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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 10 July 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Last night, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) presented a petition from the solicitor to the Omagh bombing inquiry, asking for access to unreported evidence from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into the bombing on 15 August 1998. I have also received a letter from the hon. Member for Gower and the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) asking that this matter be given precedence as a matter of privilege on the grounds that

“We suggest that the House should be given an opportunity to consider that petition, but it is profoundly unsatisfactory for it to have to make a decision without any ability for any Members to assess the propriety of releasing the evidence or of the privilege issues which may be raised by referring such material to a statutory inquiry which we understand is ‘a place out of Parliament’ for the purposes of Article 9 of the Bill of Rights”.

I have considered the issue and decided that this is a matter for which I should allow the precedence accorded to issues of privilege. The hon. Members may therefore table a motion to be debated on Monday. The motion will be taken after any urgent questions or statements and before the Government business. It will be available to Members once it has been tabled, which will be before the rise of the House today.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

UK-EU Trading Relationship

1. **Sarah Pochin** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the new trading relationship with the EU. [905099]

15. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the new UK-EU trading relationship. [905116]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): We have reset our relationships with the European Union, and are now focused on delivering a long-term strategic partnership to improve the lives of working people and make the UK more prosperous. That is good for bills, good for our borders and good for jobs.

Sarah Pochin: In 1973, the UK joined the European Economic Community, which later became the European Union. Given this week's visit by the French President and this Government's desire for closer co-operation with the EU, will the Minister confirm that no new or existing trade deal will lead to this country rejoining the EU through the back door?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: That is absolutely not the case. What we have with the European Union is a new deal that the supermarkets say has put a downward pressure on prices, and which Octopus Energy says will bring the cost of energy down. I am surprised to hear that Reform is against that, but since it has welcomed Liz Truss's party chairman as a new member today, perhaps it is no surprise that Reform takes that view.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Yesterday on “Farming Today” at 5.45 am, it was put to a shellfish farmer that it was going to become much easier for her to export her produce to the European Union. Her response was, “Yes, but we are told that the changes will be two or perhaps four years away, if they happen at all.” Given what we have negotiated away, can those changes be expedited?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am determined to expedite these new arrangements as quickly as possible. It is fantastic to see the Opposition take that position—I thought the right hon. Gentleman's Front Benchers were against them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): As the Minister will be aware, under the existing framework, the UK is entitled to take unilateral measures to protect the internal market where there is a diversion of trade. The Federation of Small Businesses Northern Ireland says that a third of businesses that previously traded between Great Britain and Northern Ireland have ceased to do so. We know from his interview yesterday that the Minister does not consider three quarters of deportations being voluntary to represent a majority, but does he consider a third of businesses to be a diversion of trade? If he does not, what would be a diversion of trade?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On 1 July, we introduced the phase 3 checks under the Windsor framework. The Windsor framework was negotiated by the previous Government, and we supported it from the Opposition Benches. I assume that the Conservatives continue to support those arrangements. Obviously, we monitor the issue of trade diversion very carefully, and we stand ready to help businesses adjust to the new arrangements.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): A few months ago, this Government reached a small but welcome trade agreement with the EU—our largest trading partner—and just this week, Members of this House heard from the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, about the closeness of the relationship between the UK and France. It was the first state visit by a French President since 2008 and the first by a European Union political leader since Brexit. Now that UK-EU relations

are at a turning point, does the Minister agree that it is finally time to be more ambitious, drop the red lines, cut the red tape, and aim to negotiate a UK-EU customs union that would boost the public coffers by £25 billion a year?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We have delivered an ambitious new trading arrangement with the European Union. We have also delivered a new free trade agreement with India and an economic deal with the United States. What the hon. Lady is suggesting would take away our freedom to be able to do that, which is contributing to our economy.

Visas: Schengen Area

2. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on visa rules for UK citizens visiting the Schengen area for 90 in 180 days. [905100]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Government officials and Ministers, including me, regularly engage the EU on a range of issues of importance to British citizens. The UK and the EU allow for visa travel in line with the standard arrangements for third-country nationals. The UK Government will continue to listen to and advocate for British citizens.

Tom Hayes: Many thousands of constituents, including Philip and Kathryn in my constituency, live for part of the year in Spain. Prior to Brexit, they did so without restriction, but now they face limited visa options, resulting in more frequent flying. What conversations has the Minister had with Spain's Government about ending these barriers?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank Philip and Kathryn for raising this issue, and I know my hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for them. The Foreign Office leads on bilateral issues with EU member states, and they regularly engage on a range of issues. While we recognise that extending the 90/180 day period is a matter for member states and the EU, my hon. Friend can be assured that we will continue to listen to and advocate for UK nationals affected.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the Minister knows, Northern Ireland is in that wonderful limbo land of movement—half in the United Kingdom and half in the EU, because of the unfinished protocol Bill. Can he tell us how those in Northern Ireland will be affected by the Schengen area due to the particular, and perhaps peculiar position they are in as a result of the protocol?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Northern Ireland has the unique advantage of dual market access. On the wider issues of application of EU law that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, he can be assured that as co-chair of the joint committee I work carefully and closely on these matters with the Northern Ireland Executive.

Civil Service Relocation

3. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to relocate civil service roles to locations outside London. [905101]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):

My hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour is absolutely right to raise the importance of having a civil service presence around the country. He will know the importance of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government presence in Wolverhampton to the local area. We want to see half of our UK-based senior civil servants located outside London by 2030. We recently announced plans to relocate thousands of civil service roles to towns and cities across the whole UK.

Warinder Juss: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. I do indeed feel blessed to have the dual headquarters of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which employs more than 250 people, right next to my constituency office in Wolverhampton West. I welcome the Government's plans to move civil servant roles out of London into communities such as mine. Will my right hon. Friend please set out how these roles will work closely with businesses, the City of Wolverhampton council and communities in my constituency, as well as help my constituents to pursue careers as civil servants?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises some good points. We do not just want to see buildings with no connection to the local community; it is important that they have that connection. I also want to ensure good career progression in civil service buildings outside London. I recently announced a new civil service apprenticeship scheme so that we can recruit people from all backgrounds to the civil service and make sure that they can get promoted and enjoy a good civil service career.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The last Government saw civil servant jobs relocated not just to Wolverhampton, but to Stoke-on-Trent. It is important that the very top level of the civil service is also located outside of London, so will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out how many permanent secretaries are currently located permanently outside London? What steps will he take to ensure that more permanent secretaries are located in both Wolverhampton and Stoke-on-Trent?

Pat McFadden: We do not have a permanent secretary in Wolverhampton, but it is important that there is career progression and that there are senior roles outside London. That should include permanent secretaries, and that should all come within our target of half of UK-based senior civil servants being located outside London by 2030.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Heads of Departments have said that 60% attendance in the office is the best balance for civil servants working in Government Departments, but in an answer to a recent written parliamentary question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), the Cabinet Office said that no data exists for attendance outside London HQs—it is certainly not collected centrally. However, the Office for National Statistics has produced data about its own workforce, which, via the UK Statistics Authority, comes under the Cabinet Office. That shows a daily attendance

rate of as little as 3% in some of the ONS's regional offices. Does the Minister think that an attendance rate of 3% will help career progression and thereby help relocate civil servants outside London? Does he think that 3% is acceptable? Is this not just part of a wider pattern of non-attendance in offices outside London, and is it not time his Department published the data on attendance levels?

Pat McFadden: There have been problems at the Office for National Statistics. We launched a report into it, which has recently reported, and there will be a change in the leadership of the Office for National Statistics, as the right hon. Gentleman is aware. That report highlighted the number of people not working in the office—a pattern that emerged when his party was in power. I hope that the new leadership addresses every part of the recent report into the ONS.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Government recently announced a number of measures to reform the civil service, including cutting up to 10,000 jobs and relocating thousands of roles across the country. These reforms are vast in scope and could have a significant impact on public services, but the Government do not seem particularly interested in setting out to Parliament the details of the changes. This House has not been given any clarity to enable proper scrutiny of which roles will be moved, cut or otherwise changed. When will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster present his full plans on civil service reform to Parliament?

Pat McFadden: On 14 May, the Government announced the launch of new thematic campuses in Aberdeen and Manchester and the closure of 11 buildings, and reaffirmed the commitment on relocating 50% of senior roles outside London, which I just mentioned. The hon. Lady says these are vast commitments, but I think we need to go faster. Reform of the state is essential, and those commitments will not be the end of civil service and state reform.

Relations with the European Union

4. **Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [905104]

5. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [905105]

16. **Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [905119]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): On 19 May, we held the first ever UK-EU summit and announced a strategic partnership that will make people across the UK safer, more secure and more prosperous. We are delivering greater security via the security and defence partnership, increased safety through tackling irregular migration and organised crime, and prosperity through the removal of trade barriers, energy efficiency and a cheaper transition to net zero. That is good for bills, good for jobs and good for borders.

Tony Vaughan: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his answer. Given that he leads on UK-EU relations, will he outline how the Cabinet Office will ensure that the new sanitary and phytosanitary agreement will reduce the level of checks on goods at both the Eurotunnel terminal in Folkestone, in my constituency, and the Port of Dover, and improve the flow of trade? What steps are being taken to further break down barriers to trade in goods with the EU?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. and learned Friend is a powerful advocate for his constituents in Folkestone and Hythe. The SPS agreement will remove routine border checks and certification, including for goods travelling through Folkestone and the Port of Dover. It will mean that fresh produce will hit supermarket shelves more quickly, with less paperwork and fewer costs.

Gregor Poynton: The new agreement with the EU will help Scottish businesses to grow and to export. World-class producers such as Glenmorangie whisky, which is bottled in my constituency, Paterson's shortbread, which is baked in my constituency, and the Scottish salmon industry have warmly welcomed the deal for Scotland. Why does the Minister think that the SNP, the Tories and Reform have set their faces against it?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend speaks very powerfully for his local businesses, and I am delighted that great produce such as Paterson's shortbread, Lorne sausages and Scottish seed potatoes will benefit from easier and cheaper trade with the EU via the SPS agreement. Any party that wants to reverse that will have to explain why it wants to take £9 billion-worth of benefits a year by 2040 away from our economy.

Mr Rand: Does the Minister agree with me that, after years of the Conservatives picking fights with our most important allies rather than working with them on the shared challenges we face, our recently agreed trade deal and our closer co-operation on security and migration show the benefits of a grown-up approach to improving relations with our European partners?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The trade and co-operation agreement left a massive gap in our ability to tackle irregular migration. The agreement we have now made with the EU starts the process of filling that gap through a comprehensive partnership. It includes enhancing our operational relationship to tackle organised immigration crime and irregular migration with key agencies such as Europol.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): This Government have a track record of announcing trade deals and then nothing actually happens, as our steel sector can attest. Two months on from the Prime Minister crowing about a deal with the EU, will the Minister confirm whether any legal text has been agreed on SPS checks, sharing criminal records data and energy co-operation, and whether any of those measures have been implemented?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: If the hon. Member is seriously saying that our trade deals make no difference, he should visit Jaguar Land Rover and speak to the workers

there, whose jobs were saved by the economic deal with the United States. He is absolutely right to say that the new common understanding is not in itself a legal text, but we will be moving to agree that legal text as soon as possible. Given the questions from Conservative Back Benchers so far, they all seem to want it done as soon as possible, despite the opposition from those on their Front Bench.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If the last nine years have taught us nothing else, they have surely taught us that it is much easier to agree about the need for an agreement than it is to reach an agreement. The SPS agreement will be critical for food and drink exports. We are only going to get one chance on this, so to get it right we need maximum engagement with the companies and businesses doing the exporting. What is the Minister doing to ensure that their voices are heard in these negotiations and that the agreement suits them?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which is why I have engaged throughout. The domestic advisory group under the previous trade and co-operation agreement contains a range of stakeholders, and I regularly speak to them, but I go beyond that in my work with stakeholders. He is right that it is hugely important that their voice is heard in the process of agreeing the legal text on the SPS agreement.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): While we await the detail of the SPS deal, Northern Ireland is still seeing new and additional bureaucracy to implement the Windsor framework. Does the Minister agree that it would make more sense to extend the grace periods and put a freeze on that bureaucracy rather than introduce more, as indicated in the report by the Federation of Small Businesses in Northern Ireland?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On our ability to negotiate generally, it is hugely important that we show good faith in implementing the agreement that the country previously agreed. However, I say to the hon. Gentleman that I always show pragmatism on implementing the Windsor framework. If we take parcels, for example, when I went to Belfast last summer I was told that there was no readiness for businesses there, but I applied for and secured a six-month delay, and then implemented that part of the agreement, so he can be assured that I take a pragmatic approach.

Plan for Change

6. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on implementing the plan for change. [905106]

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): Our plan for change is already delivering the change the country voted for a year ago. Great British Energy, headquartered in Aberdeen, is investing £1 billion in offshore wind supply chains, benefiting workers in our industrial heartlands. Britain had the highest growth in the G7 in the first quarter of this year, interest rates have been cut four times and wages are rising faster than prices. There is more to do, but after 14 years of decline under the Tories and almost two decades of SNP rule in Scotland, the country is turning a corner with this Labour Government.

Elaine Stewart: Last week, the Health Secretary shared his plans to improve the NHS by giving patients more control over their treatment. Patients in England are now able to book appointments and order their prescriptions on the NHS app. With the lack of an NHS app in Scotland being described as a “national embarrassment”, does the Minister agree with me that people living in Scotland are being left behind?

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Under this Labour Government, NHS waiting lists are falling and we have an ambitious plan for the future of the NHS. Under the SNP, Scotland has an analogue Government in a digital age, and Scotland's patients are missing out. Scotland needs a new direction, which I hope it will take with Anas Sarwar's Scottish Labour party next year.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Yesterday, I met members of the Spanish Senate, with whom I discussed energy security and how to bring down energy bills for our residents on either side of the channel. It is clear that energy trading between the EU and the UK does not work properly. What can we do, and what progress has been made, to improve the interconnectors and make the investment that is so necessary?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not quite sure whether it is relevant, but please answer if you are happy to, Minister.

Ellie Reeves: It is in the common understanding, and we want a deeper relationship with our partners in the EU on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): In their plan for change, the Government pledged to get the country the highest sustained growth in the G7—or back to where the Conservative Government left it. However, it seems that this Government are on course to fail. All respected international analysis—by the OECD, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and so on—suggests that over the next four years, the UK economy will grow nothing like as fast as the United States or Canada. What analysis can the Minister point to that suggests otherwise?

Ellie Reeves: Since coming into government a year ago, we have taken measures to fix the mess left behind by the Conservatives. That is why, in the first quarter of this year, we were the fastest growing economy in the G7; interest rates have gone down four times, meaning people are paying less on their mortgages; and wages are rising faster than prices. That is the difference that a Labour Government make.

Alex Burghart: It is no surprise that the Minister could not point to any analysis, because no such analysis exists. That is because the Government have no plan for growth. They do have a plan for tax, and they have a plan for borrowing—much more borrowing. The Office for Budget Responsibility's excoriating report earlier this week highlighted just how dangerous that is. Indeed, under this Government, there is the very real prospect

of a sovereign debt crisis. Where is the Government's plan to avoid that? It is not clear that the markets can wait until November.

Ellie Reeves: Our plan for growth is central to this mission-driven Government. Our investment in housing—building 1.5 million homes—will add £7 billion to the economy by the end of the Parliament. We are getting building, with spades in the ground on our rail and road projects, and getting on where the Tories failed this country for 14 years.

Plan for Change: Tracking Dashboard

7. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What progress he has made on publishing a tracking dashboard for the plan for change metrics. [905107]

14. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What progress he has made on publishing a tracking dashboard for the plan for change metrics. [905115]

17. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What progress he has made on publishing a tracking dashboard for the plan for change metrics. [905122]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Our plan for change is already delivering for the British people, as the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and East Dulwich (Ellie Reeves), has just said: wages up more in the first 10 months of our Government than in 10 years under the previous Government; a new nuclear age with £14 billion committed to building Sizewell C as a critical part of our clean energy transition; and NHS waiting lists down by more than 200,000 for the first time in years. What a contrast to the record of the Conservatives.

Mr Mohindra: Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster reassure the House that once he has actually started publishing the tracking dashboard for the plan for change, the six milestones will not go the same way as the three foundations, the six first steps for change, the five missions and the seven pillars of growth, and that it will not be abandoned and replaced when the Government realise they are missing their targets?

Pat McFadden: If the hon. Gentleman wants more facts about delivery, let me help him out right now. Last week we launched the biggest social and affordable housing programme in a generation, meeting a need that has been unmet for years in this country; we have extended free school meals to half a million more children; and this year, we will be putting 3,000 more neighbourhood police back on the beat. I am very happy to give the hon. Gentleman all the figures he wants.

Joe Robertson: Given that the Government's plan for change tracking dashboard is still in development, can I ask the Minister to include a column or facility to track all the U-turns—or, as the Government may prefer to call it, "The Changes to the Plan for Change (Subject to Change)"? That way, the public can see where those U-turns have taken place, such as on winter fuel payments, the grooming gangs inquiry and welfare reform. It would also help Labour Back Benchers to keep up with the Government's current position.

Pat McFadden: I hear a cry for more delivery statistics, so let me help the hon. Member out. We have also recruited 1,500 new GPs, deported 30,000 people with no right to be here, and expanded free school meals to lift 100,000 children out of poverty. He is welcome.

Rebecca Smith: The Government are clearly very happy to claim that all is rosy after their first year in power, yet on the ground in my constituency and around the country, the opposite story is being told. The Government's policies are hitting my constituents hard—whether it is the impact of increased national insurance contributions on local charities, the prospect of more red tape for landlords, or moving the goalposts for the most vulnerable. Given the Government's amazing claims, why are they so reticent to share the plan for change metrics in one place, so that the good people up and down the United Kingdom can see the reality of this Labour Government in hard facts?

Hon. Members: More stats!

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady seems to want more delivery stats, so let me help her out. As my right hon. Friend, the Minister without Portfolio, said, we have had the highest growth of any G7 economy in the first quarter of this year, cuts in interest rates and an expansion of the warm home discount, which will mean that 6 million households will benefit from better insulated houses. I do not claim, in reading out these statistics, that everything is perfect—far from it—but I do believe that we have had change in the past year: change in the investment pattern of the country; change in real wages; and change in our trading position. That is change well worth having.¹

Public Service Reform

8. **Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [905109]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): For too long, residents and frontline workers have had to navigate fragmented and underfunded services, and have had to arm up for battle when using public services. From our Best Start strategy to new neighbourhood health centres, we are reforming public services, so that money is invested in prevention, services are designed with and for local communities, and people always come first.

Irene Campbell: Does the Minister agree that, while waiting lists in England are falling thanks to billions of pounds of investment into our national health service, it is an absolute disgrace that, despite record levels of money being provided to the Scottish Government, waiting lists in Scotland continue to rise?

Georgia Gould: As my hon. Friend has set out, since Labour came to power, we have seen waiting lists continue to fall, with our 2 million new appointments, but the Scottish people have not seen the same benefits. Luckily, though, they do not need to wait long to vote for a Labour Government with a plan to change that.

Public Bodies: Duty of Candour

9. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to introduce a legal duty of candour on public bodies. [905110]

1.[Official Report, 1 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 2WC.](Correction)

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): We are fully committed to introducing a Hillsborough law, including a legal duty of candour for public servants and criminal sanctions for those who refuse to comply. We have been engaging with the families and we will continue to do so.

Ian Byrne: There is a long list of MPs, Ministers and Prime Ministers on both sides of the House who enabled the establishment cover-up at Hillsborough, which denied justice to the victims and survivors. There have been only a few honourable exceptions of politicians who did the right thing. The establishment is a powerful force, and it takes real courage to confront its deep-rooted fear of accountability. Given that the Government have so far failed to deliver their promise to enact the Hillsborough law, does the Minister recognise that this is a continuation of the betrayal of the Hillsborough families, survivors and all those affected by state cover-ups? If he does recognise that, will he support the Second Reading of the Hillsborough law that I have tabled tomorrow—and if not, why not?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done. I know that he speaks on this matter from lived experience. He is, has been and will continue to be, an extraordinarily powerful advocate for the Hillsborough families. The assurance that I give him is that the Government are absolutely determined to get this right.

Public Service Delivery

10. **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): What support his Department is providing to local partnerships to improve public service delivery. [905111]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): One of the best parts of my job is to travel round the country and see the amazing work that local public service partnerships are doing. Our test, learn and grow programme has been set up to get behind frontline innovators and to trial new approaches. This brings together central Government with those on the frontline—local councils and communities—so that we can learn from what is working and then scale it up to improve things for people.

Zöe Franklin: It is really good to hear about that partnership working with local communities and local government. In June, I had the privilege of going to the launch of a new innovative partnership between the University of Surrey and Guildford and Waverley borough councils, which is seeking to apply the university's global research expertise to real-world problems faced by local communities, from creating better housing to addressing the shortage of planners. How will the Government support important initiatives like this, which seek to deliver on the Government's aim to innovate and improve public service delivery and which matter even more as local government reorganisation progresses across Surrey?

Georgia Gould: As I said, one of the best parts of my job is getting to visit amazing projects like that partnership, and I would be delighted to see the work that is happening there. Our missions are not just for Government but for the whole country. We need councils, universities and

communities to come together, so that partnership is incredibly important. As I set out, the test, learn and grow programme is about finding those innovators and partnerships and spreading great practice. I look forward to hearing more about it.

Public Procurement Reform

11. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reform public procurement. [905112]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): Two weeks ago, we set out our plans to make sure that the billions this Government are investing in roads, hospitals and railways will mean good jobs, skills and opportunities in communities around the UK. Our plans will recognise industries that are critical to our national security, protecting UK resilience in sectors such as steel and energy. Creating high-quality British jobs and boosting skills in local communities will be key requirements for companies to win contracts for large infrastructure projects.

Joe Powell: I thank the Minister for all her hard work to bring together procurement information centrally for the first time and to improve the quality of that data. What progress has been made to push that out to the public in the dashboards and analytics that will help us track and improve the public procurement system and monitor the Government's strategic goals of backing British small and medium-sized enterprises and supporting key sectors of the economy?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy for greater transparency in procurement, which we know delivers better value for money and better services. We have set up the central digital platform, which now holds over 4,000 pipeline notices, and we will soon make available a data platform that will facilitate detailed analysis of SME participation. We expect that to be available to procurement teams soon, and we are scoping how we will make it available to the wider public.

Devolved Governments: Co-operation

12. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve co-operation with devolved Governments. [905113]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr Douglas Alexander): The Government are committed to working with all levels of government to deliver for people across the whole United Kingdom. In the last few weeks, I attended the Interparliamentary Forum to speak with colleagues from across the four legislatures, and I have held productive discussions with devolved Government colleagues on our trade strategy.

Andrew Ranger: This Labour Government understand the importance of partnership in power. One year on, I welcome that this partnership has delivered record funding for Wales to improve our railways, protect coal tips, and boost our economy and our public services. At the general election, we rightly recognised that the Welsh fiscal framework is outdated. Please could the Minister provide an update on the progress being made to address this?

Mr Alexander: I can give my hon. Friend the undertaking he seeks. We are committed to working in partnership with the Welsh Government to ensure that the framework is brought up to date and delivers value for money. My officials are supporting His Majesty's Treasury on how the framework can be updated, and that work is ongoing.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Are the Government still committed to one civil service across the United Kingdom? If so, what are they proactively doing to ensure that as part of their career development, UK Government civil servants can work within the devolved Administrations and that those within the devolved Administrations can have roles within the UK Government?

Mr Alexander: I pay tribute to the work of the civil service, not just for the UK Government but across the United Kingdom. Civil servants do tireless work on behalf of the public each and every day and are a critical part of this Government's determination to deliver significant change for the country and drive forward the missions we have defined. To the right hon. Member's question, in the early years of devolution there was a lot more interchange between the home civil service here in London and the civil service in offices such as those in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff. I know that thought is being given to how we ensure that there is the right expertise in the right parts of the country, and there is an information exchange on how to get this right.

National Security

13. **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening national security. [905114]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Last month, on behalf of the Prime Minister, I made a statement in the House announcing the national security strategy. That coincided with the NATO summit attended by the Prime Minister. At its heart, the strategy has three pillars: security at home, strength abroad and increasing our sovereign and asymmetric capabilities. My Department will lead on the co-ordination of that work, which applies not just in the Cabinet Office but right across Government.

Alex McIntyre: Cyber-security is vital, not just to our national security but to safeguarding our public services, so I am delighted that the Government are investing in the sector through their cyber growth action plan. Some of that investment is going into my neighbouring town, Cheltenham, but there are so many fantastic opportunities, and potential opportunities, in my city of Gloucester. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how my constituents can access those opportunities and secure the well-paid, high-skilled jobs of the future?

Pat McFadden: Recent events have shown just how important cyber-security is. We have over 2,000 businesses across the UK generating revenues of an estimated £13 billion and 67,000 jobs in this field. We are also a large exporter of cyber-products. The truth is that we need training and capability in this new area of defence. I am happy to ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with a relevant Minister.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The BBC covered the Government's publication of the national security strategy last month with the headline "UK must prepare for war scenario". Often, the public will read an alarming headline like that without reading about the context, or about what it might mean for them or what they should do about it. Will the Government draw on academic expertise, such as that at the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence and Security at the University of Exeter, in engaging with our constituents on this subject?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member makes a very good point about engagement with the public. Anyone who has watched the news in recent years will know that the defence picture across Europe is changing. I made a statement to the House earlier this week on the importance of resilience. Resilience is not just a matter for Government, although the Government do have their responsibilities; it is a whole-of-society effort, and it will require proper dialogue and communication with the public.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

18. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on the infected blood compensation scheme. [905123]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Yesterday, the infected blood inquiry published an additional report on compensation. The Government will now urgently work through its recommendations and work closely with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to understand the delivery implications and any policy changes to the scheme. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I hope to provide a further update to the House before the summer recess. Two thousand and forty-three people have been asked to start their compensation claim and 616 offers of compensation have been made, totalling over £488 million. Last week, the Government wrote to the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee outlining the steps that the Government are taking to remove administrative barriers to allow IBCA to speed up payments.

Emma Foody: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the response to yesterday's report. I speak today on behalf of one of my constituents, a core participant in the inquiry, who was recently invited to start their claim. They have asked specifically when those affected, such as the parents of the infected, will be invited to start their claims, given that they have been waiting for decades for justice and there are concerns that delays may mean that they do not get to see it in their lifetime.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I understand that concern. My hon. Friend is a powerful voice for her constituent, and I welcome the news that they have started their claim. I know that many across the House will be eager for their constituents, including those who are affected, to begin their claims as soon as possible. The Government expect IBCA to begin payments to those who are affected by the end of this year. As I have set out, the Government are taking steps to remove administrative barriers to allow IBCA to speed up payments. I recognise that the

infected blood inquiry has also made a recommendation on the sequencing of payments, which it will be for the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to consider.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I remain concerned that Sir Brian Langstaff has never asked me, as the Minister who was responsible for the design of the scheme, to account for the process that I adopted under the advice of the civil servants that my successor, the Minister, shares. I am concerned now that there will be continued lack of clarity and certainty for those who have been waiting for too long. We appointed an expert group on the best advice of the civil servants, we ensured that there would be engagement with representatives from the 40 groups, and I met them over 18 meetings in 10 days prior to legislation coming to this House. I am gravely concerned that continued uncertainty through more report writing will not serve the best interests of this community. Does the Minister agree and what steps will he take to resolve these matters once and for all?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to the work of my predecessor as Paymaster General in this area. I know the practical experience with which the right hon. Gentleman speaks. When I gave evidence to the inquiry back in May, I said that I was not bringing a counsel of perfection and that I would listen to suggestions, which I would judge on the basis of not causing further undue delay to victims who have already waited for too long. That is the approach I will take as I urgently look at the recommendations. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will hopefully update the House on that before the summer recess.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Sir Brian Langstaff was particularly critical of the engagement with the infected and affected community since the publication of his final report in May last year. In particular, he was critical of the way the expert group was set up with the explicit instruction not to engage with the community. Does my right hon. Friend accept that a lot of damage has been done since the publication of that final report, as is exposed in the report that Sir Brian Langstaff published yesterday? Will he say what he intends to do to improve relationships with the infected and the affected?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am deeply sympathetic to the inquiry's words on the involvement of the infected blood community. The Government are committed to providing fair compensation to victims of this scandal. The inquiry recognised this and said:

"There can be no doubt that the Government has done right in ways which powerfully signal its intent."

However, I also recognise what Sir Brian said when he stated that

"there is still more to be done to ensure that the detail and operation of the scheme matches up to its intent."

I will now urgently look at those recommendations with a view to action.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): My constituent Graham is a victim of the infected blood scandal. His experiences and the length of time that he has had to wait for compensation have strong parallels with another constituent of mine, Steve, who was the last RAF officer

to go to prison for being gay. Both constituents have suffered decades of trauma as a result. What parallels can the Minister draw when learning about those two compensation schemes, and how will we ensure that in future the administration of such schemes is smoother, swifter and a better experience for those who are impacted?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady speaks very movingly about her constituents, Graham and Steve, who have clearly had to wait decades—far too long—for justice. She raises a fair point about learning from compensation schemes. This is historical. For instance, we had the Windrush compensation scheme that began under the previous Government, we have Horizon ongoing, and infected blood, where the inquiry has just produced an additional report but the compensation scheme is ongoing.

On infected blood, IBCA has used a test-and-learn approach, which I think is important in allowing us to move into a phase in which we can speed up payments. To the hon. Lady's central point, it is vital, and I am conscious of this, that we look at what has worked well in previous compensation schemes and at what has worked less well, and be honest about that and learn from it.

Topical Questions

T1. [905127] **Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Since our last oral questions session, my Department has announced that companies that win contracts for major infrastructure projects will be rewarded for creating high-quality British jobs and boosting skills in local communities. We set out our national security strategy to protect security at home, promote UK strength abroad and increase our sovereign capabilities. Earlier this week, we published our resilience action plan, which included details of a new test of the national alarm system to come in September.

Emma Foody: The Government's changes to the Green Book in place-based business cases are positive for regions like the north-east. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out how the Cabinet Office will support cross-departmental work on identifying test cases, such as the Moor Farm and Seaton Burn roundabouts in my constituency, where infrastructure is holding back growth and housing and is needed to help the Government achieve our growth and housing missions?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for her community. It is precisely because this Government want to support growth in communities like hers that the Chancellor has set out that the new Green Book will support place-based business cases. Rapid work is happening to deliver that over the coming months.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor for the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm that civil servants should not engage in public fundraising for political parties?

Pat McFadden: We all know the rules for civil servants. I think I know who he is referring to, and let me anticipate the hon. Member's next question: the person is doing a wonderful job.

Alex Burghart: Well, I will just fill in the House. For those who are not as well informed as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the simple fact is that senior civil servants should not be engaged in public fundraising from public speaking for political parties. It has been reported that on 23 June, Lord Mandelson, who the Government classify as a senior civil servant, spoke at a Labour fundraising event. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster assure the House that this breach will be properly investigated and treated?

Pat McFadden: I believe there has been correspondence to the Cabinet Secretary about this. He will reply in due course, but let me add this: Lord Mandelson is doing an excellent job as our ambassador to the United States. He was integral to the negotiation of the trade agreement with the United States and is a great asset to the Government and the country.

T4. [905133] **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): My constituent Andy is one of several former civil servants in my constituency affected by the McCloud judgment. Like many of them, he is still waiting to receive his hard-earned pension, and the delay is causing serious distress. While Andy recovers from major surgery, he now faces financial hardship due to many missed deadlines and delays. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss Andy's case and the cases of three other constituents affected who have contacted me to ensure that their cases are resolved urgently?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): I was deeply sorry to hear about Andy's circumstances, and I will of course meet my hon. Friend to discuss this case. I have asked to be kept personally updated on the case following the letter from my hon. Friend. The Cabinet Office continues to stress the importance of contractual performance to the MyCSP administrator.

T2. [905128] **Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): What steps is the Cabinet Office taking to ensure that all public bodies adopt robust cyber-security frameworks, and what is the timetable to ensure their compliance?

Pat McFadden: As I said a few moments ago, the recent cyber-attacks have been a wake-up call to Government, business and the whole of society. This is part of our national defence, and it is taken extremely seriously. The National Cyber Security Centre works with victims of these attacks and gives advice in peacetime, as it were, as to how businesses can best defend themselves against these rogue operators who try to extort them.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I was recently made aware by GE Vernova that its UK-based, lower-cost bid for the eastern green link 3 was passed over in favour of a higher-cost overseas supplier. Would the Minister meet me and GE Vernova to discuss current procurement policy and whether it does enough to support UK manufacturing and to ensure our energy security and net zero commitments?

Georgia Gould: While I cannot comment on the individual procurement, I can say that we are changing procurement rules to strengthen the focus on British jobs and skills and to support British industries critical to our national security like energy. We are consulting on this at the moment, and I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and the company to discuss this further.

T3. [905132] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is a constant complaint from my businesses in Harrow that if they are not on the Government-approved list they almost cannot get a Government contract. What action will the Minister take to ensure that new firms, including new small and medium-sized enterprises, can actually get contracts and keep jobs in the UK?

Georgia Gould: I absolutely agree that we need to support SMEs, which is why we set targets for all Departments on SME and voluntary, community and social enterprises spend. It is why we are reviewing the rules to make it easier for SMEs to get on to Government contracts, and why we are consulting on new plans to set targets for the entire public sector on SME spend.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Government published their national procurement policy statement. Given that economic growth is this Government's No. 1 mission, will the Minister update the House on how the new approach to procurement will ensure we deliver economic growth in every corner of this country, especially in the central belt, Forth valley and Falkirk?

Georgia Gould: I really welcome the House's continuing enthusiasm and support for procurement. We have listened to that and are taking it seriously, which is why we set out, as I said a couple of weeks ago, further changes to procurement rules to respond to all those points about supporting SMEs, supporting British jobs and supporting British skills.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Can the Minister confirm the amount of money that has been saved as a result of the changes I brought in to the equality, diversity and inclusion guidance in the civil service? Will he also say if he will be maintaining those changes, or does he seek to overturn that policy?

Pat McFadden: I am not seeking to overturn that, but we want to have a system where we uphold the equality law that applies to the civil service, just as it applies throughout the public sector.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Further to the answer given by the Paymaster General regarding the contaminated blood inquiry, I welcome that he will update the House when he has had an opportunity to digest yesterday's report, but can I have an assurance from him that it will not be on the last sitting day before recess?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I may be in the hands of Mr Speaker so I will certainly not tread on to which days I will be permitted to do so, but definitely before the summer recess.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Mr Speaker, as you are well aware, Bridlington is the lobster capital of Europe, so there is understandable outrage at the recent Government decision to sell out the UK fishing industry for the next 12 years in return for a sanitary and phytosanitary deal that is yet to be negotiated. Is that just another example of the shambolic way this Government do business?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: No, absolutely not. What we have, first of all, is a multi-year deal with stability, which will give the opportunity for investment. The Government will then invest £360 million in coastal communities and updating the fleet. If the hon. Gentleman is opposed to that, he should say so—surely, he is not. And the SPS agreement will allow our catch to be sold far more easily to the EU—by the way, 70% of our catch currently goes to the EU. He should be welcoming that.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I welcome the UK-EU reset, which will help to bring down energy bills and grocery bills. I also welcome the Government's new procurement plans. Bournemouth East has fantastic talent, particularly among our younger population. Will the Minister outline how the new procurement plans will both help to give those younger people opportunities and secure clean power in the south-west?

Georgia Gould: We have set out plans to strengthen and streamline social values, so that we are absolutely clear about the expectations on businesses to support jobs, skills and opportunities—namely opportunities for our young people to get into good quality work in communities like my hon. Friend's.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I think the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I are politically completely at one,

because if it was down the two of us, we would relocate all civil servants to Wolverhampton and Staffordshire. What is also incredibly important is Ministers being in those offices. Will he commit to publishing the details of ministerial attendance in offices outside London, including how long they stayed in those offices?

Pat McFadden: I am not sure I will. While Ministers should attend on occasion, Ministers having to be in a certain place just to keep up with a published record is not the best use of their time. I very much welcome civil servants working in Wolverhampton. The Cabinet Office has a fantastic building in Glasgow, which I have enjoyed visiting and working in on several occasions.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I was disappointed that the UK Government did not go ahead with proposals for a Glasgow campus for UK Government offices. One reason behind that proposal was upgrading the facilities available to Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff who are located at Abercrombie House in East Kilbride, which had been assessed as lacking the facilities required to be a second FCDO headquarters. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster work with the FCDO to ensure that that investment goes into Abercrombie House so that it can be a second headquarters?

Pat McFadden: If the right hon. Gentleman's ambition is to move the staff out of East Kilbride, he should perhaps have a word with my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid). We have good locations in both Glasgow and East Kilbride, and we welcome them both. To refer to the previous question, I recently spent time working in the East Kilbride office. I hope that it is a good home for civil servants for some time to come.

UK-France Nuclear Partnership

10.31 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the UK-France nuclear partnership.

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): The UK and France have a proud history of co-operation on defence nuclear matters. Alongside our conventional warfighting capability, the independent strategic nuclear forces of the UK and France contribute significantly to the overall security of the NATO alliance and the Euro-Atlantic. Since 1995, we have stated that we do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of one could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened. In 2010, both nations agreed to share research facilities and co-operate on nuclear technology under the Lancaster House treaties. In 2022, at Chatham House, the Defence Secretary set out the importance of rebooting Lancaster House and our defence relationship with France. That was reaffirmed in our 2024 manifesto.

Today, the Prime Minister and President Emmanuel Macron will agree to deepen their nuclear co-operation and work more closely than ever before on nuclear deterrence. That is an important step forward for the UK-France nuclear partnership, and reflects the significant improvement in the relationship between our two countries that this Government have driven. A soon-to-be-signed declaration will state for the first time that the respective deterrents of both countries are independent but can be co-ordinated. The declaration will also affirm that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by both nations. As such, any adversary threatening the vital interests of Britain or France could be confronted by the strength of the nuclear forces of both nations. Co-operation between our countries on nuclear research will also deepen, while we work together to uphold the international non-proliferation architecture. Further details will follow today's agreement.

In an increasingly volatile and complex global security environment, exemplified by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine—a war on the European continent—the UK and France, as Europe's two nuclear powers, are united in our determination to work closer than ever before on nuclear deterrence. That is a manifesto commitment, a promise made and a promise kept, and yet another example of how the Government are delivering for defence.

James Cartlidge: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I do think it is incredible that we have had to find out about such substantive matters overnight from the press and without a statement from the Government.

We Conservatives back our nuclear deterrent 100% and have never wavered on that. We support steps that boost the resilience of our nuclear enterprise, diversify delivery and, above all, help our core continuous at-sea deterrence to remain the cornerstone of our homeland defence against the most extreme threats. We also welcome steps to genuinely strengthen UK-French co-operation on defence, building on Lancaster House. In particular, having been the Government who first authorised provision

of long-range Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine, we recognise the urgent need to replenish our own Storm Shadow stocks, which is in the press release. Can the Minister confirm whether we are placing orders for new Storm Shadow missiles from MBDA or simply reconditioning existing stocks?

The nuclear aspect of this is by far the most significant. Can the Minister confirm where this will leave the operationally independent and sovereign nature of our existing Trident nuclear deterrent? *The Telegraph* quotes the declaration—which, of course, we have not seen—as saying that both nuclear arsenals

“remain independent but can be co-ordinated and that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by both nations”.

Does this mean that our respective national deterrence will now be jointly operationally delivered, and how will that co-ordination take place in practice? Crucially, how does this new nuclear doctrine affect NATO and our very close co-operation on nuclear deterrence with the United States? Will France now be offering its nuclear deterrent to NATO, as we do? Perhaps most importantly, will France be joining the NATO Nuclear Planning Group?

On the matter of tactical nuclear weapons, I have previously asked about options other than US-controlled gravity bombs, with no reply. Given the announcement on Storm Shadow and MBDA, will the UK and France now be looking at co-operation on tactical nuclear delivery options via our shared complex weapons industrial base? A particular concern of the Opposition is that there appears to be a deep paradox at play here: talk of closer co-operation with France, but in the background, the Government still getting nowhere on access to hard cash from the European rearmament fund, despite having given up our sovereign fishing grounds.

To conclude, it is truly extraordinary that such significant defence developments do not warrant a Government statement, so the Minister must now be as transparent as possible in answering our questions—not least after weeks dominated by smoke and mirrors on defence spending and chaotic U-turns on welfare that raise the most profound question of all: where is the money going to come from?

Maria Eagle: There has not been a statement yet because the agreement has not been signed yet. In fact—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): You're briefing it to the press.

Maria Eagle: If the right hon. Gentleman would like to listen to the reply, the agreement has not been signed yet. I am sure that as soon as it is signed—

James Cartlidge: But it has been briefed to the press.

Maria Eagle: I am sure that as soon as it is signed—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Minister has asked his questions. I would like to try to answer them without him heckling me too much, although it is up to him how he behaves.

Mr Speaker: No, it will be up to me.

Maria Eagle: Indeed.

[*Maria Eagle*]

The shadow Minister asked whether the idea that we should work more closely with France has any implications for the independence of Trident, and he referred to the phrase

“independent but can be co-ordinated”.

The answer is no. Our CASD operations are entirely unaffected. This is not a new nuclear doctrine on behalf of the UK. Our nuclear doctrine is the same as it ever has been. The use of our nuclear deterrent in any circumstances can only be authorised by the Prime Minister, and that remains the case. The French have their own arrangements for how they authorise theirs; it is a matter for them. This agreement implies no co-ordination in that respect.

The agreement says that there is an opportunity, when vital interests are affected, for co-ordination between both nations in the way in which they respond. That just strengthens the power of the deterrent across Europe. When two nations that are nuclear powers can co-ordinate their responses, it strengthens the deterrent against our potential enemies by making it clear that the two nations will act in co-ordination rather than entirely separately.

The shadow Minister asked whether the agreement has any implications for our deterrent still being dedicated to NATO. It does not; our deterrent is, of course, still dedicated to the defence of NATO. He referred again to tactical nuclear delivery options. I do not know whether he meant tactical nuclear weapons development. This Government do not see any use of any kind of nuclear weapon as tactical, and we are not proposing in this agreement to develop any new kinds of nuclear weapons. It is about co-ordinating the options that we have together to make Europe and the north Atlantic stronger.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I welcome today's agreement that is in train, as a powerful signal that Britain is once again stepping up to be a reliable European ally, with deeper UK-France co-ordination on nuclear deterrence marking a step change in how we engage with our closest partners. This is not just a diplomatic milestone; it has real potential to reset relations, strengthening European security and driving long-term investment into our industrial base. As the keenest champion of our sovereign capability and resilient supply chains, particularly in my constituency, may I ask the Minister how this partnership will be used to maximise opportunities for UK industry, ensuring that we can build the skills, infrastructure and capacity that is needed to keep our deterrent credible for decades to come?

Maria Eagle: The effort on co-ordinating our nuclear deterrence, between the UK and France, is in the context of a refresh of the Lancaster House treaties, which also include provisions about co-ordinating our conventional forces and co-ordinating efforts through our industries to ensure that we can manufacture new and future-proofed complex weapons that will assist in deterring potential adversaries who would threaten Europe. This is in the context of an entire, refreshed agreement that should strengthen our conventional forces as well as our capacity for co-ordination between our militaries and of our nuclear deterrence.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have consistently said that the UK's security depends on deeper defence co-operation with our European allies, so we welcome progress but urge the Government to go further. Nuclear co-ordination between the UK and France can help to deter Putin and support Europe's collective security. That is particularly critical as Donald Trump has shown that our security is no longer his concern. France cherishes the independence of its nuclear system, as the Minister confirmed, so will she provide further details on exactly how the new system of co-ordinating nuclear deterrence will work? The Government must now go further, so will the Minister update the House on whether the Government have secured full access for UK defence firms to the EU Security Action for Europe fund? As Putin escalates his attacks against civilian targets in Kyiv and other cities, we must work with our allies to support Ukraine. Will the Government use today's coalition of the willing talks to agree on how the UK and France can seize Russia's frozen assets that are held in our two countries?

Maria Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for deeper defence co-operation. On the co-ordination of our nuclear deterrence—there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations, but France and the UK remain two sovereign nuclear weapon states, and their respective nuclear forces and decision-making processes are independent. There will be increased co-ordination of research and development, and of the co-operation that we have been engaging in since the Chequers announcement of 1995. That will be deepened, and a co-ordinating committee between the Elysée and the Cabinet Office will be the joint arrangement for deciding precisely how and what extra research or training we might do. There will be increasing co-ordination of that effort, but I stress that our decision-making arrangements remain completely independent. Both nations recognise that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations—our vital interests are the same in that respect.

On Security Action for Europe and access to EU funds, negotiations are ongoing but not complete. One would hope that progress can be made. I cannot recall the hon. Gentleman's third point—

Calum Miller: The coalition of the willing.

Maria Eagle: I have nothing further to say on that today, as the hon. Gentleman would probably expect in a response to an urgent question on nuclear co-ordination.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Is the Minister as surprised as I was to find that the shadow Secretary of State only half quoted that sentence from the report in *Navy Lookout*, about making it clearer that “no extreme threat” to European security would go unanswered by both countries, but failed to look at the real purpose here—that it signals a strengthened deterrence posture, as Russia has repeated its threats to use nuclear weapons? Does my hon. Friend agree that this shows that the relationship, which was damaged by Brexit, is now being recreated by this Government? The AUKUS pact and defence co-operation is now a clear priority for this Government, with the European Union, and that is embodied in this new relationship with France.

Maria Eagle: I suppose I should say that I am surprised that the shadow Secretary of State for Defence only quoted half the sentence—if indeed that is the case—but he is probably not the first Opposition spokesperson to do that in the history of Oppositions in this House. I agree with my hon. Friend that what we have here is a strengthening of the deterrent across Europe, which will help to deter potential adversaries from conducting themselves in a way that might threaten the future of our nations.

Ben Obese-Jeety (Huntingdon) (Con): I welcome the announcement of strengthened collaboration with France, although reading between the lines, it sounds like “co-ordination” is actually submarine patrol deconfliction. Our aerial participation in the NATO nuclear mission is still a decade away, with the completion of F-35A delivery not scheduled until 2033, according to the Government, but both the French air force and marine nationale are armed with the air-sol moyenne portée améliorée—ASMPA—medium-range supersonic nuclear-tip missile as part of their force de dissuasion. Is that nuclear strike capability within the scope of this agreement? If so, how will it be incorporated into our own nuclear doctrine? Will it be an escalation step prior to the use of Trident? Does this form an interim solution while we await the capability to fully participate in the NATO nuclear mission? How will command of it work?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman complains about the amount of time it has taken this Government to do things in respect of defence, but we had to pick up the mess that was left by his Government, who were in office for 14 years. It is a bit of a cheek for him to complain about delay, when the reality is that his own Government did nothing for 14 years. I have made it quite clear that our defence nuclear posture is not changing, and that we are not seeking to acquire new and different nuclear weapons, but if the vital interests of the UK and France are engaged and threatened, we will co-ordinate our nuclear response as a result of this agreement, and that provides a greater deterrent.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): A much stronger relationship between the UK and France in this area will require a deepening of our commercial collaborations in our respective industrial bases, particularly in the supply chain. Will the Minister comment on how the Government’s own procurement policies will help to support this collaboration, particularly as it might benefit companies in the Teesside defence and innovation cluster?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. The refresh of the Lancaster House treaties is about not just nuclear co-operation, but co-operation between our conventional forces and greater co-operation and effort between our industries bilaterally to provide us with things like complex weapons in a way that will deter and enable us to defend ourselves at thresholds well below any nuclear threshold. Any increase in defence spending, as we are seeing, does give more opportunities for our own industries. Whether those companies are offering novel or dual-use technology, or are our traditional big primes, any increase offers more opportunity for all of them to help us in our rearmament.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I understand that the ink may not yet be dry on this agreement, so clearly the Minister can answer only on what she is

aware of at the moment. However, she mentioned the use of a committee to make decisions. Who will chair that committee? What will its membership be? How will decisions be made if there is a disagreement between our allies in France and ourselves?

Maria Eagle: Our respective national authorities will remain responsible for planning and conducting operations. A UK-France nuclear steering group will be established to provide political direction for increased co-ordination across nuclear policy capabilities and operations. That will be joint between the Élysée, which has authority over nuclear matters in France, and the Cabinet Office, which will co-ordinate with it—obviously with input from the Ministry of Defence.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s response and greater collaboration between the UK and France with this nuclear partnership. It not only enhances our nation’s security, but has the potential to deliver highly skilled and highly paid jobs to every nation and region across our country. Will she say a little more about how those benefits will be realised in Scotland?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. The strategic defence review and our ongoing commitment to increasing defence spending in this country give opportunity for our industry to benefit, obtain contracts and assist us in ensuring that we can defend our nation and NATO more fully and in a better way going forward. There will be jobs, skilled opportunities and growth in all parts of the nations and regions of the UK.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The threats and nuclear sabre-rattling that we have heard from President Putin since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is utterly unacceptable, and the response from the British and French Governments has been robust. For me, defence co-operation between the UK and France is always welcome. Will our Governments also seek to get a reaffirmation from other P5 countries, including Russia, of the Reagan-Gorbachev formula that

“a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”?

Maria Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for this extra co-ordination. The aim of all this is to make sure that NATO and Europe are safe from the threats that may come from Putin and his nuclear sabre-rattling, as the hon. Gentleman referred to. We believe that deterring those threats is the best way to ensure that we do not end up having to fight a war that would be catastrophic. That is where we are at present. I am not sure that President Putin is in the mood to agree that nuclear wars cannot be won, because he does issue nuclear threats every now and then. We need to ensure that he is deterred in his approach.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The two bedrocks of our national defence are our own sovereign capability and our membership of NATO. The United Kingdom and France are both members of NATO, but, as the shadow Secretary of State pointed out, the paradox is that we and every other NATO member bar one are members of the NATO nuclear planning group. Of course, that “bar one” is France. As part of these

[Greg Smith]

discussions, is France going to join the NATO nuclear planning group? If not, how on earth will this co-ordination work within that partnership?

Maria Eagle: I am not here to speak for the French Government. As far as I am concerned, our nuclear posture has not changed; their nuclear posture is a matter for them. What this agreement says is that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations, and although we both independently look after and are responsible for our deterrence, we believe that co-ordinating potential responses in this way provides a greater deterrent for Europe and NATO. That is the basis of this agreement.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Clearly, our deepest and closest relationship on nuclear deterrence is with the United States of America. Can the Minister confirm how this agreement will affect that relationship, which is crucial for our security?

Maria Eagle: The agreement does not change our very close relationship with the Americans. In line with the NATO strategic concept, the strategic forces of the US, the UK and France all contribute significantly to the overall security of the alliance. There is no reason why that should not continue to be the case.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—I always expect to be called last, but I have just jumped in ahead of my colleague and friend, the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann).

I thank the Minister for her answers today. We very much welcome the news that we are to enhance our nuclear programme—that security can only be good for our whole nation. However, the estimates I have read still put our nuclear capability well below the threat posed by Russia, so how can we continue to build our nuclear capability, and how can Northern Ireland play a

part in that work? The Minister is always committed to helping Northern Ireland, so I am very keen to hear how that will work.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is usually last, but never least, and he is not even last on this occasion.

I agree that it is important that we strengthen the credibility of our deterrence, which is why we are committed to building the four replacement boats that will carry our continuous at-sea deterrent and up to 12 SSNs through SSN-AUKUS. We are doubling the drumbeat of our construction of submarines over time, which I think sends a pretty powerful signal to potential adversaries that our CASD, and our capacity to defend and to use it, is going to be significantly strengthened over the coming period. I am glad to say that I have found general support for that in this House, which I welcome.

Robin Swann: The Minister referenced the political steering group that will be set up between the two nations. Are there any concerns—either within Government or within the Ministry of Defence—about sharing intelligence with a separate political steering group that will sit outside of, or adjacent to, NATO?

Maria Eagle: The steering group is about political policymaking rather than intelligence. I am sure that appropriate arrangements will be established if there is any such issue, but I do not anticipate that there will be a problem.

James Cartlidge: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A point of order relevant to this debate?

James Cartlidge: Indeed. May I seek your guidance on how to set the record straight? Following the question from the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), the Minister criticised the fact that I only partially referred to a quote from the declaration text. To be clear, I have not seen the declaration. It was leaked to the media overnight; that was all I could read from, and I am none the wiser from the answers we have just had.

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, we cannot keep the debate going. You have made the point and it is on the record—let us move on.

Business of the House

10.58 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 14 July includes:

MONDAY 14 JULY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Deprivation of Citizenship Orders (Effect during Appeal) Bill, following which the Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration.

TUESDAY 15 JULY—Opposition day (9th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 16 JULY—Second Reading of the Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill [*Lords*], followed by a debate on a motion relating to the Committee on Standards' third report of Session 2024-25 on register of interests of Members' staff, followed by a general debate on giving every child the best start in life.

THURSDAY 17 JULY—General debate on the global plastics treaty, followed by a general debate on ageing community and end-of-life care. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 July will include:

MONDAY 21 JULY—General debate on the 80th anniversary of victory over Japan.

TUESDAY 22 JULY—The Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the summer recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 22 July and return on Monday 1 September.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Jesse Norman: I am not going to let this moment pass—I am sure no colleague would wish me to—without again reminding everyone present that this week marks the 20th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings. On 7 July 2005, 52 people were killed in four separate attacks and 700 more were injured, many of them grievously. I know that the whole House will want to join me in mourning the victims of these dreadful crimes and in sending all our best wishes to their families and loved ones.

While we are on the subject of anniversaries, the House will need no reminding that 2025 is 760 years since Simon de Montfort convened the first representative Parliament. Perhaps even more significantly, this year marks 800 years since the year 1225, when the charter we now know as Magna Carta was agreed as a statute and, indeed, became the first of all our statutes. To that extent, it is 1225 and not 1215 that should be recognised as the birth date of Magna Carta. [*Interruption.*] I am pleased to hear that wide array of support from the House—thank you. I thought it was an important point to put on the record.

For the Government, of course, the past week marks an anniversary of a somewhat less glorious and happy kind: their first full year in office. As a House, it falls to us to ask how the Government have done. It would be right to focus in the first place on their shockingly negligent and abusive treatment of our Northern Ireland veterans, but that is the topic of a Westminster Hall debate next Monday, so let us focus on wider issues.

Labour pledged to deliver the highest economic growth in the G7. In reality, UK growth has failed even to beat the G7 average. Labour promised to meet NHS waiting list targets for 92% of patients, but the current figure stands at 59.8%—just one percentage point better than a year ago. Labour vowed to smash the boats and the boat gangs, yet small boat migrant numbers are up by almost 50% compared with this time last year. Perhaps we can forget the pledges.

How, then, is the UK economy actually doing? Well, we know that the Office for Budget Responsibility has cut its growth forecast to just 1%, inflation is higher than a year ago and unemployment stands at its highest for four years. So diminished is the Government's standing in international markets that the Institute for Fiscal Studies recently pointed out that the UK now faces higher borrowing costs than almost all comparable countries. It is two full percentage points higher than Germany and higher even than Greece and Italy.

I am afraid to say that the Government have stored up more pain to come. The junior doctors have now voted in favour of further strikes through the autumn and into the new year. They had a 22% increase last year, the House will recall, and they are now looking to their Labour brothers and sisters for a scarcely believable further 29%. That is before we include their pensions. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has, as the wildly overrated Aneurin Bevan said in 1948, "stuffed their mouths with gold", and they are already coming back for more.

What has the media reaction been to all this? Internationally, *The Economist* described the Prime Minister's first year as "wasted". *Time* called it "a catalogue of errors". The normally sympathetic *New York Times* commented that Britain's Prime Minister is "fading away before our eyes".

Even supportive British newspapers have not been able to disguise their dismay. The *Financial Times* has bewailed Labour's "drift", and *The Guardian* its "lack of vision"—not my words, but those of some of the most respected newspapers in the world.

Finally, what do the poor, suffering public make of all this? We know what a laser focus those in 10 Downing Street keep on the polls, and it will not have escaped their notice that the Prime Minister's approval rating is now at -35. No Government in recent times have ever lost public support after an election faster than this one. How mortified the Prime Minister must be to be wrenched back almost weekly from the perfumed chanceries of Europe to the grimmer realities of domestic politics.

We need not dwell on the pieties and pomposities of Labour's pronouncements about stability and trust before the July 2024 election. These are the facts, they speak for themselves, and they say only this: must do better—a lot better.

Lucy Powell: May I join the shadow Leader of the House in marking the 20th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings? We all remember that day well, and I am sure that the

[Lucy Powell]

whole House will want to remember all those who died and those who were affected by it.

May I also take this opportunity to welcome the newly announced new director of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, the highly qualified Miriam Minty, who will be starting in September?

As the shadow Leader of the House said, this week we welcomed the French President to the UK for a state visit. I thought his address to both Houses on Tuesday was excellent and historic, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, your team and all those involved in organising it. I thought that it underlined the deep and enduring relationship between our two great countries. The visit concludes today with a summit, and I will ensure that the House is updated at the earliest opportunity on any agreements that we come to as part of that.

I have to say it is a bit galling that, week in, week out, the right hon. Gentleman raises the proposed strike action by junior doctors, which is extremely disappointing. We do not think strike action is necessary, given that the NHS is finally moving in the right direction. Strikes would put that recovery at risk, affecting patients and letting down our collective obligations to those we are here to serve. We have delivered a very generous pay settlement, but we are keen to work constructively. The Health Secretary's door remains open—he will be in the House shortly.

Our approach is very different from that which the Conservatives left us. They left the NHS on its knees, with waiting lists at a record high, and with over half a million appointments and operations cancelled due to strike action in just one year. And it was not just the doctors; the rail strikes cost the economy over £1 billion, the teachers' strike lost 600 teaching days in one year, and the Conservatives went to war with public sector workers week in, week out. I did notice, though, that the Leader of the Opposition is today giving a speech in which she will talk about the “ticking time bomb” that has been left. Too right there is a ticking time bomb—it is the Conservatives' ticking time bomb. We all know that they left mines all over the place, and we are having to sweep them out.

The right hon. Gentleman wants to know how our first year in office is going, and I am happy to tell him. We promised 2 million extra NHS appointments, and we have delivered a million more than that. We said that we would get waiting lists down, and they are coming down month on month. Interest rates are coming down. Net migration is coming down from a record high under the Conservatives. We have secured three trade deals—trade deals that they once hailed but never delivered, and we have got them going. We have created nearly 400,000 new jobs since the election. We have recruited an extra 3,000 new police officers. We have built nearly 200,000 new homes, established Great British Energy, extended the warm home discount to 6 million more households, expanded free school meals for half a million more children, and opened free breakfast clubs. We have banned bonuses for water bosses who have been polluting our rivers, and wages grew more in our first 10 months in office than they did in the Conservatives' last 10 years in office. I am happy to debate him any time on our record, and I thank him for the opportunity to do so today.

I do feel slightly sorry for the shadow Leader of the House when, coming here week in and week out, it is just going from bad to worse for the Conservative party, is it not? Perhaps that is why he goes so deep into history in his questions, because he does not want to talk about recent history. He is one of the first up this morning after—let us be honest—a big defection overnight, the latest in a long line of those fleeing the sinking ship. Personally, I would not put have put Jake Berry—best friend of Boris Johnson and former chair of the Conservative party—down as a likely defector. It really is that bad for the Conservatives. However, I could not have put it better myself, when Jake said

“we've got a Conservative Party that doesn't seem to know what it stands for any more... the Conservatives have lost their way. They've abandoned their principles. They've abandoned the British people.”

He is right, isn't he?

Having said that, and we cannot pass this by, that defection does not make up for what has been a terrible week for the Reform party, especially when it comes to, shall we say, HR matters. The bigger story for Reform this week is that it really is becoming the party of sleaze and scandal, and of dud and dodgy personnel. I do not think this is really the right moment for it to start ditching its vetting procedures. Even though it has only a handful of MPs, its Chief Whip seems to have had a busier week than ours, and that is saying something. I am not sure if Reform will welcome our partnership with the French on tackling the small boats this week, but it is already enthusiastically implementing a policy of one in, one out.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Early-day motion 1496 sets out how Samiul Ahmed bought Cockermonth's Old Courthouse for a knock-down price and, ignoring professional advice, allowed the listed building to collapse into the River Cocker.

[That this House notes in July 2022 Samiul Ahmed of Tower Hamlets purchased The Grade II listed Old Courthouse, Cockermonth, a building with an annual income of £38,000, believed to be worth £250,000, for the reduced price of £51,000, due to riverbank erosion and the need for major structural repairs; further notes that in pursuit of quick profit, Ahmed arranged a structural survey and associated works, but on learning of the extent of wider liability and ignoring professional advice, had support props removed, leading to major deterioration and collapse of a portion of the building into the River Cocker in October 2023; also notes that after three years the building remains unsupported, a partial ruin; notes that the Environment Agency mapped increased flood risk to Cockermonth as a result, and expressed concern that the front of the building is also undermined and at risk of collapse; observes that Ahmed failed to pay contractors, has been successfully sued for £62,000 by one local company, and that he has conspired to avoid liability by arranging transfer of his personal ownership of the building to a different legal entity, Halal Group Ltd.; believes that Ahmed is now seeking to transfer responsibility to Cumberland Council taxpayers a potential bill which could range between £1 and £4 million; asserts it should not be the responsibility of taxpayers to pick up the liabilities of persons whose motivation has been property speculation for a quick profit; and calls upon Mr Ahmed to fund the restoration costs.]

So it was disappointing to hear the owner on Radio Cumbria this morning continuing to blame the council. My message to Mr Ahmed is: “Publish your plans and prove you can finance them, and do it quick, before the town floods through your inaction.” Would the Leader of the House agree that a debate on council powers to deal with greedy, incompetent property speculators is well overdue?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important constituency case. He is absolutely right that we need more accountability, and we need communities to have more powers over these vital local assets. That is exactly what we will be doing when we introduce the English devolution and community empowerment Bill later.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Yesterday, LBC published a month-long investigative story on special educational needs and disabilities. Shockingly, it revealed that families have been sent legal cease and desist letters in attempts by some schools and local authorities to deter parents from seeking education, health and care plans for their children with SEND. The report uncovered that some parents and the independent SEND advocates assisting them have been threatened with legal action and with being reported to the police simply for daring to ask questions about the SEND provision to which their children are entitled but that is not being delivered. Let us be very clear: SEND children and their families have a legal right to support, and I am sure that the whole House would agree that attempting to prevent or limit the provision of such assistance, particularly through intimidatory tactics, is completely unacceptable.

We all know that the SEND system is fundamentally broken and that reform is needed. That is why the Liberal Democrats set out our five principles for SEND reform in England yesterday. Principle No. 1 is ensuring that children’s and families’ voices are at the heart of the reform process. Indeed, the Prime Minister said yesterday that he wants

“to work with parents and teachers to get this right.”—[*Official Report*, 9 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 941.]

Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Education to make a statement explaining exactly how their voices are being not just heard, but understood as part of the SEND reform process, and will she join me in condemning the outrageous practice of issuing legal threats to parents who are simply trying to do their best for their children?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important issue, which I know she and many in her party care deeply about, as do most on the Government Benches. As she says—I think it is widely accepted—we inherited a SEND system in crisis; I think any parent or any constituency MP who has been supporting families through this system knows that it is broken and needs addressing. I join her in highlighting the LBC investigation, which has really shone a light on some of these issues.

On the process, I reassure the hon. Lady that we absolutely want to and will build consensus on these issues—we have been very clear about that. We will be working with parents, teachers, campaigners and professionals right across the system to develop those reforms and to fix the system, which is much needed.

We will continue that engaged dialogue over the summer before publishing a White Paper in the autumn; that White Paper will, of course, be followed by all the processes and discussions that would normally follow. I will ensure that the House is kept updated throughout.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): At a time when just 26% of the UK’s science, technology, engineering and mathematics workforce are women, I am incredibly proud that Croydon high school in my constituency is on course to become the first all-girls school in the world to design, build and launch a CubeSat into space, following a successful live flight test this month. This group of students are testament to what is possible when we encourage our girls to reach for the stars. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Astrogazers team on their pioneering work, and will she allow time for a debate on how we can open up more opportunities to girls in science, technology and engineering across all our schools?

Lucy Powell: As a STEM graduate myself, I absolutely endorse what my hon. Friend says. Girls are often better at science and maths in many ways, but they just do not pick it. I strongly congratulate the Astrogazers team and the school in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and encourage all the girls involved to get into a career in science, engineering and technology.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business in the Chamber. If she could also look forward to the September sitting and give us dates early, it would help us to plan debates in the Chamber.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, we will have the following debates in Westminster Hall: on Tuesday 15 July, there will be a debate on SEND provision in the south-east; on Thursday 17 July, there will be a debate on the role of freedom of religion or belief in UK foreign policy, followed by a debate on the role of the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit during the second world war; and on Tuesday 22 July, there will be a debate on Black Country Day. We are also, of course, already planning for the September sitting; on 4 September, we will have a debate on the adoption and special guardianship support fund, followed by a debate on the future of terrestrial TV.

Earlier this year, I raised the plight of minority groups in Bangladesh, and yesterday I hosted a seminar in which we heard from representatives of the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Ahmadiyya communities, who are all under direct attack in Bangladesh. A couple of weeks ago I referred to the Rath Yatra celebrations in Harrow. In Bangladesh, the celebrations were attacked by Islamist thugs who disgracefully destroyed that wonderful and peaceful procession.

At the same time, the current interim Government in Bangladesh have failed to announce the dates of the general election, when a proper democratic Government will be elected. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made next week by a Foreign Office Minister on how we will put pressure on Bangladesh to ensure that we safeguard minorities?

Lucy Powell: As ever, I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing some important forthcoming debates. I shall do my best to give as much advance notice as possible on the opportunities coming up in September.

The hon. Gentleman raised the really important issue of freedom of religious expression or belief—it normally comes up later in this session, but I am really glad he is also raising it today. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are in constant dialogue with the interim Bangladesh Government, and we have made very clear the importance of upholding freedom of religious beliefs and of protecting all communities. We will continue that engagement, and I will ensure that the House is kept updated on those conversations.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I cannot help but note that the news of the defection of my predecessor, Jake Berry, has generally been greeted in Rossendale and Darwen as bad news for Reform. It has been suggested that the party should re-establish its vetting procedures.

On further Reform news, I was informed this week that the Reform-led Lancashire county council plans to cut £3 million from the education budget by significantly reducing support for nurseries. That is despite increased childcare funding from this Labour Government. I have been contacted by several Rossendale nursery managers who have made it clear that this will result in increased costs for parents and even closures. If these are the sort of efficiencies that Reform is pursuing, increasing costs and stress for young families, we should all be deeply concerned. I and fellow MPs have written to the leader of the county council opposing the cuts in the strongest possible terms and asking him to think again. Does the Leader of the House share our concerns and will she agree to hold a debate on this subject?

Lucy Powell: Having visited a number of nursery schools in Rossendale over the years, I know of the amazing work that they do to provide children in my hon. Friend's constituency with the very best start in life. This Government are absolutely committed to supporting and increasing that work and to ensuring that all young people get that best start in life.

I am shocked to hear that the Reform-led county council is planning on closing nurseries. That is a retrograde step and something that it should rethink. My hon. Friend is right to point out that his predecessor, the former Member for Rossendale and Darwen, is now a member of Reform. I think that that former Member might have ambitions to put himself forward as a candidate for the Mayor of Lancashire in the forthcoming elections. I also remember him joining me in the former all-party group on nursery schools in wanting to keep the Rossendale nurseries open. Perhaps he might start his new career in Reform by telling the party straightaway not to make this decision.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): First, I add my tribute to my late friend, Lord Tebbit of Chingford, who was one of the finest parliamentarians and a man of great courage and patriotism. We owe him so much for what he did for our country. He was also a victim of terrorism, as you will know, Mr Speaker.

This week I had the privilege of representing my constituency at the 20-year commemoration service of the 7/7 bombing at St Paul's cathedral. For those of us

who were in London, in Westminster, on 7 July 2005, it brought back the sheer horror of what took place on that dreadful day. For the 52 people who lost their lives and the countless others who were mentally and physically scarred, the suffering was beyond imaginable. A constituent of mine at the time, Dan Biddle from Collier Row, lost both his legs and an eye in the attack and has been battling that trauma ever since. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Home Secretary to heed Dan's call for a full public inquiry into 7/7, and to give the victims the justice, the compensation and the closure that they rightly deserve?

Lucy Powell: I pay tribute to Lord Tebbit, who was a leading politician when I was growing up. Although I disagreed with him on most things politically, I rated him as a politician who had a clear agenda and was able to take things forward in a way that many others were not. I recognise the challenge that he and many others faced. As the MP for Manchester Central, I also represent those who have been the victims of terrorist attacks and I greatly understand the calls for answers, the calls for truth and justice, and, of course, the calls for compensation. I will ensure that the hon. Member gets a full response from the Home Secretary about the issues that he raises.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Douglas Forteach, vice-principal at Freebrough academy in my constituency, is retiring after 30 years of service as a school teacher. He was one of my teachers when I was there—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute both to Douglas for 30 years of educating young people in our constituency and to teachers all across our country?

Lucy Powell: Well what a fine job Douglas Forteach did! I am sure he is incredibly proud of the fact that one of his former pupils is now a Member of Parliament. I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking Douglas for a great life of service and for teaching all his wonderful students over the years.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Three weeks ago I asked about the long overdue final delivery plan for ME, and the Leader of the House rightly acknowledged the strength of feeling on this issue and referenced the NHS 10-year plan. The 10-year plan has now been published, but unfortunately it makes absolutely no mention of ME. The Department of Health and Social Care repeatedly raised expectations that the final delivery plan for ME would be published by the end of June, which was a delayed date in itself, but that deadline has well come and gone. This is appallingly disrespectful to those suffering from ME, and the continued delay is causing unnecessary distress and despondency. Can the Leader of the House explain why the delivery plan has not yet been published, and can she press the Department for a clear timetable and an urgent statement on this?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raised this issue with me three weeks ago, and I know there has been much interest in her question and my answer among many who want to know when the delivery plan will be published. I am sorry that ME was not contained in the NHS 10-year plan, but I will be in touch with Ministers to get some answers about the timing.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): The return of the Bayeux tapestry to this country for the first time in almost 1,000 years is a triumph for Britain. The tapestry quite literally wove Hastings and 1066 Country into our national history, but while we are often at the centre of historical events, we have not always felt the benefits, and our area is in the bottom 10 places in the whole country for social mobility. This will be the exhibition of a generation, and our area must be a part of it. Children in my constituency must not be priced out by the cost of a ticket or train fare. What better way to ensure that that does not happen than to have the tapestry visit 1066 Country. It is for the experts to decide whether that is practical, but will the Leader of the House support my campaign to make sure that my area is truly part of this national moment and feels the benefits of it?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in saying what great news it is that we are finally, after many hundreds of years, going to see the exhibition of the Bayeux tapestry in this country. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is one of the champions in the House for her area; 1066 Country is very close to my heart, having holidayed there for many years as a child. I know how important the exhibition will be to her area and the young people there. I am sure, as she says, that this exhibition of a generation will bring renewed interest in Hastings, Battle and the surrounding areas, so I join my hon. Friend in her call for young people to get access to it.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I sincerely thank the Leader of the House for announcing that there will be a debate on the 80th anniversary of VJ Day. It confirms how worth while it is to come to business questions and make the case for a debate.

I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating British players on a record-breaking start to the first week of Wimbledon, particularly Cam Norrie on his great effort in reaching the men's quarter-finals. Sadly, many British players have spoken out about the abuse that they have been facing online, including Katie Boulter and Jodie Burrage, and a Women's Tennis Association and International Tennis Federation report found that 40% of those trolling players were dissatisfied gamblers. Can we have a debate in Government time about what we can do to prevent this sort of unacceptable abuse, not just of tennis players but of all those in public life?

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for being such a regular attendee of business questions. I can confirm that it was because of his representations in these sessions that I got the idea of having a VJ Day debate before we break up for the recess. As he says, the VE Day debate was very oversubscribed, so I hope that in the upcoming debate we can look at the very specific lessons of VJ Day too.

The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important matter. I join him in congratulating Cam Norrie and all the British players on their progression at Wimbledon. The online abuse that they and many others in public life have suffered is unacceptable, it is disgraceful and it needs to stop. The Online Safety Act 2023 is an important first step, but we need to go further. The big tech

platforms need to step up and put an end to this kind of abuse on social media, where it flourishes, because it is not acceptable and it needs to end.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): The crisis at Morecambe football club continues. Due to the owner's failure to sell, staff are unpaid, the bar is unstocked and two primary school leavers' dos have been cancelled. The community has rallied round, as it always does in Morecambe, and the parties will go ahead, but may we have a debate in Government time on corporate fiscal and social responsibility and what powers should be available when business owners let communities down like this?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear that the situation at Morecambe football club continues. It sounds like it is getting worse, but I am pleased that the community has rallied round to make sure that some of those leavers' dos can go ahead. My hon. Friend is right to continue to raise these issues in the House. This is one of the reasons that we introduced the Football Governance Bill, which passed its remaining stages in the House earlier this week. We want to put fans and communities right back at the heart of football and our important local clubs, such as Morecambe FC. I know that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is keen to continue to work with my hon. Friend to resolve the issues at Morecambe.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May we have a debate or a statement on the accountability and accessibility of arm's length bodies? For months, I have been working with a company to try to get answers for it out of UK Research and Innovation. Emails go unanswered for weeks and months at a time. There is no publicly available contact information for the chief executive. I got an email this morning because my office called the press office at UKRI to say that I was going to raise the matter here; that is the only point at which we have had anything out of it. Bodies such as UKRI deliver a lot of Government policy. Surely, they should be accessible and accountable to Members of Parliament in exactly the same way that the right hon. Lady's ministerial colleagues are required to be.

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important issue, and I am sure we all share the frustration that he describes with many arm's length bodies—quangos, as they are known—not being open and accountable in the way that they should be. Frankly, the Government think there are too many of them and we are taking steps to streamline them. It is in the DNA of this Government to make sure that people have recourse and accountability. That is why we have introduced Bills such as the Football Governance Bill, the Renters' Rights Bill, the Employment Rights Bill and what is now the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. We want to give ordinary people more rights and recourse in respect of bodies that take decisions on their behalf. I will ensure that the right hon. Gentleman gets a reply from UKRI, and I am sure that it has heard his question.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Adam Jogee.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I extend my sympathies to you and your family on the recent death of your mother?

[Adam Jogee]

Last Sunday, people from across Staffordshire, including many from the heart and soul of our ancient county, Newcastle-under-Lyme, came together at Lichfield cathedral for a celebration of Sir Ian Dudson's service as lord lieutenant of Staffordshire. Sir Ian and Lady Dudson have served the county, and particularly Newcastle-under-Lyme, very well for well over a decade. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Sir Ian and Lady Dudson for their service to the county and wishing them and their family well for their retirement?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Sir Ian and Lady Dudson for all their service to his community and wish them the very best for their retirement.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I join the tributes to Lord Tebbit? He was a political giant in his day and far more capable than the "Spitting Image" puppet ever gave him credit for.

May we have a debate in Government time on emerging proposals to cancel education, health and care plans? I say in all sincerity to the Leader of the House that we all know from our constituency work that the special educational needs system is broken and needs reform, but abolishing EHCPs would only lead to a backlash from angry parents and probably a major Back-Bench rebellion. Whatever her Government are going to do, please, in all seriousness, don't do that.

Lucy Powell: As we have said many times in this Chamber, the SEND system is broken and needs reform. The last Conservative Education Secretary described it as a "lose, lose, lose" situation for parents and children. It is not delivering the outcomes and is not a good process for anyone involved. I hope the right hon. Member is not trying to misrepresent our position or plans in what he just outlined, but I can reassure him, as I have reassured others, that we are working closely with the sector and with parents, campaigners and others as we draw up a White Paper. That White Paper will be published later this year, and will be there for all to see, consider and consult on. We will take that process incredibly seriously because we want to build consensus on how we can bring much-needed reform to the SEND sector.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has given a commitment to respond to Sir Brian Langstaff's report, which was published yesterday, before the recess. I stressed to him earlier that the community out there who are campaigning feel wounded by the way they have been treated since the final report was published in May last year. If it is left to the fag end of this parliamentary term and squeezed in on the last day, that would just exacerbate the situation. Can I stress to the Leader of the House, for her discussions with the Paymaster General, that we should not leave it that late?

Lucy Powell: As ever, my hon. Friend raises important issues around the infected blood scandal. As I have said to him before, since we came into Government last year we have tried to be incredibly forthcoming with the House in many statements and a debate, and we have tried our best to move forward the compensation schemes,

which are now under way. I hear what he has to say. We need time to consider the findings of that report, but we absolutely are committed to ensuring that the statement is made to the House before we rise.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Dirprwy Lefarydd. This month, Ynys Môn's status as a UNESCO global geopark is due its revalidation process to assess the functionality and quality of its status. The island is a globally significant site for geological study and appreciation, with a vast geological history spanning four eras, twelve geological periods and 1.8 billion years. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the trustees and volunteers at the GeoMôn centre in Porth Amlwch, whose hard work ensures that Ynys Môn maintains its world-renowned status?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising somewhere that I visit regularly. It is a beautiful part of the world, and I know many people enjoy going there. She is absolutely right to point out that, in addition to that, it is an important geological site where much study takes place. I support all her efforts in raising those issues and will ensure that she gets a response.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): Last night, I was delighted to host the Lost Mothers project in Parliament to share its report and the consequences for female offenders who experience pregnancy and give birth in prison. The project was joined by the Clean Break theatre company, whose play based on the findings of the report dramatises the struggle and trauma caused by maternal separation. Will the Leader of the House encourage Ministry of Justice colleagues to read and consider the findings of the Lost Mothers report when making changes to sentencing guidelines?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a great campaigner on these issues. I thank her for raising the Lost Mothers campaign and its report, and I will ensure that Ministers respond to it. The Government are committed to addressing the specific needs of women in our criminal justice system, including pregnant women; that is the work of the Women's Justice Board. I will ensure that there is a decent reply on the Lost Mothers report.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that it is wholly unacceptable for a senior official at His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to refuse to respond to repeated reasonable requests from me on behalf of my constituents? We have correspondence going back to early March. Will she meet me to discuss how we can ensure proper accountability for some of these arm's length bodies and that we get timely responses from executive agencies in all cases?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the case the right hon. Gentleman describes. I am happy to work with him to try to get a more prompt reply from HMRC. This is the second time that this issue has been raised in this session. I expect arm's length bodies that are responsible for big services, big expenditure and issues that really matter to our constituents to be responsive to MPs and ensure that they get replies when they need them.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): Last weekend marked Airborne Forces Weekend. I was privileged to attend the official opening of the new Airborne Memorial Shelter at Aldershot military cemetery. The shelter is a moving and permanent tribute to the service and sacrifice of our airborne forces, including those who lost their lives in the tragic air crash at Little Baldon 60 years ago, on 6 July 1965. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the tireless work of Tommy Simpson, Richard Stacey and the Aldershot Parachute Regimental Association, whose quiet efforts over many years made the project a reality? They are Aldershot's finest, and those who wear the maroon beret are Britain's finest.

Lucy Powell: What a real tribute that is to all those from our airborne forces. I join my hon. Friend in thanking the Aldershot Parachute Regimental Association and all those involved in delivering this really important project. I know she has also worked with my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Pam Cox) and for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), himself a veteran paratrooper, to honour the legacy of all those involved. I thank her for her leadership on this really important issue.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): There are over 10,000 education, health and care plans currently registered in Devon and the average cost is rising—it is now over £18,000 per pupil. Much of that is spent on private providers who are not subject to the rigorous oversight that we demand of SEND provision in the state sector. Given that the Leader of the House spoke a moment ago about a forthcoming SEND White Paper, may we first have a debate on how SEND provision can be improved in the south-west and across the country?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight some of the real challenges we face in the sector. A number of very expensive private places are often sought by those private providers. They do not have the same level of standards, accountability and value for money that we would expect in the public sector. This is just one of the many difficult areas that we will need to tackle as we consider our special educational needs reforms, and we will be doing that.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): East Hunsbury primary school in my constituency has been named the kindest school in Britain. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the school, Kelly Roberts the mental health lead, and, in particular, all the students who put themselves forward to be kindness ambassadors? Does she agree that in our acts in this place, online and in the press, we could all be a bit more like East Hunsbury primary school and always act with kindness?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the kindest school in the country, which is in his constituency. Maybe I could extend an invitation to the kindness ambassadors to come and meet me and other Members, so we can share a bit more kindness across the House.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I echo the condolences expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee)? It is good to see you back in your place.

I hope the Leader of the House will join me in celebrating the new escape room attraction that has opened in my constituency this week—it is called Stafford. Yesterday, Sandon Road was closed, Weston Road was gridlocked, Newport Road had roadworks and Beaconside is always to be avoided, leaving Lichfield Road the only road out of town. May we please have a debate in Government time on how Staffordshire county council needs to get its act together and sort out the endless roadworks blighting my constituency?

Lucy Powell: This is at least the third time my hon. Friend has raised with me the problem roadworks her constituents are enduring because Staffordshire county council has not been able to manage them properly. She describes it as an escape room, which might evoke a sense of fun, but I know that for her constituents it is anything but fun—more a living nightmare. She is absolutely right to call out Staffordshire county council, which really needs to get a grip.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): This question is from Miranda and Leo, constituents who have been doing work experience with me this week and are in the Public Gallery today. They are students at Brighton, Hove and Sussex sixth-form college—BHASVIC—which is one of the country's top state sixth forms. They have to travel to college by train. The Unizone train pass offers travel into Brighton for just £22 per month within a 30-mile coastal zone from Worthing to Eastbourne, but it does not extend north to Mid Sussex, where Leo and Miranda live, just five miles away. It costs them £70 to £90 extra per month, which equates to £2,000 more over the two years they will be at college. Given that the Government's mission is to break down barriers to opportunity for every child at every stage, does the Leader of the House agree that that fare system is unfair, and will she make time for a debate on fair access to public transport for college students?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming all the students from BHASVIC, which sounds like an outstanding sixth-form college that produces wonderful students such as those with us today. Their question is a really pertinent one. It is unacceptable that there are those differences in travel costs, which are a real barrier to young people getting the education, training and job opportunities that they need. That is why we are taking steps to address them, whether through our transport strategy plans, bus fare caps and opportunities for young people. We will also introduce the devolution Bill to ensure that areas can work collectively to break down such false boundaries.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): This week, Sky News reported the testimony of an anonymous Israeli soldier, who admitted that the killing or capture of Palestinian civilians often depended on the day and on the mood of the commander. That chilling account adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting a systematic disregard of Palestinian civilian life. In the light of the ongoing reports of killings, violations and forced displacement, will the Leader of the House press the Foreign Secretary to clarify urgently that the UK Government are considering further sanctions, and what concrete representations have been made to the Israeli Government to ensure compliance with international law and the protection of civilians?

Lucy Powell: We strongly condemn some of the recent Israeli military operations in Gaza, and we are strongly opposed to further settler expansion into the west bank. We have been calling for Israel to end its blockade of aid into Gaza. There is an urgent need for more goods and aid to get in, because there are extensive humanitarian needs in the area, as my hon. Friend well knows. We have already paused trade discussions with Israel, and we have sanctioned individuals and organisations supporting or inciting violence against Palestinian communities. As I am sure he will appreciate, we do not comment on possible future sanctions.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The Institute for Fiscal Studies is undoubtedly the country's leading economic research institute. I pay tribute to Paul Johnson, who finishes after 14 years in his role, and welcome Helen Miller. Clearly, there are challenges for all parties in making tough choices about our public finances, but could we have a debate about the options facing the Government? The deputy leader of Reform yesterday came up with a figure that was half what the IFS said a certain measure would cost. If we are to make the right decisions, and be led by rational economic analysis rather than by rhetoric, it is important that this House, and the experience that lies within it, informs the decisions made in the autumn.

Lucy Powell: I join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking Paul Johnson, who I think we all acknowledge has done a commendable job as the director of the IFS over many years, and I look forward to hearing more from Helen Miller, the incoming director. The right hon. Gentleman is right to recognise the challenging economic times that we are in. He will not like me saying this, but we inherited a big black hole in the public finances. Reserves had been spent in the first half of the year, with public sector pay recommendations sitting on Ministers' desks but without a penny allocated to them. That has meant a very challenging time for us. It is why we have put a premium on financial stability—not because we want to align with Office for Budget Responsibility spreadsheets, but because we know that those on the lowest incomes pay the heaviest price when the economy runs into problems, which we want to address. The House debates those issues regularly, and I am sure that we will continue to do so. Of course, Budgets are delivered to the House first.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): Following yesterday's "Act Now, Change Forever" mass lobby of Parliament, organised by the Climate Coalition, will the Leader of the House make time to debate the serious nature of developing countries' debt, which prevents those nations from adequately spending to mitigate a climate crisis they have done the least to cause, and the unique position our Government are in to legislate and bring private creditors to the negotiating table?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issues of the "Act Now, Change Forever" campaign. She will know that tackling the climate crisis and our mission to be a clean energy superpower by 2030 are at the heart of what this Government are about. The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero will come to the House soon to make a statement about these issues, and I am sure my hon. Friend can raise those then.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Research from the University of Bath has uncovered serious violations of the pharmaceutical code of practice by Novo Nordisk, one of the companies behind new weight loss drugs. The company covertly paid millions of pounds to healthcare groups and charities to promote its drugs. In the light of the Government's active support for weight-loss treatments, can we have a debate in Government time or at least a statement on the transparency and regulation of the companies behind weight-loss drugs?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raises a really important issue. We recognise that medicines and their availability need to be carefully monitored and regulated, and there are various processes in place to do that. I will ensure she gets a reply from Health Ministers about that particular case.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): After many years of dedicated service, a former police officer from my constituency is being failed by the Scottish Public Pensions Agency's mishandling of the police pension scheme and outrageous delays to the issuing of remediable service statements. Months of delays in receiving her remediable service statement has left her unable to plan for her future. Instead of enjoying a well-earned retirement, she is now forced to continue working due to the failure of the SNP Government in Holyrood. This is not just the usual SNP incompetence; it is a betrayal of those who have served our communities. Does the Leader of the House agree not only that this situation is deeply shameful but that the only way to restore dignity to our public servants and honour the promise of a secure retirement for workers across Scotland is to elect a Scottish Labour Government next year?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely agree with the sentiment of my hon. Friend's question; it is a shocking case. The SNP's record in government is one of waste, short-termism and a lack of transparency, failing the people of Scotland and constituents like hers. Our police officers do phenomenal work every day, and they deserve respect and dignity in retirement.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): At a recent constituency surgery, a constituent came to me who is in receipt of the survivor police pension. She drew my attention to the anomaly that if she were to remarry or cohabit, she would lose her pension. There has been an ongoing campaign about this for a number of years. I am looking to apply for a Backbench Business debate, but could the Leader of the House ask a Minister to make a statement and forestall that debate?

Lucy Powell: There are quite a lot of issues I know about at the Dispatch Box, but this is not one of them. The hon. Member raises a really important point about entitlement to the survivor police pension should someone remarry, and I am sure it would make a very popular Adjournment debate if he were to apply for one. In the meantime, I will ensure he gets a ministerial reply to his question.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): The north-east is known for its passion for football, and last week I went to a walking football session at Blaydon youth and community centre, hosted by the Newcastle United Foundation and supported by the Premier League. There

was plenty of Toon Army pride on show, though not a lot of walking, but beyond the football it was a chance for folk to talk, connect, forge friendships, and improve wellbeing. May we have a debate in Government time about the importance of football in supporting community wellbeing?

Lucy Powell: I think I am right in saying that it is my hon. Friend's birthday today, so may I wish her a very happy birthday? She has taken the occasion to remind the whole House of the important role that football, grassroots football and grassroots sports can play in the wellbeing of all our communities. I support the efforts of Blaydon youth and community centre, and all those involved in the walking football session. I hope that they do many more in the future.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): On Monday, I spoke to a constituent who works at the Jessie May charity, which provides hospice-at-home care for children and young people in my constituency and beyond. It is currently fundraising to meet running costs of £300,000—costs that cannot in any way be helped by the capital funding for hospices announced by the Government. It is to be commended on having managed to raise more than £183,000 so far, but that is clearly not a sustainable way of providing such vital healthcare. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Minister to make a statement on how hospice care can be funded sustainably?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to all those involved in the work of the Jessie May charity. As constituency MPs, we all know of the immense work that those who work in hospices do for us all and for society as a whole, as well as caring for those individuals at the end of life. She raises an important issue in that hospices have for too long relied on a great deal of their funding coming from fundraising and the charity sector. This Government are here to support hospices. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be in the Chamber shortly to make a different statement, and I will ensure that he has heard the hon. Member's question and is forthcoming with an answer.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): On Tuesday Ukraine suffered its heaviest aerial attack, as more than 700,000 drones and 13 missiles struck cities around the country, and the BBC reported today that Russia conducted another massive overnight attack on Kyiv. Later this month, I will be driving an ambulance with medical supplies to Ukraine, with a local business that has been delivering supplies since the beginning of the war. Will the Leader of the House commend the actions of British organisations up and down the country who have stood in solidarity with our Ukrainian allies, and does she agree that we must never back down in the face of Russian aggression?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in commending the actions of British organisations up and down the country, and all their support for Ukraine and Ukrainians, whether they are here or still in Ukraine. The UK will stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine today, tomorrow and for 100 years from now. That is why we recently signed our historic 100-year partnership agreement with President Zelensky, and I hope the whole House will support that.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's 10-year health plan, and I am sure Members across the House will agree that supporting access to innovative treatments for patients is a crucial part of that. Industry figures tell me that the current approach is a barrier when it comes to medicines that are useful in the treatment of more than one condition. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on access to innovative treatments as part of the 10-year plan and the national cancer plan?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: access to innovative medicines and treatments still takes far too long, which is why those issues are a core part of our NHS 10-year plan and indeed our cancer plan. We want people to get some of those medicines faster and for the trials to be made easier, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a response about that.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Next week is Bees' Needs Week, a chance to highlight the vital role that pollinators play in our environment and to encourage everybody to get involved to help these essential species. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Cannock Wood and Gentleshaw Gardening Club on its recent successful open gardens day, which I went along to? Not only does the club bring our community together in the most beautiful way, and inspire plenty of garden envy, but it also raises funds for the Bumblebee Conservation Trust—a fantastic example of local people making a national difference.

Lucy Powell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Cannock Wood and Gentleshaw Gardening Club on its commitment to bringing the community together and raising funds for the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. I am sure there was a real buzz about the place at that event.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Later today, a bust of the late and right honourable David Trimble will be unveiled in the other place. David was the former MP for Upper Bann, a peer and the leader of the Ulster Unionist party. He led us through the Belfast agreement negotiations, for which he rightly received the Nobel peace prize, along with John Hume. Senator George Mitchell, who chaired those negotiations, said:

"David Trimble took enormous personal and political risks for peace. He demonstrated courage, determination and leadership at a time when compromise was dangerous and difficult. Without his resolve, the Good Friday agreement would not have been possible."

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating and thanking those behind today's event, and in remembering and acknowledging David's personal and political contribution to Northern Ireland, and his leadership?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying our respects and giving our thanks to Lord Trimble for his courage, determination and leadership. We all remember the incredible role that he played in bringing about the Good Friday agreement. As the hon. Gentleman says, Lord Trimble put his own political career at risk in taking such a leadership role, and that is why he and John Hume were jointly awarded the Nobel peace prize, which was a fitting tribute. I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking all those behind the event today.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): In the week that the Football Governance Bill continued its progress through Parliament, may I draw the House's attention to the 3UP campaign to secure an extra promotion place from the national league to league two? I am supporting the campaign, alongside my brilliant local football club, Altrincham FC. Could we have a debate on how the 3UP campaign could build on the Football Governance Bill in ensuring that opportunity and money flow fairly through English football?

Lucy Powell: I know what a great football club Altrincham FC is and how much my hon. Friend, as the local MP, supports them. He is absolutely right that the Football Governance Bill is an important step in ensuring that fans and communities, like those who support Altrincham FC, are right back at the heart of our football system. I am sure that a debate on the 3UP campaign would get a lot of support.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last week, I asked the Leader of the House if she would join me in wishing good luck to Freedom Performing Arts, which was performing at the world championships in Spain. I am sure she will be pleased to hear that the six to nine-year-olds secured a bronze medal. Amy and the team are really chuffed.

Last week, I visited Golf in Society—an initiative through which a group of volunteers and paid staff take people who live with Parkinson's, dementia and other age-related conditions out, ensuring that they get out and about, and keep fit and active. Will the Leader of the House make time in Government time for a debate on how such initiatives help older people with ageing and associated diseases?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to hear that Freedom Performing Arts got a bronze medal—that is fantastic. I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking all those who work with people with dementia and those who are ageing to keep them independent, active and involved in initiatives like the one that he visited this week. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is now in his place. The NHS 10-year plan, and all the work that we are doing in the NHS and in health in this country, is about bringing services back into the community, as well as prevention and exactly the sort of initiatives that he describes.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): The first Shiremoor children's treat took place in 1907. Last weekend—118 years later—I was delighted to attend this year's treat. Local schools like Shiremoor, Holystone and Backworth Park took part, and North Tyneside Disability Forum and West Allotment Celtic all joined in to make the day a huge success. A huge thank you goes to Cheryl and all the members of the organising committee for the biggest and best treat yet. Can we find time to recognise these events, which are at the heart of our communities, and to discuss how we protect such legacies for future generations?

Lucy Powell: The Shiremoor children's treat sounds like a fantastic occasion; for children, I am sure that anything including the word "treat" attracts a great deal of interest. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say

that the volunteers and community leaders who organise these things do a great service to all our communities, and I commend her for raising that event.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I declare my interest: I am a registered provider of social housing, and before the election I had support from a construction firm in my constituency. Yesterday the Competition and Markets Authority found, in its notice to accept commitments from the big seven house builders, that "suspected conduct may have had the object or effect of preventing, restricting or distorting competition".

It also stated:

"It may be presumed that parties took the competitively sensitive information into account."

The CMA is considering accepting a payment of £100 million to halt that investigation. Given the scale and seriousness of the suspected conduct, should not Parliament decide whether thousands of people have paid over the odds for their home? Should it not decide whether it is right that the Government and the CMA should accept £100 million and whether the proposed commitments will go far enough to create the competitive industry we need to see?

Lucy Powell: It is right that the CMA looks at these issues and ensures that we have true competition. This Government are absolutely committed to more house building and to more truly affordable homes and social homes. These are matters for the CMA and the Government, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a full response.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Tea is the most popular beverage in the world next to water, providing work for about 13 million people worldwide, but half of young Kenyan tea pickers surveyed by Fairtrade said that the impact of climate change on tea production was the biggest challenge, and only one in five tea farmers and workers surveyed earned enough money to support their families. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time about introducing a UK law on human rights and environmental due diligence centring on the needs of overseas farmers and workers so that they can have a living wage, as well ensuring we address the unsustainable purchasing practices and business models that undermine progress?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise those issues. We all enjoy a cup of tea—Yorkshire Tea is my preferred option. He is right to remind us that as we drink our many cups of tea a day, we really need to think about where that tea comes from, and ensure that we have fair trade and that those who pick the tea and work in the tea sector are treated fairly, with fair pay. This Government are taking steps to ensure that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish to raise the disturbing reports of abuse suffered by Alawite women abducted by jihadist groups in Syria—including, unfortunately, prolonged sexual violence in underground prisons run by groups such as Jaysh al-Islam. Will the Leader of the House ask Ministers to update this House on the assessment of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office? What steps is the UK taking

with partners to investigate these horrible crimes, and to support the survivors and ensure that their voices are included in future justice efforts?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising another very serious and difficult issue in the House. The Foreign Secretary, in his conversations with the Syrian Government and others, continues to press them to take concrete action following the horrific violence that continues to be committed against the Alawite community, as the hon. Gentleman says. I will ensure that he and the House are kept updated.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the accessibility of banking services for disabled people and those with additional support needs? That would follow concerns raised with me by the banking campaign steering group—part of the Advisory Group in Glasgow, based in my constituency—which reports widespread discrimination, branch closures and exclusion from cashless-only businesses, prompting its campaign for more inclusive banking.

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. We need to see more banking services, which is why we have the programme of banking hubs. We need to make sure that banking services, access to cash and all the services that come with that are inclusive and that we have those things in mind, because it is the people who are often excluded from those services who need them the most. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): I recently met volunteers at Kiveton Park football club, who do an incredible job organising countless teams for boys, girls, men and women in our area. They also have a disabled team for boys and girls—one of only a few in the wider South Yorkshire area—and I am really pleased that the Minister for Sport is going to visit that team and watch them play a game over the August recess. Could the Leader of the House organise a debate about the importance of local sports teams and, in particular, sports provision for disabled people?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend has secured a visit from the Minister to his local football club—and if he had not already secured it, he has now. He is absolutely right to mention the important role that disability sports play in keeping those with disabilities active and independent and giving them purpose and self-worth, so I applaud the work of his local club.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I was invited to bowl at Ibstock bowls club at a joint fundraising event with Sands United FC Ashby. That team welcomes men from across my constituency who have been bereaved by pregnancy loss and child loss to play football and to chat if they need to. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those two local clubs on coming together to raise money for Sands, the national baby loss charity, and will she consider a debate in Government time to discuss the impact of baby loss and support for families who experience it?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating those clubs in her constituency on bringing people together to raise money and to raise awareness of baby

loss. She has highlighted once again the valuable role that local football clubs and other local sporting clubs can play in bringing people together and dealing with mental health issues and other health needs—they provide a wonderful service.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I recently met a group of Ukrainian families who have settled in my constituency—it was a privilege to hear their individual stories at first hand. After three years, Putin's war still rages on. The UK Government operate the Ukraine permission extension scheme, allowing participants an 18-month extension to remain in the UK. I understand that we must respect Ukraine's desire to see all its citizens return to Ukraine when peace is secured; however, many of my Ukrainian constituents have secured homes and good employment, or are in full-time education. They enrich our communities and see their future in West Dunbartonshire. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time to review how we can provide stability to those seeking career advancement or to complete higher education, ending the uncertainty of short-term visas and starting to plan a pathway towards indefinite leave to remain for Ukrainians who have made this country their home?

Lucy Powell: I think every one of us is proud of the way in which this country has welcomed so many Ukrainians in recent years, giving them a home and refuge and supporting them in their time of need. He is right that we have to take into account the wishes of the Ukrainian Government, who want to see many of their citizens return to Ukraine. Our approach needs to respect those wishes, but my hon. Friend has raised the important issues of long-term security and access to higher education, housing and other things, and I will ensure that he gets a full response.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): The maritime sector offers very rewarding careers, particularly to people like me, who get quite excited by large-scale engineering projects. I think someone in the Department for Transport shares my enthusiasm, because they have awarded funding to set up the Tees maritime cluster, which is training young people in our area. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating some local businesses—AV Dawson, Womble Bond Dickinson, PD Ports and Steel Benders—that worked hard to establish that cluster? Given the obvious interest of the Department for Transport, perhaps we can have a debate in Government time on the opportunities for young people in the maritime sector.

Lucy Powell: I am really pleased to hear about the development of the Tees maritime cluster and all the opportunities it is going to bring for young people, including job opportunities. It will show the strength of my hon. Friend's constituents in contributing to the maritime industry, and I think it would make a very good topic for a debate.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): This week, Yorkshire Water announced a hosepipe ban. This follows a 29% hike in bills and continued pollution of our rivers. Can my right hon. Friend tell me how I can use Parliament to hold this company to account on behalf of my constituents?

Lucy Powell: I am sure many Members across the House share my hon. Friend's frustrations about water companies operating in their constituencies. Frankly, some of the bad behaviour of those water companies has gone on for too long, and there has not been enough accountability or action on the issues that matter to us all. That is why we brought in the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 and established the commission on the future of water governance. Further legislation on this matter will come forward in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Leader of the House for her responses this morning.

Resident Doctors: Industrial Action

12.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on planned industrial action by resident doctors.

Today's waiting list figures show that after 14 years of decline, the NHS is finally moving in the right direction. Since July, we have cut waiting lists by 260,000. We promised to deliver an extra 2 million appointments in our first year, and have more than doubled that figure, delivering 4.6 million more appointments. For the first time in 17 years, waiting lists fell in the month of May, and they now stand at their lowest level in more than two years. That is what can happen when NHS staff and a Labour Government work together. We have put the NHS on the road to recovery, but we all know that it is still hanging by a thread, and that the BMA is threatening to pull that thread.

On Tuesday this week, I met the co-chairs of the BMA's resident doctors committee to discuss the results of its ballot for industrial action. In that meeting, and in a letter I sent yesterday, I offered to meet the BMA's full resident doctors committee and work with it to improve its members' working lives. Since the start of this year, I have offered repeatedly to meet the entire committee, but it still has not taken up my offer. Instead of agreeing to talk, the BMA responded by announcing five days of strike action. Its planned strike action will run from 7 am on Friday 25 July to 7 am on Wednesday 30 July. These strikes are unnecessary, given this Government's willingness and eagerness to work together to improve resident doctors' working conditions. Following a 28.9% pay rise thanks to the actions of this Government, the BMA's threatened industrial action is entirely unreasonable. I am asking it again today to pause, call off the strikes, and instead work with the Government to rebuild its members' working conditions and rebuild our NHS.

Before this Government came into office, a toxic combination of Conservative mismanagement and strikes was crippling the NHS. The cost to the NHS ran to £1.7 billion in just one year; patients saw 1.5 million operations and appointments cancelled, and people's lives were ruined. Phoebe suffers from a genetic condition: neurofibromatosis, which causes non-cancerous tumours on the outside of her body. Her first operation at Great Ormond Street hospital was cancelled twice—at first due to strikes, and then because there was not the capacity to treat her. Phoebe loves going to school, and it is an absolute tragedy that her education was set back. She was prevented from doing what she loves because the NHS was not there for her when she needed it, but this year, when Phoebe's family contacted Great Ormond Street in March, her surgery was scheduled less than two weeks later. Compared with what she went through two years ago, the difference was night and day.

That is the difference a Labour Government make, and it is why this Government were absolutely right to end the strikes when we came to office. I am so proud of what we have achieved together with NHS staff. In the words of one NHS leader I spoke to recently, there is light at the end of the tunnel and, for the first time, it is not an oncoming train. That has only been possible because of the deal this Government negotiated.

When we agreed that deal to end the strikes last year, resident doctors did not just receive a 22% pay rise; the Government also gave a genuine commitment to build a new partnership with those we now call resident doctors, based on mutual respect. I have personally ensured that that commitment was followed through. A new exception reporting process has been agreed with resident doctors in principle, so that doctors are paid for the work they are asked to do. A review of rotational training is under way and almost complete to reduce disruption to resident doctors' lives. We promised to tackle GP unemployment, and we have delivered with an extra 1,900 GPs on the frontline who were otherwise facing unemployment. I am determined to go further to tackle doctor unemployment.

When I say to resident doctors that I want to tackle the bottlenecks they face, and the unfair competition for specialty training places, and to create more training places, they can judge me not just by my words, but by my actions. When the pay review body recommended a 5.4% average pay rise for resident doctors this year, we accepted that and funded it in full. Those are not grounds for industrial action. Indeed, in the history of British trade unions, it is completely unprecedented for a pay rise of 28.9% to be met with strikes. The BMA itself described this pay rise as "generous".

Thanks to this Government, the average annual earnings per first year resident doctor last year were £43,275. That is significantly more, in a resident doctor's first year, than the average full-time worker in this country, and it is set to increase further with this year's pay award. For resident doctors in their second year out of medical school, their average annual earnings rose to £52,300 last year. In core training years, resident doctors earned an average of £67,000. Specialty registrars earned on average almost £75,000. There is no question but that these are highly trained, highly skilled medics who work hard for their money, but to threaten strikes in these circumstances is unreasonable and unnecessary, so it is no wonder that the BMA has lost the public's support.

At the beginning of this dispute, resident doctors faced a Conservative Government cutting their pay and refusing to talk to them. A clear majority supported action as a result. In February 2023, 56% of the public backed junior doctor strikes. Today, that support has collapsed. Just one in five people believe that the BMA is doing the right thing. Patients are begging resident doctors not to walk out on them, and I hope the BMA is listening, because many resident doctors are.

For the first time since the BMA's campaign began, a majority of BMA resident doctors did not vote for strike action. They can see that the Government have changed and our approach has changed, yet the BMA's tactics have not. Resident doctors have received the highest pay award in the public sector, both this year and last year, so renegotiating this year's pay award would be deeply unfair to all other public servants. Such a deal would be paid for by their future earnings, and with the greatest respect to resident doctors, there are people working in our public services who are feeling the pinch more than they are.

Even if it would not be unfair on public sector workers, it is unaffordable. It should be apparent to anyone that the public finances this Government inherited are not awash with cash, so I will not and cannot

negotiate on this year's pay award, and I am not going to lead resident doctors up the garden path by making promises unless I know I can keep them. As I have said in person, in writing, in private and in public, I am willing and ready to get around the table and work together to improve the working conditions of resident doctors. There is so much more that we can do together. I do not just hear the complaints that resident doctors have about their placements, rotations and bottlenecks—I agree with them. I know the NHS has been a bad employer, and I am determined to change it. My offer to talk comes with no preconditions attached. I will also say this to resident doctors directly: consider very carefully the consequences of your actions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. May I suggest to the Secretary of State that his statement has already taken 10 minutes and he has not asked for additional time? Does he wish to consider whether his statement is to the House, or to those outside the House? He might like to make a few closing remarks.

Wes Streeting: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will move to closing. I did share the statement in advance, including with Opposition parties and the Speaker's Office. I just say to resident doctors, and it is important that the House knows what we are saying to them, that they should carefully consider the consequences of their actions. Five days of strike action mean patients and their families receiving the phone call they are currently dreading, being told that the operation or appointment they have been waiting for—often for far too long—is being cancelled and delayed. I know how I would feel if that happened to a member of my family, and I ask them to consider how they would feel if that happened to a member of theirs. While they are out on the picket line, protesting the 28.9% pay increase they have had, their friends and colleagues and other NHS staff—many of whom are paid less and receive less than them—will be inside, picking up the pieces and working in harder conditions to cover for the consequences of resident doctors' actions.

In conclusion, the strikes are not only unnecessary and unreasonable, but unfair. They are unfair on patients, unfair on other NHS staff, and unfair to the future of the NHS, which is in jeopardy. The tragedy is that they will never have had a Secretary of State as sympathetic to their legitimate complaints as this one. If they want to know what the alternative is, its Members are not sat here. They have not even bothered to show up today, and that party does not even believe in the NHS. The grass is not greener on the other side. I ask them not to squander this opportunity. At this stage, we can still come out of this dispute with a win for the BMA's members, a win for the NHS and a win for patients, but if the BMA continues down the path of strike action, it will lose its campaign, resident doctors will be worse off, and the heaviest price of all will be paid by patients. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.27 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his typical courtesy and advance sight of his statement. I also note that he is

[Edward Argar]

among the most assiduous of Ministers in volunteering himself to this House to be questioned on issues of importance. I am, however, afraid it comes as no surprise that we are here today discussing likely industrial action on this Government's watch. Last year, we warned the Government that caving in to union demands for above-inflation pay rises without any conditions or strings attached would set a dangerous precedent. It would send a message that the Government were weak, and we warned that the unions would simply come back for more. Unfortunately, events in recent days have shown that we were right.

The public will be understandably concerned about what this industrial action will mean for them and the provision of local NHS services. For patients with an appointment scheduled or even on a waiting list, that concern will be particularly acute. Let me be clear: this BMA strike action—as the Secretary of State has said, it is supported by less than 50% of those eligible to vote—is irresponsible, wrong and unnecessary. On that, I agree with the Secretary of State.

Will the Secretary of State enlarge on the additional steps that he is taking to seek to resolve the industrial dispute and prevent the strike action from going ahead? I heard what he said about his willingness to talk. Does he anticipate further meetings before strikes start on 25 July, and does he anticipate a risk of any other parts of the NHS workforce balloting for strike action?

If this strike action does take place, what steps are being put in place to minimise disruption, what is the plan to protect patients who will need to access NHS services over this period, and can the Secretary of State guarantee that emergency cover will remain and that there will be minimum service levels in place? More broadly, and based on the previous strikes, how many appointments do the Government anticipate are at risk of being cancelled or postponed, and has he assessed what impact the decision by the BMA will have on his aim of reducing waiting lists and meeting his 18-week target?

The previous chief financial officer of NHS England said that nearly all the money allocated to the NHS at the autumn Budget will be eaten up by NHS pay settlements, the national insurance hike and increased inflationary costs, just to maintain services at their existing level. Following the recent spending review and the Chancellor's announcement of additional funding, how much of that does the Secretary of State anticipate will be spent on staffing costs, including the already agreed pay award and the national insurance increase, and how much of it will actually make it to the frontline in the form of additional care, or to fund the reforms that he set out recently?

What does the Secretary of State anticipate will be the long-lasting impact of strike action on relations between the Government and trade unions in the health space? The 10-year plan was published just last week. As I said at the time, it is sensible and I am supportive of what he has set out in that, but concerns have been raised about its deliverability. The Secretary of State has said previously that he will need to work with the unions to deliver on the plan. Is he still confident that that will be possible? Does he believe that they will agree to the changes that are required, or is there a risk of further strike action over the coming years because doctors have sensed a weakness?

In opposition, the Secretary of State had some very strong and well-articulated views on industrial action. He said strike action was

“playing politics with our NHS”.

On that, I agree with him. He said that

“the Government ought to be pulling out all the stops”—[*Official Report*, 22 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 218.]

and that

“the power to stop these strikes is in the Government's hands.”—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 732.]

He is the Secretary of State now. Does he agree that the power to stop these strikes is in his hands?

Our message to the Government is clear. The Secretary of State needs to do what he has said he will do: face down union pressure and deliver an affordable settlement that is fair to staff, patients and, crucially, taxpayers. On his watch, resident doctors are set to leave the frontline to go on to the picket line—whether that happens will be down to him. Sadly, Labour's weakness is fuelling this crisis. If the Government do not get a grip now, a summer of discontent and strikes risks turning into a summer of chaos, and it will be patients who pay the price.

Wes Streeting: I think the shadow Secretary of State's memory is letting him down. Let me just remind him that before the general election, and after months of refusing to meet the BMA, the Conservatives finally entered negotiations, but not before strikes were left to run and run—at a cost of £1.7 billion to the taxpayer—and 1.5 million operations, appointments and procedures were cancelled. They also offered the BMA junior doctors a pay rise, which was only about 4% of the pay rise that we eventually agreed. Imagine what would have happened if the Conservatives had pulled their finger out and got the doctors around the table sooner, and had not been quite so intransigent.

The shadow Secretary of State is right to say that I criticised my predecessors for their unwillingness to negotiate. The difference between me and them is that I have acted. Resident doctors have had a 28.9% pay increase thanks to the decisions that I have taken as Secretary of State, with the support of the entire Government. They have a Secretary of State who does not slam the door in their face, but who is open to working with them to improve their conditions.

The responsibility for these strikes lies squarely with those running the BMA's resident doctors committee. Despite failing to get a majority of their members to vote for strike action for the first time in their campaign, they are still proposing to lead their members out on a five-day strike. They even made the announcement on the day that I had already written to them to suggest that we meet to avert unnecessary strike action.

The shadow Secretary of State is right to talk about the jeopardy facing the future. Because we produced our 10-year plan in partnership with patients, the public and NHS staff, there is not only much in it that resident doctors should welcome, but much that they suggested. Our 10-year workforce plan will set out training, education and retention of the workforce, and we will work closely with resident doctors on standards. They should start to experience an improvement in their working conditions on everything from the availability of nutritious food and drink to reducing violence against staff and tackling discrimination. We have already committed to prioritise

UK graduates for training, and we have started a conversation on contractual reform with trade unions across the board. We are determined to recruit more people locally and to tackle social disadvantage, access to medicine and all the issues that are at the forefront of the minds of resident doctors, such as placements, rotations and future career progression, including specialty bottlenecks. I absolutely want to work with them.

These are not conditions for strikes. These are conditions to work in partnership with the Government, just as other NHS unions and so many other trade unions across the public sector do. I say to resident doctors once more that sitting in front of me is the ghost of Christmas past. Reform—its Members are not in their place today—is the ghost of Christmas future. Perhaps BMA members might consider that they are lucky to have the ghost of Christmas present in front of them.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I am glad the Secretary of State has reminded Conservative Members that they have rather short-term memories. When I took my place in this House last year, thousands of my residents in Gloucester were on NHS waiting lists—many of them for longer than 18 months. Since this Labour Government took power last year, the number has come down by 92%, in part thanks to the hard work of resident doctors in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that strike action by the BMA will put that recovery at risk? Will he invite its members to meet my residents who are still on the waiting lists left behind by the Conservative party, so that they can explain why the 28.9% pay rise, which many of my constituents will not receive this year, is not enough?

Wes Streeting: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I urge BMA members to consider not just the significant progress that they have already made by working with a Labour Government, but the wider context in which we are operating. It is not just resident doctors who have seen their pay eroded over more than a decade of Conservative Government; it is the entire public sector. It is not just resident doctors who are working in crumbling buildings with out-of-date equipment and technology; it is the same in our schools, our hospitals, our prisons and the entire public sector estate.

This Government are facing enormous challenges across our economy, and we cannot sort out every issue that we inherited overnight, or even in one year—it is going to take time. BMA members should be proud of the progress that we have made together, and reassured that we want to make further progress with them, but there has to be some give and take here, and there has to be some reasonableness. Given the potential consequences of their action for patients, for their fellow staff and for the future of the NHS, the strike action is unreasonable, unnecessary and deeply unfair.

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

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): People across the country, and NHS patients in particular, will be disappointed to hear of yet more strike action by resident doctors this July, especially after the immense disruption of recent years. I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues fully recognise that this dispute does not come out of

nowhere. The previous conservative Government left our NHS under unbearable strain, with doctors working under intense pressure in crumbling hospitals and often without the resources they needed. My constituents, and people across the country, need and deserve a well-functioning NHS.

Over the past three years, doctors have received a 28.9% pay rise following earlier strikes. The BMA is now calling for a further 29% increase, but we have to be honest: after years of economic mismanagement by the Conservatives, the public finances are in a dire state. That kind of increase does not feel affordable or realistic right now. That said, we cannot ignore the reality of working conditions in our NHS. Doctors are expected to save lives in collapsing wards and to deliver care in corridors, rather than in safe clinical settings. It is degrading and dangerous for both staff and patients. We need constructive dialogue, not escalation, to resolve this dispute swiftly and fairly, and most importantly, we need urgent action to rebuild our NHS and restore working conditions that our doctors and patients can be proud of.

First, will the Secretary of State improve staff morale by committing to end the dangerous and dehumanising practice of corridor care? Secondly, does he not see that by dragging out social care reform, delayed discharges and corridor care are only going to worsen doctors' experiences of working in the NHS, weakening morale and lowering care standards?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, and I think I can reassure her on a number of fronts. First, she is absolutely right to call out the disgrace that is corridor care. Despite the best efforts of staff, who suffer the moral injury of treating patients in that situation, in too many parts of the NHS we have patients being treated on trolleys in corridors. In this decade of the 21st century, I think that is unacceptable, as is the emerging nomenclature that has started to describe these as “temporary escalation spaces”, because we are in danger of normalising what should be considered unacceptable practice. That is why this Government will shortly begin transparently publishing corridor care data showing the number of patients being treated on trolleys in corridors. I am sure there will be moments when that might cause Ministers and NHS leaders to blush, but frankly, until corridor care is consigned to history, so we should. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and by publishing the data we will hold ourselves to account, and I am sure this House will hold us to account to ensure that we deliver the conditions that staff and patients deserve.

I also reassure the hon. Member that, while the Casey commission is under way, work on social care goes on, whether that is the £4 billion increase in investment in social care through the decisions taken by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, or other improvements such as to carer's allowance, the disabled facilities grant and uplifts in funding for local authorities. However, I am also committed to ensuring that, as we improve the flow of patients through our hospitals and deal with the scourge of delayed discharges, we are a lot better at thinking about how we use the taxpayer pound to best effect to deliver the right care, in the right place and at the right time. That will often mean using NHS resources to commission social care to help tackle delayed discharges, and we will be keeping a close eye on that.

[*Wes Streeting*]

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for joining the voices of reason in this Chamber. I hope it is not lost on the BMA and resident doctors watching that this is not a case of an intransigent Government unwilling to work with and support them who are trying to face down, for political and ideological purposes, a trade union speaking up for its members. This Labour Government have delivered a 28.9% pay increase and we are willing to work further to improve conditions for resident doctors. That work can start now, and I am ready to meet the BMA immediately.

There are other voices of reason in this Chamber, including among the Liberal Democrats, who recognise the pressure on the public finances. They recognise that we are trying to do many things across the NHS that will also directly benefit resident doctors, such as making sure they have the right kit and are working in decent buildings. We are improving the conditions that they are working in and that patients are treated in so that, together, we are building in, working in and being treated in an improving NHS. That is the prize, and that prize is being thrown into jeopardy by the resident doctors' actions. If they go down this path, with all of the consequences that will follow, I am afraid—for them, let alone for the NHS and for the country—things will get worse rather than better, and I urge them not to take that course of action.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we were right to settle the strikes last year, for the sake of ensuring the future of the NHS, protecting the interests of the public and showing our doctors that they are valued, that that will always be his position, and that it is therefore somewhat surprising that resident doctors have decided to call this strike?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend—he is absolutely right. I am happy to stand corrected, but there is genuinely no historical precedent in the history of British trade unionism for a trade union to have successfully negotiated with the Government of the day a 28.9% increase for its members and then go out on strike. I think that undermines the BMA, and the more reasonable voices in the BMA with whom we continue to work constructively. It certainly undermines our NHS.

It also reinforces the grossly unfair caricature, which is often thrown at trade unions by the Conservatives, that they are all unreasonable, do not want to work with the Government of the day and are only interested in combat and agitation. In my experience, the vast majority of trade unions and trade unionists are interested in constructive engagement, striking good deals and moving forward the interests not just of their members, but of our whole country. I urge the BMA resident doctors committee to stand in that proud tradition of British trade unionism and in the proud traditions of the wider Labour movement, but I am afraid I do not see those traditions or behaviours reflected in the current approach of the BMA RDC.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We can all argue about the past, but if it helps the Secretary of State, I think we should just say today that the whole House absolutely 100% supports him in his robust

attitude. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Of course we all love doctors, but the starting salary is not so very bad. They have a job—a very good job—for life, which most people do not have, and he could also mention that they have a much better career structure than most people. A far higher proportion of them get the top job—namely, as a consultant—and the consultant's starting salary of £110,000 a year is not a bad whack.

Wes Streeting: First, I think that the right hon. Member's opening statement and the response across the House underline to the BMA and the resident doctors committee that they do not have support across this House—from the left across to the right, with maybe one or two noises off—and that is not typical in my experience of being in this House for the last decade.

I think the career of resident doctors and the prospects they can look forward to, which the right hon. Member described, have worsened. That is one of the things that is at the heart of the dispute they have taken up with the previous Government and now with this one. Many of the things doctors used to be able to look forward to—guaranteed jobs and progression into consultant roles or general practice—have steadily eroded. We have far too much doctor unemployment and far too many specialty bottlenecks. We have what I think is a really unreasonable set of behaviours towards resident doctors in terms of placements, rotations and the ability to take time off work to attend weddings and other important life moments. The tragedy of the position we find ourselves in is that I recognise that and I want to address it. We can do that together without the need for strike action, and those are not reasons for strikes. Worse still, especially at a time when I am prioritising dealing with doctor unemployment, they are inflicting further costs on the NHS, patients and the taxpayer. That makes my freedom and flexibility and my resources to deal with those issues more limited—that is the tragedy of their tactics.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and the ongoing work to get the NHS back on its feet after it was pushed to the brink under the previous Government. Strikes inevitably have a financial and a human cost to them, and the next round of strikes will undoubtedly have that too, meaning that the NHS will take a financial hit. Can he share the impact that this will have on the system? For example, can he guarantee that the cost of these strikes will not lead to job cuts?

Wes Streeting: In all honesty, I am afraid I cannot give my hon. Friend that assurance. NHS finances are precariously balanced. We have been relative winners across the Budget and the spending review set out by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but we are asking a lot of the system. As well as the progress and improvements we want in the NHS, we inherited a lot of mess to clean up, and that will take time and resource. Every penny spent on the price of failure through strike action is a penny that could have been spent on driving improvements in the service—improvements for patients and for staff—and on creating the jobs and opportunities that mean doctors do not graduate into unemployment and that mean resident doctors can progress into specialty training posts. That is why I say clearly and unequivocally to the BMA

that if this strike action goes ahead, with all the costs, pain and misery that will follow, it will not just be patients—or, indeed, this Government—who suffer, but the BMA.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I have known the Secretary of State a long time. I knew him before he was an important man—although he was always important to me, of course. He will know that as a Minister, I worked with the trade unions in every sector for which I was responsible, as the RMT and the University and College Union will confirm, and I was also a member of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. I entirely endorse and amplify what he says. Responsible trade unionism requires people to be reasonable, and reasonable people in this House know that this strike against this background is entirely unacceptable, as he has described.

I ask the Secretary of State this: will he ensure that this unhappy, unwholesome and unhealthy action does not jeopardise the health of my constituents, and will he write to the local authorities—the integrated care boards—in my area and others to set out how they can minimise the impact of this action? The last thing that you want, Madam Deputy Speaker, or that I or any Member across this House wants, is for those at risk to be put at greater risk as a result of this irresponsible action by these militant people.

Wes Streeting: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He is that rare beast: a Tory trade unionist. He raises the serious point of the consequences of strike action. I will, of course, keep the House updated, but I want to reassure the House that we are taking every step possible to mitigate the disruption that these strikes will cause. That will come at a financial cost and a cost to patients because of the disruption that will follow. It will also come at a cost to other staff, many of whom are paid less than resident doctors, who will be left at work with more pressure and in harder conditions, picking up the pieces because of the actions of their colleagues who were given a higher pay rise, but who will be stood outside protesting the 28.9% pay rise that they received.

I assure the House that we will do everything we can to mitigate the impact of the strikes on patients and the disruption that will follow. What I cannot say to the House, however, is that we can offset or cancel the impact or detriment felt by patients. We will look carefully at the data on the experience and impact of the strikes that occurred during the previous round of negotiations. I will ensure that that information is published so that the House can see the impact of the previous strikes, so that we can brace ourselves for what may lie ahead.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Anyone who has ever worked in healthcare knows that it is a team sport and that delivering excellent care requires a range of staff across the allied health professions including nurses, doctors, administrative staff and estate staff. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is therefore essential that all NHS staff groups have confidence that their pay is being set fairly, and that going beyond the independent pay review body's recommendations for one set of staff would undermine the "one NHS" team ethos that so many have worked to build?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with what my hon. Friend says. I have been personally invested in our relationship with resident doctors and in the deal we struck—not just because it was one of the first things we did when we came into office, and because I am very proud of what we have achieved together, but because I had and still have a huge amount of support and sympathy for resident doctors and a determination to address the issues they are raising. However, I reassure my hon. Friend and the House that resident doctors are one part of the NHS workforce—a valued part—but I have responsibility for the entire workforce. We set ourselves the task of building an NHS fit for the future, but we cannot do it on our own as a Government; it requires the whole team to pull together.

I will be honest with my hon. Friend: I feel a considerable degree of discomfort when I look back at a whole number of deals and pay awards, under this Government and our predecessors, where the "Agenda for Change" workforce have been left further behind. I will be honest with the House: at this moment, I have to resolve the immediate action that is being proposed by the BMA, but I am not going to allow the reform we have committed to with the "Agenda for Change" unions to be deprioritised—we owe that to them. We owe it to the nurses and to all the "Agenda for Change" staff to ensure that they are paid fairly, are given a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and receive the terms and conditions that they deserve. My priority at this stage is the "Agenda for Change" reform. Of course, I will do everything I can to resolve the resident doctors strikes, but what I cannot do is reopen this year's pay award.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I remind hon. Members and the Secretary of State that we have an important statement to come, as well as two Backbench Business debates. May we have short questions and shorter answers?

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I agree with the Secretary of State when he tells the BMA resident doctors that they will never have another Secretary of State as sympathetic to their legitimate complaints—I recognise that, having worked with five of his predecessors. My experience tells me that what happens here with the BMA often filters through to the devolved nations. What engagement has he had with his counterparts on the proposed industrial action so that there can be a combined resolution and message to the BMA?

Wes Streeting: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I will obviously engage with my counterparts in the devolved Administrations. While health is a devolved matter, the decisions that we take in this place, and what is going on in the English health system, have a bearing on other health systems, and vice versa.

I am almost tempted to call back the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who is still a Member of this House, to remind the BMA what it went up against twice before; indeed, I could call back any of my Conservative predecessors to remind the BMA that the grass is not greener on the other side of this House. It currently has a Secretary of State who has shown through actions, not just words, a willingness to work together, and I hope that it rediscovers the spirit of partnership that we had last year.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): We all know how vital resident doctors are to the functioning of our national health service. In the light of that, will the Secretary of State join me in once again urging the BMA resident doctors committee to get back around the table to engage in serious talks and to take up his offer to meet in the interests of all NHS staff and patients, so that we can rebuild the national health service in the way the public expect?

Wes Streeting: Quite aside from the fact that I offered to meet the entire resident doctors committee back in January, although it has never taken me up on that offer—I would definitely be outnumbered in that meeting—I can reassure the House, in all seriousness, that I met its co-chairs on Tuesday afternoon, immediately after the publication of the ballot result. I followed up in writing yesterday morning to reaffirm what I said in person, which was to express our willingness to meet immediately, without preconditions, to avert this strike action. That offer remains, and I am very happy to meet them on that basis.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): My wife has a long-term chronic health condition; she has had to have two major lifesaving surgeries, and has had countless stays in hospitals. We have seen the fantastic work that many doctors and consultants do, but we have also seen the impact it has when there are cancellations and delays, or when no doctors are available.

Many people will have been flabbergasted by the sheer scale of the pay rise that was awarded in the first place, without anything in return to deliver the NHS reforms that the Government seek. Those people will now be absolutely outraged that the BMA is going on strike after having a near 30% pay increase. I plead with the Secretary of State to hold the line in these negotiations, and to take away the cross-party support he has in holding the line against the BMA on this issue.

Wes Streeting: We will not be reopening this year's pay award because we simply cannot afford to, and it would not be fair on others in the NHS workforce, regardless. I honestly do not regret the deal that we struck last year, without which we would not have made the progress that we have on NHS waiting lists, which are now at their lowest level in two years. We have made that considerable progress by working together.

I do not think that the staff themselves are the drain on productivity; instead, the obstacles we face are the systems and pathways in which staff work and the conditions in the NHS—we are in real agreement on those things. I urge the BMA to keep all that under consideration before its next public intervention, which I hope will be to accept the offer to get around the table to avert the strike action that I think the whole House agrees is unnecessary, unreasonable and unfair.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which was delivered with the humility and pragmatism that is his usual professional style. After a 28.9% pay rise thanks to this Labour Government, does the Secretary of State agree that the public are not only dismayed by the actions of the BMA, but distraught and that, once again, it will be the patients who will suffer the most by this action, which is so unnecessary at this particular moment?

Wes Streeting: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It will be patients who suffer the most. I also urge the BMA to consider the impact on its whole membership, because it is other staff who are left picking up the pieces, and other staff who are tired—literally tired—of working in an NHS that is far from its best. To resident doctors in particular, I say that the cost of this will also be borne by them. There are choices and trade-offs in politics, especially when resources are tight. We can and we will act to deal with specialty bottlenecks. We can and we will act to tackle doctor unemployment, but our ability to do so is undermined, if not diminished, if we are instead paying the cost of this unnecessary, unreasonable and unfair strike action.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement today and fully support the line of action that he has taken. Indications that the majority of doctors in the BMA did not vote to strike makes this strike action even more difficult to understand. The Secretary of State is clearly trying to find a way forward. The way to do that is through finding solutions. Reviewing conditions of work, such as those that see junior doctors working 84 hours within the space of a week, would be helpful. Perhaps this action is not only about pay, but about the expectations of these young people who have life and death in their hands for 13 hours for six out of seven days a week.

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman makes an entirely reasonable point. Pay is important—people have to be able to pay their bills and lead a good life—but so too are their working conditions. I am absolutely determined to work with resident doctors to make progress not just on pay, which we have already done, but on the conditions in which they are working. Given where we are with both of those things—the improvement on pay and the willingness to work together to improve conditions—they are not grounds for strike action.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on showing great leadership when he came into office to get those doctors back to work and end the strikes. The result of that has been falling waiting times and waiting lists, and I have seen the benefit of that for my constituents in Shipley; they are not having to wait for operations and diagnostic tests in the NHS. Does he agree that this is no time for strike action, and that, should the BMA and the resident doctors go ahead with this strike, this will adversely affect patients and waiting times?

Wes Streeting: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Looking back at all the contributions this morning, I have been struck by the fact that, quite extraordinarily, the entire House, on both sides of the Chamber, has spoken with one voice. There has been total unanimity across this House during these exchanges that the proposed strikes are unreasonable, unnecessary and unfair. For the avoidance of doubt, let me tell the BMA and the resident doctors committee that this House has spoken with one voice to say: abandon this rush to strike, get around the table and work with us to rebuild resident doctors' working conditions and to continue rebuilding our national health service. I thank the House for its support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement today.

Electricity Market Review

1.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement about the review of electricity market arrangements.

The central challenge that we face is the urgent need to get off expensive, insecure fossil fuels and to deliver an energy system that meets at least double the level of current electricity demand by 2050. In doing so, we need to design the electricity network to ensure that infrastructure is built in the right places, so that we can effectively provide power where it is required. As a result of previous failures to do so, power now goes to waste, costing consumers in higher bills. That is one reason why reform is needed.

The task of this review is to help deliver a fair, affordable, secure, and efficient clean power system. The key question has been whether to proceed with zonal pricing or a reformed national system. Under zonal pricing, we would split the country into different zones relying on price differentials to guide investment decisions. Under a reformed national price system, we would rely on more deliberate strategic co-ordination in advance of investment—planning our network and areas of intended generation more closely and then delivering.

I have applied three tests to this choice in the time since the Government took office: first, what is the fairest approach for families and businesses, both now and in the long term; secondly, which reform can deliver energy security and will best protect consumers and ensure bills savings as soon as possible; and, thirdly, what will do most to ensure the investment, jobs, and growth that we need across the economy? On the basis of these tests, I have concluded that the right approach is reformed national pricing. Let me set out why.

On the fairness test, under reformed national pricing, there would be one national wholesale price, as now. As I have said, under zonal pricing there would be different wholesale prices in different zones. Lower prices will tend to occur in zones with more renewable energy and a smaller population, and higher prices in those with less power and more people.

This would be a significant departure from the current system, which, while it has some differences in network costs, means that wherever a person lives, they pay the same wholesale price for each unit of electricity. The challenge will be obvious to the House. People and businesses could find themselves disadvantaged through no fault of their own and many would see that as unfair. Such a postcode lottery is, in my view, difficult to defend.

The Government have considered whether it would be possible to mitigate these effects under zonal pricing. We have concluded that, while it might, it would be a very complex and uncertain process. And it would be even more challenging to do so for large businesses, given the way that they purchase electricity. Therefore, firms in higher priced zones, such as the midlands, Wales, and the south of England, would therefore face damage to their competitiveness. That is why we have seen so many business groups express such concern about zonal pricing. Indeed, today's decision has already been welcomed by UK Steel, Make UK, the British chambers of commerce, Ceramics UK and others.

The next test that I applied is which system can best help deliver energy security, protect consumers and ease the cost of living crisis as soon as possible. Long-term reform is essential to cut costs and save money for consumers compared with the status quo, but there is a key question as to what happens in the meantime. The clear advice of my Department is that moving towards zonal pricing would take around seven years to complete in full—assuming no delays. Over that seven-year period, the costs of financing essential investment in our energy system would be likely to rise to accommodate investor uncertainty, at a moment when we urgently need to replace retiring assets and build a clean energy system to boost our energy security. This risk premium would be paid for by consumers in higher bills in the coming years. There is also a danger that it would leave us stuck on fossil fuels for longer by deterring investors from bringing forward the investment that we need for our energy security.

By contrast, reformed national pricing could be delivered more quickly and at lower risk. Indeed, some elements of a reformed national pricing system are already under way, including building network infrastructure, and we intend to proceed with other measures, such as reform of transmission charges, as soon as possible in this Parliament. Having studied this in detail over months, I see real risks that zonal pricing would deter the investment we need and that bills would rise in the transitional period.

The third test is the investment and growth we need as a country. Many businesses make decisions to invest based on the energy costs that they face. The industrial strategy took a crucial step forward in lowering the costs faced by businesses, and clean power will help get us off the fossil fuel rollercoaster, which has so damaged our country's businesses.

We know that the biggest enemy of business investment is uncertainty, and the risk of zonal pricing is that it would create very significant uncertainty. Imagine a business seeking to invest not knowing for a number of years what zone it would be in and what price it would pay. This would harm investment not just in the energy sector but well beyond it, and it would inevitably risk reducing investment in our country precisely when we need it and undermining the tens of thousands of good jobs in constituencies across the country that our clean energy mission will support.

On the basis of those three tests, I believe that the best choice is to proceed with reformed national pricing. The key elements will include: effective planning through the strategic spatial energy plan to be published next year; national pricing reforms, such as making transmission charges more effective and predictable and taking relevant powers through Parliament to do so; and making changes working with the National Energy System Operator and Ofgem to improve the operation of flexibility and the balancing of markets.

Under reformed national pricing, we will build the transmission network we need to the benefit of all consumers, and we will be more directive and co-ordinated in how we plan our energy system. Each upgrade that we deliver will reduce constraint costs and ensure that consumers benefit from clean power. My Department will set out a reformed national pricing delivery plan later this year. Taken together, I believe that these steps can help to deliver a more affordable, fair, secure and

[Ed Miliband]

efficient energy system and will address the problems that the REMA process set out to solve without the unacceptable risks I have outlined.

These steps build on what we have done over the past year to turbocharge our drive to home-grown clean power. We have consented three times more solar in 12 months than in the previous 14 years. We have lifted the onshore wind ban and consented enough offshore wind to power the equivalent of 2 million homes. We have backed the biggest expansion of new nuclear in half a century. We are kick-starting new industries in carbon capture and hydrogen. We are giving nearly 3 million extra families £150 off their energy bills next winter and upgrading up to 5 million homes to help cut bills.

Every energy decision that this Government make is in pursuit of protecting the British people from fossil fuel markets controlled by petrostates and dictators by delivering clean, home-grown power that we control. It is in that spirit that we have chosen reformed national pricing. We are doing everything we can to ensure energy security, protect consumers and get bills down, and to ensure that businesses can invest for the future. This is underpinned by a commitment to fairness across the country. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.11 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I know that this has been a difficult decision for him. He told everyone that his flagship mission was to commission more renewable power than ever before by 2030—more wind than ever before and faster than ever before in a market that was already facing supply-chain challenges and soaring costs. I said at the time that it was completely unfeasible but that if he was going to do it he should take every opportunity to minimise the grid infrastructure that needs to be built and the costs of his plans. On the other hand, I know that he will have had wind developers telling him that if he takes those decisions and makes those choices, they will not be bidding into his auction in the next couple of years—the auctions he needs them to bid into so that he can meet his self-imposed targets—because they want to protect their returns.

When faced with a choice between protecting the profits of wind developers and cutting bills for the British people, the Secretary of State has chosen the wind developers, who know that they have him over a barrel. In setting himself an unachievable 2030 target that was based on ideology and ideology alone, he was telling those wind developers that he has to buy whatever they are selling, no matter the price. A little over a year ago, the Secretary of State told the country that bills would come down by up to £300, but his statement today shows that when push comes to shove he will choose higher bills for the British people to fund profits for renewable energy companies. Worse still, what he did not mention is that today's announcement means higher bills to pay wind farms billions in constraint payments not to produce energy but simply to switch off.

I have warned the Secretary of State repeatedly about the risks of building more wind before grid, and I asked him to continue my work on what a full system cost of

energy would look like, which includes the cost of back-up and constraint payments. But he did not listen. He axed that work because he did not want to know what those costs were. Instead, last year he signed us up to the most expensive wind prices in a decade, at about £86 per megawatt-hour. That is almost 15% higher than the average cost of electricity for the last year, which has been about £74 per megawatt-hour. This year's prices will probably be the same, if not higher, and he wants to extend those contracts to 20 years. He has not explained how locking us into much higher prices for longer will bring down bills—but lower bills is what he has promised the British public.

There is more. The Secretary of State's plan requires more grid to be built faster than before—that means £74 on to household bills. His plans mean that constraint payments for wind farms to switch off will rise to £8 billion—that means £100 on to bills. Now we read that we will be paying solar farms to switch off when it is sunny too, and the Office for Budget Responsibility says that green levies will rise by £5 billion.

People may have noticed that the Secretary of State used to talk a lot about cheaper energy but now talks about less volatile prices. What his Back Benchers need to realise is that most people would not swap a 4% variable rate mortgage for an 8% fixed one. What they care about is the price of their bills, and they want cheaper prices. If he was truly interested in bringing down bills, he would not have scrapped the analysis that I started last year to find out the true cost of a system dominated by wind and solar.

I have now read—twice in one week—that Downing Street is starting to pressure the Secretary of State about when his plans might actually bring down bills. All I can say is: I share the feeling! Before repeating all the empty promises about cutting bills by £300, Downing Street might have wanted to ask where his evidence was, but I will ask him now. Will he reinstate that cost of energy work so that we can clearly see the differences between the systems? Will he set out a road map to show exactly how he will lower bills? Will he confirm that he will not sign up to prices in this year's wind auction that are higher than the current average cost of electricity? Can he also confirm whether he saw a full cost-benefit analysis of the choices in front of him today, and does he share the views of Ofgem and NESO?

I will leave the Secretary of State with two quotes. The chief executive of Octopus Energy—one of the country's biggest advocates of renewables—has said that the Secretary of State's plans mean

“soaring costs, locked in for years to come, and more on the way... And the more we build, the worst it gets, for years.”

He also said,

“It's brutal for families and crippling for growth.”

I think the Secretary of State said in his statement that the biggest problem for businesses is uncertainty, but it is not; it is high energy costs.

The second quote—perhaps the most revealing—comes from one of his closest advisers, his chief energy system adviser, who said, “If we procure lots and lots of renewable generation and then we do not build the grid that allows it to get to markets, we will be wasting lots and lots of money.” I could not have put it better myself.

Ed Miliband: This is the first time I am at the Dispatch Box opposite the shadow Secretary of State; I congratulate her on her new baby boy and welcome her back to the House of Commons. I know from my own personal experience that crying at night is challenging, but who is surprised, given the state of the Conservative party?

I think the shadow Secretary of State and I have a number of differences. The fundamental difference is this: she wants to gamble in the fossil fuel casino—she wants to gamble on fossil fuel prices. That is what the Conservatives did when they were in office, and it led to the worst cost of living crisis in generations. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Secretary of State says from a sedentary position that it is not true. It absolutely is true, and I think she needs to get out there more and hear what people have to say to her. It ruined family finances, it ruined business finances and it ruined the public finances. And what do they do? Do the Conservatives come along, after their worst election defeat in 200 years, and think, “Well, maybe we got it a bit wrong. Maybe we should think again”? No, they double down on a failed strategy. That is the first point.

The second point is this. The shadow Secretary of State says that we have a problem of constraint costs—that it is really a problem that we do not have the infrastructure that the country needs. She is absolutely right, but who was in charge for 14 years? Don’t just take my word for it, by the way. I notice that her colleague the shadow Energy Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), is not in his place, but he said that it is absurd that, after 14 years of Conservative Government, we are now in a situation where it is more difficult to build critical national infrastructure than it was before they came into power and that it costs more. That is what we have got: the grid system was massively backed up, the planning system was in disrepute, and the network and transmission infrastructure was not built.

The third point is that the shadow Secretary of State now says, “Okay, well let’s forget about the past. Ignore my record—airbrush it out. Let’s build the grid.” Too right we should build the grid, but she is opposing new clean energy infrastructure all around the country. She is going around saying, “Oh, it’s terrible. We shouldn’t be having this happening.” So at the level of strategy and what is the right thing for the country, at the level of her record and why we are in this position, and at the level of what she is doing now, I am afraid she is in the wrong place.

Now, what are we doing? We are actually changing all of this. In the period that the shadow Secretary of State has been away, we have seen a whole set of decisions made that the Conservatives talked about but never delivered. On nuclear power, they talked a lot about Sizewell and small modular reactors and all that, but they did not actually deliver it. We are—with over £40 billion of private investment in clean power unblocked and a record-breaking renewables auction.

By the way, the shadow Secretary of State says that I am somehow on the side of the wind developers. No, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am on the side of UK Steel, Make UK, the British Chambers of Commerce, Ceramics UK and businesses across the country who have said that this is the right decision for the country. *[Interruption.]* She mentions bills. Let me address that directly. My strategy and my belief is that a clean power

system can bring down bills for good, because that is that way that we lower wholesale prices and get off the rollercoaster. Home-grown clean power is the answer for Britain, and I suggest that, now she is back in her post, she does some hard thinking about the past, about strategy and about what is right for Britain.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State will not be surprised to hear me say that I very much welcome what he has announced. He set out three priorities: fairness, lower bills—including and especially in industry and business, where my Committee heard as recently as yesterday that energy bills are causing real concerns and something of a crisis in certain industries—and attracting investment, not least ahead of auction round 7.

I was saddened that the shadow Secretary of State was so critical of wind generation. I have her letter of 12 March 2024 to my predecessor as the Chair of the Select Committee setting out her terms of reference for the consultation that the Secretary of State has responded to. She placed great emphasis on the importance of investing in renewables, so it is a great shame to see her change of heart.

Under the reformed national system, does the Secretary of State envisage increasing opportunities to use demand flexibility, and to use it as fast as possible, as a key way of bringing down energy costs for domestic and industrial consumers?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great expertise on these matters. I will come to his question, but let me say first that I like to talk about issues on which both parties have been enthusiastic. We have the second largest offshore wind generation in the world. It was started when I was Secretary of State with Gordon Brown as Prime Minister, and it was continued under the last Government. It is extraordinary that the shadow Secretary of State is now abandoning that and saying that offshore wind is somehow the problem. It is not the problem; it is the solution.

My hon. Friend is right about consumer-led flexibility. The key point about that is that it is voluntary, and it is a way for consumers to save money. The shadow Secretary of State mentioned Octopus Energy, which is one of the pioneers of this. We are in the foothills of what we can achieve here, whereby consumers are empowered, through things like batteries, solar panels, heat pumps and smart meters, to control when they use energy much more easily, to their benefit and the benefit of the system.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for sharing his statement in advance. He is right: making the UK a clean energy superpower is the smartest and most strategic way to free ourselves from our dependence on expensive, volatile fossil fuels. However, as we have heard, accelerating the transition to renewables alone is not enough. The Government have to ensure that the clean power mission ultimately brings down customers’ bills and creates a fairer system for households and businesses.

[Pippa Heylings]

Energy bills in the UK are among the highest in Europe. Our high costs exacerbate cost of living pressures and increase fuel poverty. They also undermine our international competitiveness for industrial and commercial consumers and risk driving some businesses overseas. The Liberal Democrats have long called for electricity prices to be decoupled from the wholesale price of gas so that families in the UK are not left paying over the odds for clean, British-generated electricity just because of volatile global gas prices. We will be looking closely at the details of the Government's plan following the review of electricity market arrangements.

The Secretary of State outlined his three tests. To ensure that British consumers are not exposed to an unknown level of risk, will he publish his cost-benefit analysis and set out what impact the changes will have on customers' bills? We will also be looking keenly for the much-needed joined-up approach between planning for renewable energy infrastructure through the strategic spatial energy plan, and the land use framework and local area energy plans, which, worryingly, are a bit out of sync.

Renewable energy can be the cheapest, most secure source of power, but for many people, seeing—and feeling it in their pocket—is believing, and under the current system, many are struggling to see it. Alongside the changes announced today, I hope the Secretary of State will consider other Liberal Democrat proposals, just as they did when putting into practice our proposals for rooftop solar on all roofs. We would like to see free insulation and heat pumps for people on low incomes and the introduction of a social tariff for energy to protect the most vulnerable.

Ed Miliband: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. There is not necessarily a monopoly on good ideas. On the whole idea of new build housing having rooftop solar installed as standard, the last Labour Government were going to do it in 2016, but it got abolished by the previous Government. It is an absolute no brainer. It actually unites people whether they like solar on land or not, so it is really good that we are doing that.

On decoupling, absolutely—that is part of what clean power 2030 will do. Gas will set the price much less often than it does at the moment, and we will be moving to contracts for difference rather than renewables obligations, which means that the reductions in price will feed through to consumers. That is key. We will publish the cost-benefit analysis later in the year, as our document published today states. The hon. Lady is right about the SSEP, which, to be fair, was started under the previous Government and will be published next year. That will be a crucial way in which we guide where the new infrastructure is built, precisely to get over the problem of the disconnect between the generation we need and the network infrastructure.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): As a member of the Select Committee, I enjoy that I can give a wry smile every single week when academics, non-governmental organisations, consumer groups and industry say they had so much delay and faffing from the Conservative party and now we are getting on and delivering.

On zonal pricing, it is fantastic to see that we are giving some certainty to the market, and I thank the Secretary of State in particular for setting out that we

are going to start tackling excessive transmission charges. In Northamptonshire, Green Hill Solar is bringing forward a massive opportunity for clean power right on my doorstep. Does the Secretary of State agree that that type of investment, and the certainty that the statement brings, will create quality technical jobs locally in Northampton and reduce people's energy bills?

Ed Miliband: On my hon. Friend's point about certainty, which is really important, global inflation has affected the offshore wind sector. I take it from the comments by the shadow Secretary of State that we should just say, "Well, let's not bother with offshore wind, then. Let's just stick to gas." We just have a difference of view. I think that would be such a mistake. It would leave us so exposed, and we know what happened in the past.

On my hon. Friend's point about jobs, this is a massive opportunity. I had a chance recently to visit the site of the new Rampion 2 wind farm off the English coast. This is going to create thousands of jobs, as well as jobs in the supply chain. When I talk to hon. Members across the House, I am struck by how many places contribute to the supply chain, and we want more of that. We want those jobs made in Britain. That is the point about GB Energy, the National Wealth Fund and the clean industry bonus, which will be part of auction round 7.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Under the current system, the most expensive generator sets the clearing price for electricity, pushing up prices for consumers and businesses. Can the Secretary of State explain how the reforms that he is setting out today change that by moving to a pay-as-bid system and providing more affordable energy for consumers and businesses?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman asks a bang-on question, and that is why I hope he will support clean power 2030. The key thing is that if we can get these renewables on to the system, gas will set the price much less often. As this is a CFD rather than a renewables obligation, the reductions in price feed through to the consumer. This will have a genuinely transformative effect on the so-called decoupling that he and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson have raised.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this package of measures, which will reduce energy costs. The system left by the Conservatives needed to tackle three things: transmission charges, constraint payments and marginal cost pricing, by which the price of gas drives the cost of the whole system. I therefore welcome the strategic special energy plan, which will see assets built closer to their users and lower transmission charges, which comprise more than 20% of the cost of power. I welcome the new transmission lines and storage facilities, which will reduce constraint payments. These are game changers, but 40% of the cost of power still comes from the marginal cost of gas. Can my right hon. Friend elaborate on what he said in response to the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and tell us whether there are any plans to decouple the wholesale price of gas from the system? That is the real game changer.

Ed Miliband: I will come to my hon. Friend's earlier points in a minute, but his last point is absolutely crucial. The last Government looked at this and found

it difficult to find a mechanism to do it within the system. A key thing that clean power will do is that gas will set the price much less of the time, and with ROs being phased out and CfDs coming in, that will have a dramatic effect. At the moment, the gas price covers something like more than half the generation, and that will fall to a much lower figure—I can give my hon. Friend the actual figures.

My hon. Friend's first point about constraint payments is worth dwelling on. If we are worried about constraint payments because the network is not there, we are right to be worried. But if that is our view, we should support the building of the network infrastructure across the country. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot say that we are worried about constraint payments and the cost on consumers but that we cannot have the new infrastructure built. That is an issue and it is a choice—I would not call it a dilemma, exactly—that every Member across the House has to make.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): UK households and businesses pay almost the highest energy costs compared with other European countries. As has already been said many times, although it is worth repeating, that is because the cost of electricity is coupled to the cost of gas. I absolutely share the Secretary of State's ambition to rapidly reduce our reliance on gas. Long, medium and short-duration storage will play a vital role in bridging the intermittency of renewables. What more can the Government do to rapidly increase support for these emerging technologies?

Ed Miliband: LDES, as it is known to the super-nerds—long-duration energy storage—is really important, as indeed are batteries. We now have a cap and floor mechanism for LDES. Ofgem, along with NESO, is looking at the applications that have been made, and that will now be driven forward. That is really important. What I always say to people is that we need all the elements of the system. We need nuclear—in my view—we need renewables, we need battery storage, and we also need LDES. All of them can contribute to a clean power system.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It is clear that zonal pricing would not only waste valuable time in the race to reduce our reliance on costly fossil fuels; it would see my constituents in Ealing Southall, many of whom are on very low incomes, and indeed families across London paying more for their bills. Does he agree that this Labour Government's plan to invest in clean, cheap, renewable energy and to reform energy pricing for the whole country as one is a fairer and more effective way of reducing bills for everyone?

Ed Miliband: I thank my hon. Friend for that really important question; she makes two points that are critical. One is the time it would take to get to a zonal pricing system, and the second is the arbitrary nature of who would benefit and how, and the cost differentials. I think we can see that there would be a great sense of unfairness about that. She is also absolutely right that the choice is not reform or no reform; the choice is: what kind of reform? That is what reformed national pricing is all about.

Above all—my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) referred to this—this is about getting on with it. It might be lost in the mists of time, but the Conservatives used to have a target for clean power. It was for 95% clean power by 2030, but they never really talked about it much, and then they sort of abandoned it quietly. The truth is that they used to understand this. We have got to build the infrastructure and the renewable power generation.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): The strategic spatial energy plan must ensure that new large energy projects in Wales work with and not against communities. There must also be a role for local small-scale projects, as these can deliver the large amounts of clean energy we need, with far less impact on our communities and the national grid. Can the Secretary of State say how the upcoming SSEP will put the needs of communities at its heart, and how it will support the expansion of small-scale energy projects?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady makes a really important point, if I may say so, about the SSEP and, more broadly, about the role of community energy and, for example, rooftop solar. Even before we introduce the future homes standard, we are seeing an increase in the number of new homes with solar panels on their roofs. We have got community energy—which is much more successful in places such as Germany and Denmark—which GB Energy will be powering forward. Also, I am really interested in how we make it more worthwhile for individual householders to install solar panels. It is right for them and it is a way to cut bills. That is what is really exciting about it. We definitely see small-scale and community energy not just as part of our planning for the future, but as something we want to drive forward.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's decision today. Zonal pricing sounded like a good idea, but the reality is that the uncertainty about future arrangements was risking investment and would not lead to jobs in green manufacturing in my constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith, or indeed across Scotland. To meet the needs of consumers and businesses, we need a more flexible energy network, so can he set out in more detail how he envisages that happening?

Ed Miliband: I thank my hon. Friend for that really important question. The impact on Scotland is an important dimension here, because Scotland has really exciting plans to drive forward renewable energy, particularly offshore wind. It can be a massive job creator for the future, and it is something we are really focused on. One other issue with zonal pricing is that I fear it would have had quite an adverse effect on the Scottish green economy, which was a point powerfully made by lots of different stakeholders. I can definitely say to my hon. Friend that we are 100% committed. We think that Scotland has a rightful place as an energy capital and an energy powerhouse, and offshore wind is a crucial part of that.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Thank you for allowing my question, Madam Deputy Speaker. I must apologise to the House and the Front Bench for being a little late.

[Seamus Logan]

I appreciate the high-wire nature of the act that the Secretary of State and his ministerial team are trying to deliver, but there are two litmus tests in Scotland that are absolutely crucial. First, private investment is essential to make the journey to net zero happen. Secondly, Scotland is such an energy-rich country, as he referenced, and yet we are paying the highest prices for tariffs and standing charges. Will his statement make it easier for private investment to come in and deliver us towards that journey to net zero, and does he foresee lower energy costs for consumers in Scotland?

Ed Miliband: The answer to both those questions is yes. The first point the hon. Member raises is important and goes to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), which was on the fears that lots of people had that it would dry up the renewables industry in Scotland if we went down the route of zonal pricing. That is why we have opted for the reformed national pricing system that we have talked about. To elaborate on the second point, building this clean power system that can lower wholesale prices, which is the absolute prize here, is the route to lowering energy costs for people in Scotland and across the UK.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Last summer was the hottest on record and this summer may be even hotter still. The world faces a climate crisis. To tackle that, we need to move fast to net zero, and Scotland's energy sector will be crucial in this country's achieving that. To do that, we need to encourage—not discourage—investment, and we cannot waste any time. Does the Secretary of State think the decision will help Scotland boost its energy sector and through that, this country's fight against climate change?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great expertise and passion on these issues. On his first point, it is worth saying something about this, and I hope to say more on it in the next week or so. The impacts of climate change that we are seeing around the world are the new normal, I am afraid, but they are not normal in comparison with the past. We are seeing some horrifying scenes around the world, and the warming of the planet makes them much more likely to happen, so there is real urgency, and he is right to emphasise that. He is also absolutely right that Scotland will play a pivotal role for the UK in answering the questions on energy security and tackling the climate crisis. I believe the announcement today will help in that endeavour.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Yesterday I hosted a roundtable of manufacturers in the rural part of my constituency. They welcomed the Government's industrial strategy and particularly the measures on industrial energy prices, but they raised concerns about the grid connections in that part of my constituency. Will the Government work with me to improve these grid connections, because the Teesside region has thousands of jobs in clean energy and green industries, and I want all my industries to benefit from that?

Ed Miliband: The Energy Minister has just volunteered, unprompted—which rarely happens in this House—to meet my hon. Friend, so enthusiastic is he about discussing this issue.

My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of grid connections. We inherited an absolutely broken system that was massively oversubscribed, with a zombie queue, lengthening delays, and nothing happening, basically. That is why we have ended the first come, first served system and are doing a much more intentional, planned system for the grid. That is good for connecting renewable energy, but the other crucial thing is that by working out which energy projects we need and which we do not, we free up the queue for industrial projects. That is the key, and that is the work that NESO is currently embarked upon. I hope that it will help businesses in his constituency and across the country to deal with the obvious and acknowledged frustration they have on grid connection.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for opting for a reform system, which will avoid bills going up in my constituency and provide the certainty to drive investment in our energy system. Does he agree that our clean power mission will be vital not only to generating lower bills and better jobs for areas such as mine, but to providing a future and opportunities for people growing up in the area, where a new Mona wind farm has just been approved?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it so well. When I talk to young people who are thinking about the jobs they might do in the future, from nuclear to renewables to carbon capture, I am always struck that, across the board, they know these are the growth industries of the future. There is a huge opportunity for Britain, including for her constituents, and it is incredibly exciting what we can deliver. This is the new case for climate action: it is about energy security, lower bills, jobs and growth, and doing the right thing for future generations.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his vision. On inheriting zombie systems from the previous Government, does he agree that it is remarkable that the Conservatives have shown no contrition whatsoever about the dire state in which they left our energy system? That resulted in the worst cost of living crisis in memory, and families in Ilford South and across the country are still paying the price.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. The Conservatives have shown no contrition or acknowledgment, and they have not learned any lessons—not a single one. They basically say, “We were right and the electorate were wrong.” I say to them gently—or not so gently—that that is a recipe for oblivion, frankly. It is time they took a long, hard look.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), for the extensive conversations that he has had with me and other Welsh Labour MPs on our concerns about zonal pricing, and that we felt it would fail the “fair and

affordable” test that the Secretary of State has outlined today, so I welcome this statement. Now that we have had this announcement about reform national pricing, will he assure my constituents and businesses that they will see lower consumer bills as a result?

Ed Miliband: That is the key: this decision provides the certainty required. It is the fairer choice. It is the choice that will not lead to seven years of uncertainty, risk premiums and higher bills. It gives us the platform to work with industry to get on and deliver. If I have one message for industry, it is that now is the time for them to step up and come forward with these projects. We are breaking down all the barriers that they face, for example on planning, the grid and uncertainty. Our absolute determination is to get on and deliver for my hon. Friend’s, constituents and people across the country.

Energy Planning

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the first of the Select Committee statements. The Chair of the Committee will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement—brief questions, not speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Committee Chair, not to the Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.48 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to present our Committee’s first report of this Session, “Gridlock or growth? Avoiding energy planning chaos”. I think it follows on very nicely from the statement we have just heard from the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, especially given some of the questions that followed. I thank my Committee colleagues for their diligence and proactive engagement throughout the inquiry, which has enabled us to produce a detailed report in a challenging timescale.

The Secretary of State, in his statement just now, addressed some of the concerns that we raised in our report about planning and the part it plays in ensuring that infrastructure is built, as he said,

“in the right places, so that we can effectively provide power where it is required.”

and at a cost that is affordable for domestic and business consumers. His focus on the serious problem of high energy prices for businesses is very welcome. The Committee has taken evidence on that, most recently yesterday when the Chemical Industries Association referred to a crisis in the UK’s industry caused by uncompetitive energy prices.

In our report, we considered the role of the strategic spatial energy plan. The Secretary of State told the House just now that it will be published next year. Again, we welcome that—it was recommendation in our report—but we want much greater clarity on both how the clean power 2030 action plan and the SSEP relate to grid connections and the development consent process. We found evidence of significant confusion over the role that grid connections have in determining securing planning consent and, similarly, the role that having planning consent can play in securing a grid connection. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State make his commitment to the publication of the SSEP, but I encourage him to do so sooner rather than later.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the country made substantial investment in a super grid, a secure and modern energy infrastructure designed to meet the country’s growing energy needs. It was designed to give us 30 years of resilience. In the 1980s, the grid was already coming under strain and was in need of continued investment, so what did the Government do? They privatised it. Sir Malcolm Rifkind provided the rationale. He said that the energy industry

[*Bill Esterson*]

“should be able to make its own investment decisions based on its investment needs and on the resources that it can raise in order to fund that investment.”—[*Official Report*, 13 December 1988; Vol. 143, c. 790.]

Unshackled from the state, our energy infrastructure was expected to attract its own investment, but for our vital grid infrastructure the promised private funding just did not materialise.

At the time, a rising star of the Labour party, the then shadow Energy Secretary—some people may have heard of him—Tony Blair, challenged the market-led approach to energy infrastructure. He told this House:

“even when the industry is privately owned abroad, in most countries major strategic decisions are taken by Governments, not companies.”—[*Official Report*, 12 December 1988; Vol. 143, c. 680.]

He went on to say:

“All those unresolved contradictions underline the stupidity, indeed the impossibility, of an energy policy determined by the interests of the private sector. The very considerations most critical to securing the long-term future electrical supply are the very ones least suited to the inevitable short-term demands of the market.”—[*Official Report*, 12 December 1988; Vol. 143, c. 687.]

The then future Prime Minister’s predictions were sadly all too accurate.

Today, whether we pursue renewables, nuclear or internationally traded gas, the reality remains the same: we urgently require overdue upgrades to our ageing energy network. The strategic direction of this Government is clear: to build and deliver the energy infrastructure that will cut carbon emissions, secure our energy supply in the face of serious and growing international threats, and reduce energy costs for households and businesses over the long term. If we get that right, the UK has the opportunity to become a global leader not only in developing and deploying low-carbon infrastructure, but in how we manage the transition itself.

Energy security is the top priority for this Government, as it is for my Committee, of course. We want Britain to stand on its own two feet, producing energy on our land, on our shores and in our seas, and by our own workers, giving us the opportunity to seize back control of household bills. Political consent and public support for the energy transition are essential, because Britain’s national security depends on it. The Government have set ambitious targets for the UK’s transition to clean energy, underpinned by both international commitments and domestic legal obligations, but real progress will depend not on high-level debates about ideology or party politics, but on whether we can construct the low-carbon generation and transmission infrastructure needed to meet those goals in practice.

That is where the policy statements come in. They provide essential planning guidance for local and national authorities on how to evaluate proposed energy infrastructure, and how such proposals interact with wider strategies and land use plans. We called our report “Gridlock or growth” because the choice is stark. If we get the transition right, the UK can benefit from clean, cheap renewable energy, cutting bills, boosting business and supporting the growth needed to fund better healthcare, education and pensions. But the current system for prioritising grid connections has become severely congested. Too many speculative projects with

little chance of being built are clogging up the queue, delaying or blocking more viable ones. The system has effectively seized up.

One of our clearest findings is the need for common-sense reform. The Government are right to propose moving away from a purely market-driven system, because that system, left unchecked, has led directly to the current gridlock. Planning authorities cannot remain blind to a project’s chances of securing a grid connection. A project’s prospects of grid connection should become a “material consideration” in the consent process. It is sensible at this time to have a guiding hand prioritising those projects most likely to deliver the energy generation we need, and to build the necessary transmission infrastructure to get that energy to businesses and households across the country.

Of course, none of that will work without proper planning consent. That, in turn, depends on meaningful engagement between developers and communities; engagement that happens early and is focused on resolving issues before they become entrenched. That is a key part of how we avoid the lengthy and expensive legal challenges that have held the British energy sector back. Too often, new solar or wind farms, and the pylons needed to carry energy to homes and businesses, become flashpoints of local opposition. Communities are frequently consulted too late to shape the outcome, or not given real insight into the trade-offs involved. We heard that when people are told that underground or offshore options may cost more and lead to higher bills, they are often more open to overland options.

Similarly, the Committee recommends that nature-positive infrastructure projects can engage and better galvanise public consent for development, and that there should be a presumption against building onshore wind infrastructure on deep peat. The Committee recommends that the National Energy System Operator should use strategic planning to foster earlier, deeper community engagement well before the formal consent stage, and that the Government require developers to engage early and meaningfully with local communities to identify potential impacts, explore mitigation options and commit to delivering them. We also heard that a significant proportion of proposed mitigations, despite having funding allocated, are never actually delivered. The failure of the system to enforce the measures erodes public trust in the process. The result of poor consultation is that nobody is satisfied: communities feel ignored, developers face avoidable delays and legal costs, planners and courts are burdened unnecessarily, and confidence in the system is undermined.

The principles are simple: put the right projects in place through direction from the centre; secure consent and mitigations by building trust in the system, early engagement and proper enforcement; and build the infrastructure. The clean power plan and—soon please—the SSEP set the priorities. We have the investment and innovation potential supported by the industrial strategy. Lower bills, greater security and sustainability of energy supply are there for the taking. Let us take them and go from current gridlock to growth. I commend this statement to the House.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We have just heard how important it is that we get community support for infrastructure. The Committee supports the presumption

of consent for low-carbon infrastructure with critical national priority status. However, the Committee sets out in the report serious concerns about the potential impact on biodiversity and the lack of delivery on promised ecological mitigations. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is essential for Parliament to hold the Government to account on ensuring that the energy transition is delivered in a genuinely nature-positive way?

Bill Esterson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her service on the Committee—her contribution is always valuable in our discussions and in the questions we put to our witnesses. She rightly raises nature mitigations, which we looked at in our inquiry. As I mentioned in my statement, we heard that all too often developers do not implement the mitigations that they are required to make. It is very important—this is one of our recommendations to Government, as she implies—to ensure that developers carry out their obligations and implement the improvements that she refers to.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for leading us through the report. It is right that sometimes Select Committees pose more of a challenge to Government. In this case, I think it is right to call out that, while the Department is doing great things and working at pace, we need to ensure that everything is joined up and co-ordinated. The national policy statements, the land-use framework, the new SSEP, strategies and plans need to be joined up to ensure that nature-positive and nature-based solutions and environmental protections are also joined up. Does the Chair agree with me that the Department needs to work harder to ensure that, while we deliver at pace, everything gives one coherent message to the market?

Bill Esterson: I am also very grateful to my hon. Friend for his contribution. He joined the Committee recently and has grabbed the agenda with both hands, as one of our most assiduous attenders. I think he and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) match each other on attendance, actually—I do not want to give the wrong impression. He is correct: we need the Government to engage with our recommendations on enforcement of nature-positive solutions. He gives me an opportunity to reiterate that there is confusion on whether the need for planning consent precedes grid connection or the other way around. I think we could do with the Government clearing up some of those things.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We are all in favour of green energy in Lincolnshire, and we do our bit with massive wind turbines in the North sea, but will the Committee do a more in-depth report about the sheer concentration of solar farms in Lincolnshire, with 10,000 acres around the town of Gainsborough? I know that the grid connection is important, but surely the Committee could play a useful role in saying that all parts of the country should do their bit. We cannot simply take 10,000 acres out of good agricultural production in one small part of England.

Bill Esterson: That is something that we have looked at as part of this inquiry and more widely. It is really important that those who host major energy infrastructure are taken on board. We made recommendations about early engagement, and about listening to rather than

ignoring what local communities say about the potential for re-routing sites or routes for pylons. The right hon. Gentleman talks about solar farms, but are there other options? There is good evidence that when engagement is done in the correct way, compromise is often possible. Although not everybody will ever be happy in consultation, there are definitely better ways for these things to be done.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I commend the Committee and my hon. Friend for their work. The report echoes what National Grid told me when I visited its operation in Hams Hall in my constituency. Does he agree that the Government's work on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill has paved the way for infrastructure projects to be delivered more quickly, and that businesses such as Jaguar Land Rover, whose battery assembly plant is in Hams Hall, will welcome his Committee's work and the Government's efforts on delivering vital infrastructure?

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There is a good crossover between the Planning and Infrastructure Bill going through Parliament and the amendments made to the national policy statement. Our recommendations pick up some of the linkages between the two, as she suggests. The key point is how we speed up the process so that we can get to my final point, which is to get on and build the infrastructure, as she says.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The report highlights an ambiguity about what is said centrally by the Government and what is expected from industry. Separately from this report, the Select Committee has heard evidence on tidal range power generation from the Severn and, during visits, about innovative approaches. Does the Chair of the Select Committee share my concern that the confusion caused by that ambiguity could lead to the UK missing out on opportunities to be a world leader in alternative types of generation, and does he agree the situation must be clarified?

Bill Esterson: I am also grateful to the hon. Lady for her contribution since the start of the Committee—she is another assiduous attender. She makes absolutely the right point. Where we have identified areas of ambiguity—there are many around grid connection and planning, which I have touched on before—the Government need to clear them up, so that decisions can be made in a timely fashion, developers can have the confidence and certainty that they need, and we can get on with the process of improving the infrastructure, the grid capacity connection and the supply of cheap clean energy.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his incredibly thorough and interesting report, which I look forward to reading. Will he comment on an amendment that I tabled to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill? It is often said that Suffolk Coastal may be hosting up to 20% of the UK's future energy or transporting that future energy. We have four nationally significant infrastructure projects within a five-mile radius, and there has been no co-ordination between the energy developers for the planning and development of those projects. My amendment would have legally required

[Jenny Riddell-Carpenter]

such co-ordination when energy developers bring forward their plans, so that we can manage mitigations, look at the issues, and better plan and develop out when large NSIPs are being developed.

Bill Esterson: It is important that we have proper co-ordination between developers and different projects, which we also touched on in our report. The national policy statement is the strategically important element of planning, so it is very much relevant to my hon. Friend's point. I think she will find that some of the comments and evidence that we heard in our inquiry lend themselves to the point she just made.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): There are plans for major solar farms, substations and other infrastructure in North West Norfolk and across the county, taking high-quality agricultural land out of use. The cumulative impact of that is being ignored. I welcome the Committee's recommendation on solar. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the planning system should ensure that energy infrastructure is built on developed land, brownfield land and industrial land, not on best-quality agricultural land? Why does he think that the Government have so far failed to prioritise energy security in the national policy statements?

Bill Esterson: I think most of that question is probably better answered by Ministers, but as to what we found in our evidence, it is very much the case that we have to work with local communities to address their concerns about having to host significant amounts of infrastructure, as in the hon. Gentleman's community. The point about putting solar or wind farms on brownfield land is a good one. I do not think anybody is against that, and I think that that is part of what the Government intend. The point is that there are occasions when that is not possible, but the key is to engage with people and take them with us by demonstrating the case for where infrastructure must go.

Children's Social Care

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We come now to the second Select Committee statement. Helen Hayes will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. There should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

2.8 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this statement. Today I speak on behalf of the Education Committee and, more importantly, the thousands of children across England whose lives are profoundly shaped by our children's social care system.

I put on record my thanks to the Committee Clerks and specialists, who have supported this inquiry, as well as to Georgia, Jake, Lamar and Louise, the four young adults with recent experience of the care system who came to give oral evidence to the Committee in person. I know that it was not easy to speak about the challenges that they have faced, including experiences that no child should ever have to endure, but by doing so they have helped to shape our report and ensure that young people have been at the centre of our thinking. We are very grateful.

Children's social care provides essential support to some of our most vulnerable young people—children who have faced trauma, neglect, abuse, bereavement or instability. They need not only protection but love, stability and the opportunity to thrive. In December 2023, our predecessor Committee launched an inquiry into the state of children's social care. Following the general election, my Committee resolved to continue that critical work. Our inquiry builds on substantial evidence, including the independent review of children's social care, published in 2022, which concluded that the system was failing to meet children's needs. The evidence we have received from care-experienced young people, social workers, local authorities, charities and academics confirms that many of these challenges persist.

The system is under significant strain. Rising need, stretched budgets and workforce shortages are compromising the ability to put children genuinely at the heart of the system. We have seen a significant shift in the profile of spending on children's social care, from spend on early help services, which has fallen 31% in real terms over the last decade, to spend on costly crisis interventions, which has rocketed. This imbalance is unsustainable. The 2022 independent review proposed a £2.6 billion uplift in children's social care spending between 2023 and 2027, with £1 billion annually ringfenced for family help services, to shift focus toward early intervention. That recommendation has not been fully implemented.

There has been rising need for children's social care over the past decade, with the number of looked-after children standing at almost 84,000 in 2024—an increase of over 20% since 2014. These pressures reflect broader social and economic challenges. Poverty is a key driver of social care involvement, and the forthcoming child poverty strategy must be ambitious, aiming to significantly reduce the number of children growing up in financial hardship. We urge the Government to allocate a substantial portion of new funding from the spending review to restore early intervention services to 2010 levels in real terms. Prevention is not only the right thing to do by children and their families; it is also more cost-effective.

The shortage of appropriate placements for looked-after children is a critical issue. In 2024, 45% of looked-after children were placed outside their local authority, and 22% were placed more than 20 miles from home, disrupting education and relationships and exacerbating trauma. We call on the Department for Education to publish a national sufficiency strategy for children's social care, requiring every local authority to develop plans to reduce out-of-area placements and demonstrate how they are implementing best practice. Not every local authority sends children far away from home, and we believe more can be done to reduce this harmful practice.

The children's social care market is failing to deliver for children and local authorities. The excessive profits of some providers are unacceptable, and reports of financial instability among some large operators are deeply concerning. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes provisions to reform this market, which we welcome. However, these measures must be rigorously monitored. The Department should provide annual updates to Parliament on their impact, and if a profit cap is introduced, my Committee must be consulted on draft regulations.

Our inquiry examined all forms of children's social care: foster care, adoption, kinship care, residential care and support for disabled children. Within foster care—the most common placement type—there is a shortage of approximately 6,500 carers. We urge the Department to develop a national fostering strategy. Simply continuing to advertise for more foster carers will not be sufficient, and work is needed to address some of the practical barriers that prevent foster carers from being able to sign up once they show an interest in doing so. In particular, we are calling for collaboration with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that housing policy properly supports foster carer recruitment.

Kinship care is a vital option for many children. The forthcoming kinship allowance pilot must provide financial support equivalent to that of foster carers, and we call for legislation to guarantee kinship leave entitlements. For adopted children, the adoption and special guardianship support fund must be made permanent to eliminate annual funding uncertainty.

While we support the emphasis on kinship and foster care, high-quality residential care remains essential for some children. Reports of children placed in unsuitable settings such as caravans and boats are completely unacceptable—the opposite of a child-centred approach. The new regulation and inspection regime for supported accommodation is a positive step, but universal care standards must apply across all placements.

The social care workforce is in crisis, with high turnover and overstretched staff increasing safeguarding risks. We call for a comprehensive workforce strategy to improve retention and reduce reliance on agency staff, which increased by 38% over the five years to 2022.

Disabled children face significant barriers, including limited access to respite care and inconsistent assessments. We heard that support for disabled children is often deprioritised as social services focus on child protection concerns, and that sometimes parents of disabled children are treated with suspicion and subjected to inappropriate assessments without justification when they need support. We urge the Department to implement the Law Commission's proposals and establish clear national eligibility criteria.

Mental health support is another critical gap. Children in care are four times more likely to experience mental health challenges, yet access to services remains inadequate. We recommend piloting co-located mental health services between social care and child and adolescent mental health services, and strengthening mental health assessments for children in care.

It is essential that children in care have a voice when important decisions are being made about their lives. Currently, too few children are accessing the advocacy support they are entitled to, with an average referral rate of just 5% across local authorities. We endorse the independent review's proposal for an opt-out model of independent advocacy for all children in care, to ensure their voices are heard.

Reunification with birth families, when safe and appropriate, can be a positive outcome for children and parents. However, current practice is inconsistent. The Department must evaluate reunification practices and publish national guidance to ensure it is prioritised when suitable and in the best interests of the child.

There were 49,000 children on child protection plans in 2024—an increase of 1,600 from 2014. Neglect remains a significant concern, and we call for a national survey on the prevalence of abuse and neglect and a dedicated national neglect strategy.

Finally, and most concerning, support for young people when they leave care is simply not good enough. Care leavers have some of the poorest outcomes in society across a range of measures: 39% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, training or employment, compared with 13% of all young people in that age group, and it is estimated that a quarter of homeless people have been in care. Care leavers still face a cliff edge in support on turning 18. We heard from young people who had to drop A-levels and struggled to afford rent while in full-time education at the age of just 18. The Department for Education must develop a national care offer to ensure minimum standards of support across the country and review and improve the financial and housing support available to care leavers.

Our children deserve a compassionate, coherent and effective social care system that places their needs at the centre. Behind every statistic is a child who deserves the same opportunities as their peers to feel safe, loved and empowered to thrive. The recommendations in my Committee's report provide a road map for reform. We urge the Government to act swiftly in addressing rising need, restore early intervention, reform the delivery of care placements, ensure better mental health services,

[Helen Hayes]

support the workforce and stop care leavers facing a cliff edge at the age of 18. We owe it to these children to build a system that is not merely reactive but restorative, not just efficient but compassionate, and not only functional but transformational.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee on this report and thank her and the Committee for their work on it. I particularly welcome the recommendations on kinship care, which mirror closely the measures in the ten-minute rule Bill that I introduced in this place three years ago and which we on the Liberal Democrat Benches have been campaigning on. I hope she will work cross-party to make sure the Government go further and faster on kinship care.

I want to pick up on the Committee's recommendations on the adoption and special guardianship support fund. She and I know how distressed the families of children who have been adopted or put into kinship care who need this support are. It is a very small amount of money—does she agree that if the fund could be expanded slightly, all children could go back to having the level of support they had before the cuts were introduced a few months ago?

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for her question and for all her interest and work in this important area. The report makes strong recommendations for the Government to make the adoption and special guardianship support fund permanent, to evaluate the impact of the cut in the short term, and to review and make changes to the level of funding if necessary. We know that the Government are looking at changes and improvements, particularly in access to mental health services, so that more children who are adopted can get support through mainstream health services without having to rely on specialist funding as a supplement for that. We think the Government should look carefully at how that goes but not be hesitant to restore the fund if that is needed following monitoring.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I am pleased to have contributed to this report as a member of the Education Committee, which is excellently led by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I also thank the Clerks and staff for all their work on the Committee. It is good that the report has been welcomed by the Centre for Young Lives, the County Councils Network, as well as care leavers charities such as Become.

Will my hon. Friend expand on the section of the report about keeping children safe? Evidence that we heard from our witnesses during the inquiry suggested that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was going to do a lot to address their concerns about keeping children in care safe. Despite that, we have still made recommendations about multi-agency working. We have recommended that those agencies have clear processes in place, so that they can review and escalate concerns between different agencies, with a clear line of accountability and decision making to keep children safe and stop them falling through the gaps. Does my hon. Friend agree that it should be a priority for the Department to get those processes in place to prevent those children from falling through the gaps?

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his contribution to the Committee's report. He is right—he will recall the distressing evidence that we took, which came in the short aftermath of the verdict in the case of Sara Sharif, who was so badly let down by services that had multiple opportunities to intervene and keep her safe but failed to do so. We welcome the steps that the Government are taking through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to strengthen joint working, particularly through the single child identifier and other measures around multi-agency working practices. We are calling for the Government to go further, though, because none of us can tolerate seeing any more of those tragic cases in the headlines—the names of children who we remember and who were failed by services that should be there to protect them.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am immensely grateful to the Chair of the Education Committee for the way she has introduced the report and the work she has done. I am particularly moved by what she said about disabled people, and I wonder if she would look at the relationship between that and special needs education as there is a close association between the two. Will she also look at the issue of the quality of parenting? I was at a school in my constituency just a week ago, and I was told that children are presenting to school really very poorly parented as that is related to the subject that the hon. Lady has studied. It is not all children, of course, but too many are suffering in that way.

Helen Hayes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and his interest in this area of work. My Committee is looking separately at the issue of special educational needs and disabilities, and we expect to report shortly on that. It is an expansive and lengthy inquiry. He is, of course, right to say that there is some overlap. In relation to children's social care, we heard from families with disabled children about the multiple difficulties they face with different parts of a system that is not joined-up enough to support them. His question about parenting speaks directly to our recommendation about the need to shift to early intervention, and help and support. In that vein, I welcome the Government's announcement this week about Best Start family hubs and the expansion of those services, which I believe are trying to do exactly that. We will keep a close watch on how that goes over the coming months.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement. Like her, I pay tribute to the care leavers who spoke to us, often sharing deeply traumatic stories of their journey through the care system. Their corporate parent is ultimately the state, and we as its custodians must bear the responsibility of ensuring that we support children in care as if they are our own. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is why the Committee's recommendation that the Government should implement a national care leaver offer is so important, and that doing so would guarantee a consistent approach across local authorities?

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her contribution to the report, drawing on her deep experience in this sector prior to coming to this place. Many of us come to this subject area also as

parents. I am the parent of a 19-year-old and a 16-year-old, and found the stories that the Committee heard of children cut adrift by services at the age of 18—when young people are still growing into adulthood and need so much help and support—heartbreaking and unacceptable. We are calling for a national care offer, so that wherever care leavers are in the country, they know there is a guaranteed level of support to help them into the next stages of life.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I very much welcome the report, which I look forward to reading in detail. I thank the Committee for all its work on this important matter, and of course the Chair for introducing its many excellent recommendations so comprehensively. There is a lot to go on, but I wish quickly to touch on two points. I declare an interest as a foster carer and adoptive parent, and I fully endorse the report, which highlights the huge widening gap in foster care provision. The emotional appeal for foster carers is powerful, but as the Committee said, it simply is not enough. Does the Chair agree that properly recognising the effort and complexity involved in fostering placements is urgently needed, most importantly for children in care? On support for care leavers, I have heard from too many who, on reaching 18 or even before then, move out of the council area where they were taken into care, so I also endorse the call for a national care leaver offer.

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for bringing his personal experience to the debate. I agree with him about foster carers. We looked in detail at the issue, and the gap between the numbers of people expressing an interest in foster care, compared with those who sign up and become foster carers, is enormous. We focused our attention on some of the practical barriers that prevent people from becoming foster parents, especially housing. That is particularly the case for foster carers who might be living in social housing. Housing policy does not adequately support people who might want to come forward but do not have enough space at home, when that is often the responsibility of the same local authority that is their landlord. We think that more could be done to overcome the practical barriers that foster carers face.

Points of Order

2.26 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will not know this, but I have learned that independent experts have advised that Lincolnshire police are now at real risk of having to issue a section 114 notice—the equivalent of a public body declaring that it can no longer balance its budget. It comes after a long campaign, run by myself and colleagues, about Lincolnshire police funding more generally. Has the Home Secretary advised you on whether she intends to come to the House to address that, for the people of Lincolnshire are acutely worried that policing services in our county will cease to protect them from the risk and reality of crime and disorder?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The Chair has had no notice that the Government intend to make a statement, but I am sure that those on the Government Benches will have heard his comments, which are now on the record.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I support my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), but I want to make a different point of order. Have the Government told you that they will come to the House today to make a statement on channel crossings? The channel is in chaos today—already 220 people have poured across—and 1,195 arrived on 1 June. President Macron and the Prime Minister say that this cannot go on. This is an existential crisis for our country, and we want action. Just taking in a swap of 50 a week is not going to solve the problem. On this vital issue, have the Government come to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and said that they want to make a statement today?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. I confirm that the Chair has had no notice from the Government that they intend to make such a statement today, but those on the Government Front Bench will have heard his interest in the matter.

BILL PRESENTED

ENGLISH DEVOLUTION AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Angela Rayner, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Pat McFadden, Secretary Wes Streeting, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Secretary Liz Kendall and Secretary Heidi Alexander presented a Bill to make provision about combined authorities, combined county authorities, the Greater London Authority, local councils, police and crime commissioners and fire and rescue authorities, local audit and terms in business tenancies about rent.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 283) with explanatory notes (Bill 283—EN).

Backbench Business

Educational Attainment of Boys

2.29 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the attainment and engagement of boys in education.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and I thank colleagues from across the House for their interest in what I believe is one of the most overlooked and consequential challenges of our time: the underachievement of boys at every stage of education. This debate is not about grievance—it is about evidence. I hope that today we can focus on the data, the consequences and the things that must change to do better by our boys, not instead of girls, but alongside them.

I am proud to have Cian and Alex, work experience students from my constituency of Bishop Auckland, with us in the Gallery this afternoon. Working alongside my parliamentary assistant, they have helped me to prepare for today's debate with thoughtfulness, curiosity and maturity. I hope that their presence is a reminder of the promise that exists in young men in County Durham and beyond.

We cannot ignore the reality that too many of our boys are being left behind by a system that does not fully see them, expect much from them or equip them with the tools to thrive. Let us start with the facts: by key stage 2, only 57% of boys meet expected standards in reading, writing and maths, which is seven percentage points behind girls; when looking at the writing gap alone, boys are 13 percentage points behind girls; in their GCSE exams, boys, on average, achieve half a grade lower than girls across every subject; at A-level, girls outperform boys by an average of over a grade and half across their best three subjects; and girls are even pulling ahead in the new T-level qualification. Just 30.4% of 18-year-old boys went into higher education last year, compared with 42% of girls. Boys make up over 70% of permanent school exclusions and 95% of young people in custody.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Eight out of nine men in prison report that they were excluded from school. I was a secondary school teacher before I entered Parliament, and the attainment gap was a big worry, but my biggest worry was that we do not respond properly to or cater for people who are neurodiverse. About 20% of our young people, including girls, are different learners, but our curriculum does not really cater for them. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern?

Sam Rushworth: I do share that concern. We should have a debate about the way in which we address that issue, as well as about the issues facing young care leavers. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about what the prison population looks like.

The issue is not just about adolescents, because the problem begins in early years. By the end of reception, just 60.7% of boys are assessed to be “school-ready”, compared with 75% of girls, a point that I will return to later. Where does it end? A quarter of a million young men, aged 16 to 24, are classed as NEETs—not in education, employment or training—which is 78% higher

than the number for young women. That is a post-covid increase of 40% for young males, compared with an increase of just 7% for young females.

What is more, as the Centre for Social Justice reported recently:

“For those young men who are in work, the...gender pay gap has been reversed. Young men are now out-earned by their female peers, including among the university educated.”

This national challenge is especially acute in constituencies like mine, of Bishop Auckland, and across former coalfield communities in the north-east, where too often working-class boys start behind, and stay behind. I did not call the debate today merely to highlight an issue—I want it to lead to action and I am calling for real change. That begins with taking the issue seriously, because what concerns me most is not the data, but the absence of outrage and lack of urgency.

It was not always this way. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was girls who were lagging behind. The Government rightly took action to improve outcomes for girls, introducing targeted support, challenging curriculum bias, expanding grammar schools for girls and promoting girls' access to science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Those were not small tweaks, but deliberate strategic interventions, and they worked. Now that the situation is reversed, with boys persistently underachieving, where is the strategy? I am not talking about a general strategy to address deprivation or educational disadvantage, but a specific, evidence-based, deliverable strategy around boys and young men that addresses the gender-based aspects of underachievement.

At the foundation of that strategy must be a resolve to stop blaming boys and to start rebuilding their self-worth. There was a time in the 1970s when society did the same for girls. It became known as “the deficit approach” because it attributed girls' underachievement, relative to boys, to a lack of effort or a deficiency in them, rather than the failures and limitations of the education system or prevalent socioeconomic trends. So-called “biological determinists” argued that gender differences were natural and unalterable, and, simply put, girls were not as bright. Thankfully, those nonsense theories have been well and truly debunked when it comes to girls, yet too often, when we talk about boys, the tone shifts to blame. It is as if boys' underachievement is seen as self-inflicted, a product of laziness or of so-called “toxic masculinity”.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. In my eight and a half years as a maths teacher, teaching in inner city schools, I found that the problem was never just about a lack of aspiration but about a lack of access and a lack of knowledge; that goes for any group, not just for boys. Does he agree?

Sam Rushworth: Absolutely—that is a point well made, and I hope that we will have more contributions of that nature during the debate.

Boys are not the problem: it is the system that is failing them. Of course we need to help boys to develop empathy, respect for those who are different, self-control, and awareness about how their words and actions affect others, but can we please be more careful not to tell boys that they are, by nature, toxic, or that, in 2025, they are privileged simply by being male, when many

feel anything but that? They feel undervalued, distrusted and anxious that they will never live up to society's expectations.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I had not intended to contribute to this debate, but the hon. Gentleman has provoked me to do so by the character of his insight. It is brave and right of him to deconstruct the nonsense about toxic masculinity, and to emphasise that white working-class boys, of the kind that are prevalent in his constituency, are particularly disadvantaged by a system that has underestimated, indeed neglected, their needs. He mentioned NEETs. As an education Minister, I did my best to address that issue, but successive Governments have done insufficient. I congratulate him on bringing this debate and on what he has said in it.

Sam Rushworth: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I hope he will continue to contribute to the debate.

Boys feel undervalued, distrusted and anxious that they will not live up to society's expectations. Sam Fender, an icon of the north-east, recently put it:

"We are very good at talking about privileges—white, male or straight privilege. We rarely talk about class, though. And that's a lot of the reason that all the young lads are seduced by demagogues like Andrew Tate. They're being shamed all the time and made to feel like they're a problem. It's this narrative being told to white boys from nowhere towns. People preach to some kid in a pit town in Durham who's got—"

nothing—

"and tell him he's privileged? Then Tate tells him he's worth something? It's seductive."

We cannot leave that space to be filled by online influencers selling toxic answers. We have to offer something better—belonging, purpose and hope.

Evidence shows that boys thrive when, rather than being treated as a problem, they are trusted within a culture of high expectations, when we set them up to succeed, and when they know that their learning is relevant and will take them somewhere. The coded message in our current curriculum is that society values academic excellence over development of technical skills and know-how. It is as if we have replaced the 11-plus with a 16-plus exam, where those who get good GCSE results go on to sit A-levels, which are given higher esteem, and those who fail are pushed towards vocational courses, as though those skills are lesser.

A good example of a school that is bucking that trend, which is attended by some of the young people from my constituency, is the University Technical College South Durham, in Newton Aycliffe, which Ofsted recently rated as one of the happiest schools in the country. I have met some of its students. They all have familiar stories about how they were previously suspended and in trouble all the time at school, but when they attended the UTC they found purpose. They build relationships, promote leadership and make a child feel known, and that works—the children are thriving, boys included.

Elsewhere, schools working with the Yes He Can programme or applying the "Taking Boys Seriously" framework from Ulster University are closing gaps and rebuilding trust with disengaged boys, not coddling but understanding them—I looked up to see where the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was when

I mentioned Ulster, and he is not in his place. Other examples are Hays Travel and Nissan, which will take young people from the age of 14 to give them vocational work experience.

I welcome the Government's industrial strategy. It is really exciting that, for the first time in a long time, we are seeing a real effort to create meaningful career pathways into the sorts of secure jobs that young people in the north-east used to be able to aspire to.

Another good example is the plan to build 1.5 million homes. We know that we cannot do that unless we have more skilled young people coming into those professions. Last week, I spent half a day with some young apprentices from Bishop Auckland college bricklaying with Gleeson Homes in my constituency. It was fabulous to see these young men who really had a sense of direction: they knew that in a few years' time, they would be earning good salaries and able to build good family lives.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a truly insightful and much-needed speech on this important matter. Will he join me in recognising the importance of pre-apprenticeship work for younger boys who are not yet ready to take on apprenticeships, as well as the value of some of the voluntary organisations, such as MPower in St Blazey in my constituency?

Sam Rushworth: One hundred per cent. That is another good example of why we need to create those pathways.

Let me say that I am not calling for us to stop encouraging young men to go to university. I am a working-class lad, and I was much better suited to going the academic route than I was to working as a mechanic or something, as those who have seen me put up a shelf will attest. I am calling for greater parity of esteem, respect for all skills and earlier opportunities for people to feel valued, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) just pointed out.

Sir John Hayes: I will praise the hon. Gentleman again. He is absolutely right about really valuing practical learning. I come from a similar background to him; I was not clever enough to be practical, so I had to become an academic. Re-establishing the idea that vocational, practical accomplishment has at least equal prowess to academic learning—I think it has greater prowess, actually—is fundamental. May I add one other example, with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker? The hon. Gentleman will know of the Men's Sheds movement, which is typically for older men. I visited the men's shed in Long Sutton, of which I am president, and there was a youth shed bringing young people into a male community, allowing boys to share, learn and grow.

Sam Rushworth: What a great example. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that.

I will speed through the rest of my speech, because I am conscious of time and the contributions of other people. We want young boys to go to university too. I declare an interest: I used to tutor for the Brilliant Club in schools in the north-east. That was about young people whose parents may not have gone to university and helping them to have that aspiration and realise what they could do.

[Sam Rushworth]

On early years, as I said at the beginning, a lot of attainment is set before the age of five—we know that even by the age of five, boys are behind girls. This Government are doing some significant things that are important in that regard, including the Best Start family hubs, which were announced just this week. Those are about not just children, but parents being able to access support. As a parent myself, I know that I raised my seven-year-old son much better than I raised my 18-year-old son, because I made so many mistakes in knowing how to help him. Too often, I tried to use a carrot-and-stick approach and did not understand well enough how to help him to reflect on his behaviour, although they are both wonderful boys.

The free breakfast clubs initiative is about so much more than just breakfast. I recently visited Cockfield primary school in my constituency, where, since it was an early adopter of the scheme, attendance went from about 10 or 12 children to 60 children every morning. I met children who used to have difficulty being on time or who were regularly absent, and I was told how they are now coming and thriving. A wise headteacher there was using that scheme not just to feed the children, but to engage them in meaningful activities that help develop their social and emotional skills.

Before I was elected, I was a governor at Benfieldside primary school in County Durham, where we introduced a specialist social and emotional learning programme. That was about helping children to develop so-called 21st century skills, such as emotional self-regulation, recognising what they are feeling, self-awareness, social awareness, empathy and how to build healthy relationships. The teachers reported remarkable differences within a year of the programme's introduction, and parents were coming in and saying, "Something is happening to my child, because they are so much calmer and better able to manage their behaviour."

There are real opportunities for us to grasp this issue in the breakfast clubs, in free school meal provision and in the Best Start family hubs. This is about not just increased funding, but content. If I have one ask of the Minister today, it is to give 30 minutes of her time, either by herself or with officials, to meet with me and people I used to work with in this field who have developed these really useful tools that can be introduced in any classroom setting.

I believe we urgently need a national strategy for boys' attainment that is cross-party, evidence-based and rooted in fairness. It should invest in teacher training that recognises gender bias and engages boys more effectively. It should embed social and emotional learning throughout the curriculum, especially in early years and transition stages. It should expand vocational and technical pathways, recognising different routes to success. It should promote leadership opportunities for boys in school life and, most importantly, ensure transparent, gender-disaggregated data to hold ourselves accountable nationally and locally.

This is a debate not just about attainment, but about dignity. It is about who we see and who we invest in. I do not want boys in Bishop Auckland, Bootle, Barry or Basingstoke to feel that the system has no place for them; I want them to feel seen, supported and believed in, because when we raise the floor for those who are

struggling, we lift the whole classroom. Let us act with some of the clarity and courage we showed a generation ago for girls—our boys and our society deserve nothing less.

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

2.47 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech. As the Chair of the Education Committee, I want to see every child and young person engaged in learning throughout their time in education, and helped to find their individual interests and passions, whether they are academic, vocational or a mix of both, and to have built a strong foundation on which they can thrive beyond their time in education and into adulthood.

In their work, my Committee and its predecessor Committee have heard about the many and varied differences between groups of children and young people and the need to do more to close those gaps in participation and attainment. Our immediate predecessor Committee launched an inquiry on the topic of the educational attainment of boys, but the calling of the snap general election last summer meant that the Committee never met to discuss the evidence received from stakeholders. I have drawn on that evidence in preparing for this debate.

The Association of School and College Leaders is clear that it is important not to generalise about boys' educational engagement and attainment. Many boys achieve well in education, demonstrating good engagement and achieving qualifications that allow them to move on to the next stage of their education, or into an apprenticeship or their first job. However, there are particular groups of boys who perform less well than similar groups of girls. Digging into and understanding this detail is an important part of addressing those disparities.

Wera Hobhouse: I am fascinated by what I am hearing today. I met Tony Bury, my Bath constituent, who is working with the Centre for Social Justice on improving outcomes for boys—I encourage everybody who is interested in this issue to read its latest report, "Lost Boys". Does the hon. Member agree that we need a national strategy to address the underachievement of some boys?

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. To reflect on what my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland has said, I believe there is a need for a strategic approach to this issue, but as I will talk about later, my Committee is looking at inclusive education and how we can make changes in the system that help schools to respond in a more defined way to the needs of individual children. I believe that, through some of those techniques, we can create an education system that works for everybody.

In particular, when we think about the groups of boys who do not thrive so well in education, we know that white British boys, black Caribbean boys and mixed white and black Caribbean boys eligible for free school meals have particularly low levels of attainment, as do those from Gypsy or Roma backgrounds or Travellers

of Irish heritage. Differences between girls and boys emerge in the early years and pre-school phase and continue right through to higher education. There is a difference in speech and oral language development between boys and girls from the earliest years, which is reflected in a gender gap in phonics performance in year 1. With the exception of maths, girls outperform boys at key stages 1 and 2, particularly in reading and writing. At the end of reception year, aged around five, three quarters of girls have a good level of development, while less than two thirds of boys do.

At key stage 4, girls outperform boys on all of the headline Department for Education measures. Some 68% of girls in state-funded schools achieve both English and Maths GCSEs at grade 4 or above, which is 5% higher than the rate for boys. Progression to higher education at the age of 19 is higher for young women than it is for young men, and among those who do take up a place at university, young men have higher rates of drop-out than young women. However, despite entering the workforce with lower qualifications than women on average, men still earn more on average, with the gender pay gap growing over time. As such, this is an area of policy that requires complex and nuanced consideration.

Is the difference between girls' and boys' attainment due to a continued improvement over many years in the attainment and engagement of girls, challenges for specific groups of boys, or a mixture of both, and what can and should be done to address those disparities? The evidence that the Select Committee has received reveals different views on what steps should be taken to address these persistent differences throughout school and university. One viewpoint is that taking steps to improve engagement and attainment for every pupil will naturally help improve the engagement and attainment of those groups of boys demonstrating the biggest gender gap. The OECD report, "Gender, Education and Skills: The Persistence of Gender Gaps in Education and Skills", published in 2023, stated that

"gender disparities in school performance and the resultant career choices do not stem from innate differences in aptitude but rather from students' attitudes towards learning and their behaviour in school, from how they choose to spend their leisure time, and from the confidence they have—or do not have—in their abilities as students."

Reading ability is a key cornerstone of many other aspects of education, and the seemingly continual decrease in the proportion of boys reading for pleasure over the years is one important issue to tackle. I commend BookTrust on the work it is doing with children's laureate Frank Cottrell-Boyce to promote the importance and the joy of reading for pleasure, and to encourage and support more children to find their love of books.

We know that screentime and the use of smartphones are having profound impacts on children and young people from an increasingly young age. Among the many harms that children are exposed to as a consequence of their engagement online, teachers, parents and young people themselves report exposure to toxic masculinity. We also know that excessive screentime harms young people's sleep, reduces their attention span and affects their ability to concentrate. These are complex and difficult areas, but I am clear that urgent action is needed to protect children from online harms, and that taking steps to promote positive role models and challenge unacceptable monocultures on social media should be a priority.

There is also a big difference in the proportions of male and female teachers, particularly in primary schools. It is important that we continue to support and encourage more men to teach younger children. Evidence to the Select Committee suggests that a quarter of all state-funded primary schools do not have a single male classroom teacher. It is clearly important that we have women role models to encourage participation and engagement among girls, particularly in STEM subjects, but the same applies to boys seeing male teachers in the classroom and in other educational roles, such as learning support assistants.

There is a difference between boys and girls in the presentation and diagnosis of special educational needs and disabilities, and our work on the Education Select Committee is clear about both the failures of the current SEND system—described as "lose, lose, lose" by the last Conservative Secretary of State for Education—and the need to drive early identification of need, instead of allowing children to go unsupported in education.

Education, health and care plans are more than twice as prevalent for boys as for girls—as of the beginning of this year, 23% of boys were identified with SEN, compared with 13% of girls. Too many children struggle with dyslexia. The delays for assessing pupils with social, emotional and mental health issues are unacceptable, and ADHD is significantly underdiagnosed across the country.

My Committee has been looking in detail at SEND for several months now, and we will shortly publish our report. Our work has included visits to a number of schools and college settings that are already delivering inclusive practice for SEND. It seems clear that some of the techniques that can be used to ensure that every child's needs are met in school would also deliver benefits specifically for boys who are underachieving. For example, at Aylsham high school in Norfolk, which we were pleased to visit just a couple of weeks ago, and at West Credit secondary school in Ontario, we saw vocational subjects, such as construction skills, horticulture and food production, on offer alongside academic subjects in a way that helped to secure the interest and engagement of a wide range of pupils.

We know that the previous Government's changes to the curriculum have resulted in a sharp decline in the availability of some creative subjects and sport in our schools. We all appreciate the importance in education of people finding the things that they love to do and can succeed at, which can sustain their motivation to participate in some aspects of education that are more challenging. It is important that we have an education system that can deliver that for every child.

Every Member of this House will remember that special teacher who sparked a particular interest in a field of study, or a passion for an area that particularly enthused and engaged us. For me, it was my former headteacher, Tony Richardson of Ormskirk grammar school, which confusingly was actually a comprehensive school. He was my English teacher, and he taught me about debating and literature and took a close interest, and it made a huge difference. Tackling the recruitment and retention crisis in teaching, and helping teachers to commit to stay for the long term, also allows children to have that special relationship with staff, which is important.

This week, my Committee heard from Professor Becky Francis, who is leading the Government's curriculum and assessment review. Professor Francis is clear on the

[Helen Hayes]

importance and challenge of ensuring that every pupil, no matter their background, can find themselves in the curriculum they are taught across a wide range of subjects. Whether it is careful tracking of pupils, a rich and varied curriculum, exciting trips, making every lesson engaging, making sure there are opportunities to secure content that might not have been fully grasped on the first attempt, teachers whose enthusiasm and knowledge are matched by their pedagogical skills, improved teacher training, time for continuing professional development, strong leadership from school leaders, or the improved engagement of parents and carers, it will all help every child to achieve their full potential. That includes the groups of boys who are underperforming compared with their peers.

We must build an education system in which every child can thrive. That requires an honest acknowledgment of the areas in which our system is currently failing, including for some groups of boys; a forensic understanding of the reasons why; and the courage to deliver reform that can make a difference. This is a vitally important issue, and it is one in which my Committee will continue to maintain a close interest.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Members will have noticed that time is ticking on, and I want to get as many people in as possible. I would therefore be grateful if Members could limit their remarks to around four minutes.

2.58 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this crucial debate. The attainment and engagement of boys, especially working-class boys, in their education will determine how society will look in the years and decades to come. Despite the importance of this topic, however, it has languished at the bottom of the list of national priorities for far too long.

In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton North, I am proud of the contributions made by teachers who work hard to leave no child behind, but until there are worthy interventions at a national level to address the scale of the current crisis in the system over boys' attainment, they will be doing so with one hand tied behind their back. This issue and its drivers have been misunderstood and misrepresented for far too long, and I am pleased to see MPs today grapple with the topic in a way that some have not, but that is only half the battle.

Historically, only piecemeal policy proposals have been half-heartedly explored—proposals unfit even to nip at the heels of this challenge, let alone address it in its entirety. Who must live with the consequences of that inertia? It is the boys who have gone to school this morning, in my constituency and across the country. They are less likely than girls in their class, if current trends persist, to seize the opportunities that school offers them. Boys and young men in communities like mine are just as deserving of a chance to get on in life and to fulfil their potential as their counterparts in more affluent areas, but they have been badly let down.

In the postcode lottery that has affected our society, it is disadvantaged boys who are being held back. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland pointed out earlier, “class” is not a dirty word, and we must not shy away from it when talking about this issue. In Rochdale borough, where my constituency sits, there is a 17% gap between boys eligible for free school meals and those who are not when it comes to who is meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2. That gap reverberates throughout boys' entire academic careers, and it widens when they come to sit their GCSEs. There is a 22% gap in the borough between boys who receive free school meals and those who do not when it comes to the percentage of pupils getting grade 4 or above in English and maths at the end of high school. In both instances, boys on free school meals, which is a welcome and wholly necessary intervention, are underperforming by comparison with those who are not. It is not by a slight amount; it is significant.

There is crossover when it comes to the issues at play here—not just around gender, but around socioeconomic circumstances. One way of assessing this more closely is by comparing the rate of exclusion among boys from deprived areas with the rate among girls and their male counterparts from more affluent backgrounds. Poorer boys are twice as likely as their female peers to be permanently excluded, and five times more likely than their more affluent male peers to be removed from school. According to the Centre for Social Justice, the gap is widening.

In some instances, economic hardship can be a contributing factor to exclusion and isolation, which can obviously lead to multiple negative outcomes. School exclusions and low attendance are intimately linked to crime, with the Prison Reform Trust recently highlighting that 59% of the prison population was regularly truant from school. This is not a party political issue, because no party has a monopoly on good ideas. In order to get this right across the whole country, we must speak to those who, even in the most trying of circumstances, are making inroads in supporting boys to succeed and thrive, and we must enable institutions to inform national policy, rather than thinking that we know best.

I welcome the steps that the Department for Education has taken recently, but we must go even further. Although class is currently not a protected characteristic, it should be given a similar level of parity. I believe that the Government should be mandated to consider class when policy proposals relating to children's education are being considered. Arbitrary and outdated measures of class lead to arbitrary and outdated policy outcomes, and we need to codify a modern definition of class in order to hold Governments to account through this lens.

The clock is ticking for the boys who went to school hungry this morning, for those struggling to keep pace with their peers in their schoolwork, for those crying out for a teacher to recognise their individual needs and to act, and for those who stand on the brink of exclusion. Their futures hang in the balance, and we can no longer neglect to ask the questions that we may not like the answers to. The challenges facing boys in schools are complex, and the solutions will take grit to implement, but it is time to finally heed the warnings that have been sounding for decades and to find the courage that eluded us in facing up to these challenges in the past. I truly fear the consequences if we do not.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. There is an immediate three-minute time limit.

3.3 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this very important debate. I rise to speak on an issue that cuts across every postcode, every classroom and every community: the persistent and growing gap in educational engagement and attainment among our boys.

Although I declare an interest by admitting to the House that I am the proud mum of two boys, we must make it clear that this is not about pitting one group of students against another. It is about recognising that some of our boys—particularly those from working-class backgrounds and from the British Caribbean community, and boys with special educational needs—are being systematically left behind by a system that was never designed with them in mind.

Over the past decade, nearly 1 million five-year-old boys have started primary school already behind. By the age of 11, girls consistently outperform boys in reading by around seven percentage points, and in writing by about six percentage points, while the maths gap sits at around five points. By GCSE level, 68% of girls achieve at least grade 4 in English and maths, compared with just 63% of boys. These are not trivial differences; they are measurable, systemic and enduring. Among pupils eligible for free school meals, the attainment gap falls across the same old fault lines, with just 34% of white boys and 36% of black Caribbean boys achieving at least grade 4 in English and maths.

In Croydon East, I have heard from teachers, youth workers, parents and students that our young people, and those who support them, know that they do not lack talent, ambition or even motivation, but opportunity. We need a curriculum that speaks to them, mentoring that looks like them and teachers who truly believe in them. I welcome this Government's commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunity, to raising standards and to giving all children the best start in life.

Now is the time to consider how we invest in early intervention, before exclusion and the school-to-prison pipeline take hold, to look at how we expand male role models with male teachers, but also with mentoring and youth outreach in the community, and to change accountability systems in schools so that we are not punishing creativity, but have a more inclusive approach to how people learn. It is time for us to stop asking why boys are disengaged, and to start asking what we can do to change how we re-engage them, because every boy in Croydon and all across Britain deserves the right to learn, thrive and dream.

3.5 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) not just for securing this debate, but for his excellent speech at the outset. It was so good that he inspired the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) to cross the Floor—very briefly.

As the Member for Suffolk Coastal, I have heard from parents, teachers and community leaders about their growing concerns on this very topic of the educational outcomes of boys, particularly those from disadvantaged and rural backgrounds. We have already heard a lot about the data, and it is stark. Nationally, boys are consistently underperforming girls at every stage from early years through to GCSEs and beyond. In 2023, just 60% of boys met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2 compared with 70% of girls, and we know boys are less likely to achieve a grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

The issue is about not just attainment, but engagement. Boys are far more likely to be excluded and more likely to be labelled as disruptive. They are less likely to enjoy school or feel that it meets their needs. That is especially true in rural areas such as mine where transport, funding and access to support services all create additional barriers. In Suffolk Coastal, we have seen at first hand the effects of these systemic issues. Parents in Leiston and Felixstowe tell me they are worried that their sons are being written off far too early. We know that children with complex needs or SEND issues, especially autism and ADHD, face even more barriers to getting on in school. With an overstretched educational system and EHCP delays, for children battling SEND the barriers are continuing to stack up.

We need to rethink how we engage boys—not through blame or stereotyping, but through recognising diversity of needs and learning styles. This means early intervention with more speech and language support in the early years, and the new Best Start family hubs programme could be a real game changer in places such as Suffolk Coastal by providing the right level of support. We also need to have a truly broad and balanced curriculum, and parity of esteem for arts and sports with vocational learning is at the heart of that. We need to make sure that school is genuinely a place for children, and boys specifically, to thrive, not feel as though they are a round peg being forced into a square hole.

In closing, if we are serious about improving boys' attainment, we need a system that supports their potential and is built around them. We need to back schools, families and communities with the resources they need to close that gap. This is not just for boys, but for society as a whole.

3.8 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing today's debate. As others have done, I start by saying that the numbers are stark. By almost every measure, boys are falling behind. By the end of primary school, just 57% of boys meet the expected standard in English and maths, compared with 64% of girls. For a white, working-class boy from a low-income household, that picture is even bleaker. Just 33% of those eligible for free school meals meet that same benchmark at GCSE.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his speech. The educational attainment of boys is a serious concern, and I agree with him that it is principally a class issue. Working-class boys are further behind in their GCSEs and face higher NEET rates and exclusion rates, with a lower rate of those going on to HE. Does my hon.

[Luke Myer]

Friend agree that to prevent crime and antisocial behaviour and to deal with wider economic issues, we need to see early intervention and targeted support for working-class boys?

Josh Newbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come on to many of the issues that he refers to. He represents a community with a demographic that is similar in many ways to my own, so I very much welcome his efforts in this space.

In Staffordshire, as across the country, boys are around 50% more likely to be excluded than girls, and twice as likely to be permanently excluded. We have to work out why that is happening, and why so many of our boys and young men feel out of place in the classroom and in school, and subsequently rebel against the system.

As the first in my family to attend university, I know that our education system, particularly after the incredibly damaging reforms of a certain former Education Secretary, all too often feels like it is one size fits all. That is a particular barrier to opportunity for white, working-class boys, who often do not see themselves reflected in school. Cannock Chase sadly falls significantly behind the national average, with just 23% of over-16s receiving a higher education qualification, compared with 34% nationally. In '22-23, 34% of men from Staffordshire had started in higher education by the age of 19, compared with 49% of women.

As a man raised to be a proud feminist, the fact that the rate and numbers of women going to university have increased hugely since first overtaking those of men in the mid-'90s should absolutely be welcomed. It should not be seen, in any way, as something that is taking away from men, as it is sometimes falsely characterised. In recognising that, however, we must not ignore the fact that the rate and numbers of men going on to higher education have risen much more slowly. Even more stark is the fact that 22% of young people in Cannock Chase leave school with no qualifications at all, and only 57% of white boys from Staffordshire met the expected standard in English reading and writing and maths last year.

For young boys, those are not just statistics; they are social problems. We must also recognise the danger of ignoring a growing crisis among boys—when they feel alienated from school and opportunity, others step in to fill that gap. Most worryingly, that includes the rise of toxic figures on social media who spread misogyny. Young boys are being fed a version of masculinity built not on resilience, education and kindness, but on dominance, grievance and hatred. As has been said, if we shame men as a whole, or characterise all of them as privileged, we not only fail to address this issue but push many boys towards those malign influences and risk losing a generation to that toxicity.

I welcome the fact that the Government are working to address the root causes of violence against women and girls in schools, teaching pupils about healthy relationships and consent. We need to draw boys into education by showing them that it matters, and that they matter. We need to show them that they will play a role in our society, and that learning is not just for the academically gifted and the privileged. We must invest in mentoring, mental health and early intervention. We must back apprenticeships, technical pathways and,

as a society, value them as much as we do degrees. We must understand why so many men are walking away from education and training. Is it a lack of support or financial pressures? Whatever the cause, it deserves real scrutiny from this House and real solutions.

We must also explore reforming assessment methods, because not every young person thrives in a system built around high-stakes exams. Coursework, modular learning and vocational achievements must be valued equally, as they were when I was at school. Above all, as we have done today, we must talk about this openly, honestly and with urgency. We have to inspire boys to stay and thrive in education, and—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland so eloquently put it—not shame them or make out that they have privilege when they have anything but. Instead, we must guide them towards a future defined not by anger or exclusion but by achievement and respect.

3.13 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing this important debate, and I pay credit to the work done by the young men in his office.

For too many years we have been sleepwalking into a crisis of boys disengaging, and we have finally had the wake-up calls that we desperately needed to show us that this House must do better. From the TV show “Adolescence” to Gareth Southgate’s lecture on the lack of male role models and the Centre for Social Justice’s report on “Lost Boys”, with its shocking revelation that two thirds of those who are unemployed are young men, it is clear that everyone else can see this problem. Now it is time for us to tackle it.

I stood as an MP because I truly believed that this was the party that would break down the barriers to opportunity, and it could not be clearer that that means tackling the issue of boys’ disengagement from education. With only a third of boys on free school meals achieving grade 4 in both English and maths, it is time to ask why and to ask what this Government should be doing to break the glass ceiling for working-class boys across the nation.

I have championed the role of sport many times before in this place and I will do it again today, because we have mountains of data that show that access to sport does matter. For boys who struggle to get through the school day, PE is often the only thing that keeps them showing up in the morning; for boys who are on the edge of exclusion, we have seen that sport-led interventions can bring them back from the edge and improve their engagement with school; and for boys looking for community and a sense of belonging, we know that, too often, they find that online in isolated communities or in groups committing acts of antisocial behaviour. The truth is that we are seeing the result of the Conservative party’s decision to spend years starving neighbourhoods of funding for community sports clubs.

A local teacher from Nicholas Chamberlaine school in Bedworth in my constituency told me that most children access physical activity only in schools. She told me that this is

“because the area is less privileged and so access to sports clubs, safe outdoor spaces and even basic fitness opportunities outside school is limited.”

That must change. The evidence is clear: sport-led interventions work. They work when police forces implement them, they work when schools use them and they work when local councils implement them. My ask today is clear: fund sport-led interventions and fund them properly, and give young people the sense of community and access to sport that they are crying out for.

Before I finish, I want to take a moment to praise the many wonderful talented and kind young men and boys I have met, including: one of my volunteers, who is one of the most dedicated and hard-working people I know; the young men I have met in my constituency who are coaches for their local clubs or who help out by volunteering and refereeing at local games; and the young men who have joined my team for work experience.

3.16 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing this incredibly important debate. We are here to talk about boys in education—their engagement, their outcomes, and their future. The truth is that too many boys are falling behind. In Staffordshire, just 36.3% of boys achieved a grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE last year. That is 1 percentage point down from the year before. Behind every percentage point is a lad whose life chances are narrowing. They could be our future engineers, our carers, our bricklayers, our paramedics or our entrepreneurs—full of potential but maybe starting to think that school just is not for them. That should worry us all.

What is clear is that it is not just about what happens in secondary school; the signs are there so much earlier. We know that boys are far less likely than girls to finish reception with a good level of development. That early gap often sets the tone for the years ahead. This is about far more than teaching; it is about whether families can get into a nursery, whether health services are in place and whether parents feel supported in the early years. We cannot fix educational inequality without looking at the bigger picture. That includes children's mental health, family support and, vitally, investment in our towns and villages. When a place is left behind, the young people who live there are left behind too, and we know from the data that it is particularly boys who are being left behind.

I am calling on the Government today to continue being bold: to invest in the wraparound support that helps children to thrive, to expand mental health support in schools and to strengthen the ties between schools, families and local services, because when those links are strong, children do better. We know that intervention is found not only in education, but in community. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) spoke of the value of sport, which is incredibly important in creating opportunities.

The challenges of how to be a man in 21st-century Britain are brilliantly portrayed in the BAFTA-winning series “Big Boys”, where young men grapple not only with the pressures of being working class at university, but with the simple yet profound question of how to be both kind and “masculine”. My hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), who is my good friend, could not be here today, but she has been doing vital work championing the 93% Club, which supports working-class university students and graduates. I am also a proud member of that club. She often references the

character of Danny in “Big Boys” as an example and an inspiration. It is a powerful reminder that policy must meet young people where they are and lift them to where they deserve to be.

If we want a fairer, more productive Britain, we cannot keep writing off young working-class boys who are struggling to find their place in education. We owe them better, and I know that the teachers, schools and wider community in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages are ready to deliver when we give them the tools to do so.

3.19 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Today I will speak about how boys from more deprived backgrounds have fewer academic and non-academic skills, and how it is harming their ability to get decent jobs in the post-industrial era. This topic was the subject of my second PhD paper, and although I cannot force Members to read it, I can certainly force them all to listen today.

The puzzle that my paper addressed was why non-graduate men are finding it so hard to get jobs in the post-industrial economy. The employment rate for non-graduate men has fallen from about 90% in the 1970s to about 75% in 2020. The manufacturing jobs that they used to do have disappeared, but if employment rates have risen as they have, why can they not get jobs in the service sector? The answer—or at least part of the answer—is in the earliest years of young boys' lives. By the age of five, the least-skilled boys have lower academic and non-academic skills than the least-skilled girls. That makes it hard for them to attain in school and to develop the perseverance and social skills that they need. The physical skills that were rewarded in the post-industrial economy lost out in the move to the service economy.

How do we fix this and ensure that young boys can get the jobs that they need in our economy? As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) has pointed to, it is about the earliest years and even before birth. It is first about making their parents' lives affordable. Less time for parents worrying about bills means more quality time with their kids, and more money in the pockets of parents means more psychological and material resources to invest in their children. Secondly, investing in high-quality early years education is probably the highest returning investment that any Government can make. Thirdly, we have to create good jobs for graduates and non-graduates to move into, for both men and women. Mass production manufacturing is not coming back, but we in government can create good non-graduate jobs in construction, healthcare and education. We must invest in our physical and social infrastructure to create the good jobs we need, where we need them.

Every person should be able to live a decent life, but as things stand, too many people cannot. There are many young men whose fathers left school and got decent jobs at the local factory, but those young men cannot do the same today. That disappointment turns to depression, anger and division. Rather than coming together, we are falling apart. Strength is found in each of us doing well—each of us doing so with a common purpose and connection. It is for us in this place, on this side, to build that nation.

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

3.22 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Can I start by warmly congratulating the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing this incredibly important debate and on his powerful and insightful opening speech? It behoves all of us to spend more time on this topic, so I am grateful that he has made me look into it more than I had previously. It goes without saying that our education system should enable every child to flourish, no matter their gender, needs or background, but as we have heard all too clearly already, for too long cohorts of boys have failed to thrive in our education system in the way that they should, with a widening attainment gap between boys and girls, particularly among white working-class boys.

We have heard the statistics already, and I note that many of them come from the excellent report by the Centre for Social Justice, but they bear repetition because they are so shocking. Where 75% of girls are school-ready, only 60% of boys are. In GCSE exams boys achieve on average half a grade lower than girls across every subject, and at A-level girls outperform boys by an average of over a grade and a half across their best three subjects. Too many boys are quite clearly failing to reach their potential at school, and this is having severe and long-lasting consequences for our society and the economy.

Since the pandemic alone, the number of young men aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training has increased by a staggering 40%. According to the Higher Education Policy Institute, men with no qualifications are nearly twice as likely as women with no qualifications to be unemployed, and if they are employed, they are more likely to work in hazardous, menial or stagnant roles. That makes men less likely to look after their mental and physical health, leading to higher rates of substance abuse, smoking and alcohol consumption, lower life expectancy, and much higher rates of imprisonment and death by suicide.

It is hardly surprising that so many boys feel hopeless. Some 41% of teenagers report that they have been taught that young men are a problem for society. Tim Page, service co-ordinator at Catch22, said:

“There is no trust or hope in the future, a young man from a disadvantaged background has no clear path towards making a future for themselves, the only options for hundreds of boys and young men I have worked with are crime or benefits.”

I think that should make us all stop and reflect.

Education is obviously vital in tackling this tragic and disturbing trend, not just to enable pupils to achieve good grades and a decent salary, but to inspire our children so that they grow up to do good and important things as part of a thriving community and society. I agree with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland; I think it probably is time for a gender-specific strategy looking at boys in particular, but as the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), pointed out, some of the wider systemic challenges facing our education system have a particular impact on boys. As the Government are considering a number of these issues, I think it would be worth looking at them through a gender-specific lens.

We need good teachers to stay in our boys' lives and to guide and encourage them, whether on career options for the future or just as good role models, yet over the

past 12 years more than 40,000 state school teachers left within one year of qualifying, and just 24% of the overall teaching workforce are male and 30% of primary schools have no male teacher at all. I was thinking about this last night, actually. Both my children are at primary school. One of them will leave in the next few weeks, and by far and away the teacher that she has talked about the most in her seven years there has been a male teacher. He has only been teaching her for a day a week in year 6, but all the kids love him and look up to him. I have never heard them speak about any other teacher in such a way. It is largely a female-dominated school, and it is wonderful to see such affection for a male teacher and such a role model for all the children, both girls and boys.

Many attribute the shortage of teachers—both male and female—to the conditions that teachers face and a lack of career progression. I believe that the presence of more male teachers would normalise learning as a suitable activity for men and boys and may especially help children who do not have positive male role models at home. However, as the Minister knows, schools are facing the impossible task of trying to find more money in their already squeezed budgets to cover underfunded national insurance increases and teacher pay rises. While the Government have promised to recruit 6,500 more teachers, I have yet to see how they will be able to achieve that.

Some of the hopelessness that many boys are experiencing also stems from inadequate mental health support. We know that boys are twice as likely as girls to be excluded from school. Sadly, exclusion and criminal activity are too often intimately related. Those who are excluded multiple times from school are more likely to have a younger age of first conviction.

Mental health researchers have noted that boys in emotional mental distress tend to use coping strategies that externalise into violence and destruction, while girls are more likely to internalise into self-harm and depression. We Liberal Democrats have long called for a dedicated qualified mental health practitioner to be placed in every primary and secondary school to help tackle mental health and behavioural concerns early. While I am glad that the Government are continuing to roll out mental health support teams in schools, I fear that those teams are really overstretched, because they are often shared between several primary and secondary schools, with perhaps half a day or a day a week of mental health practitioner time in each, meaning that children do not have consistent access five days a week to a trusted person to support them with their mental health. I hope the Minister will say something about how the roll-out can be sped up and those teams grown so that there is more coverage for each of our schools.

Of course, there is a big overlap between mental health provision and special educational needs and disability provision. Boys make up over 60% of those receiving special educational needs support and over 70% of those on education, health and care plans. Those receiving SEND support are more than twice as likely to be excluded as the average boy, and more than five times as likely to be excluded as the average girl. Too many children are being forced out of school due to a failure to provide the required support for them to learn.

I have heard time and again from parents and kinship carers who feel that they have been let down by the SEND system in this country and that they are having to try to educate their children with no support. That has very much driven up the number of children being home-schooled, so I hope the Minister will use this opportunity to assure parents and carers of children with SEND across the country that their rights will not be rolled back when the Government look to reform our broken SEND system. Families must be at the heart of these changes, so that all children can access the support they deserve. I urge the Minister to look at the five principles for SEND reform that the Liberal Democrats published yesterday.

Finally, seriously tackling the feeling of hopelessness among young boys means looking at the online world. We have seen from research that algorithms are feeding increasingly violent and misogynistic content towards boys. With 60% of children aged eight to 10 having a social media account, it is wrong that companies can profit from addictive and harmful algorithms. We need to start taking a health approach to online safety, with tighter regulation of the tech giants and by empowering and educating young people and the adults who care for them about the online world. Crucially, we need to provide alternative spaces and activities for young people, so that they are not always glued to a screen when they have spare time.

The Liberal Democrats want the digital age of consent raised, to end addictive algorithms and to stop companies trading on our children's attention. I very much hope that the Government will not kowtow to Donald Trump and remove the digital services tax, but instead treble it, so that that money can be invested in improving our children's wellbeing and mental health. I once again thank the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland for securing this important debate, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

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

3.31 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): In Leicestershire, where I am from, it is the last week of term, so as we come to the end of the school year—my children's primary school has only just broken up—I want to thank all the teachers and other staff in our schools who have worked so hard this year, for both our boys and our girls. We as MPs go in and teach for an hour or something like that and realise how hard it is, so we pay tribute to all of them.

I also want to say thank you to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), who led us off with an absolutely brilliant speech—it really was a genuinely brilliant speech. I saw my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who is no longer in his place, go across the Chamber to congratulate him, so I am sure the Whips will have him on defection watch now. Indeed, everyone has given brilliant speeches, despite the three-minute time limit. When the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) said that he would give us his entire second PhD in two minutes and 15 seconds, I was a bit nervous for him, but he made a good fist of it, so well done everybody.

This is a very timely debate. People have already talked about the recent reports from the Centre for Social Justice, and there has also been some great work by the Higher Education Policy Institute. It is also a very important debate, and one in which we must not be insular. There is a global trend; in fact, the OECD says that 56% of university entrants across the entire developed world are now women, which is a huge change right across the industrialised economies. In fact, women are the majority of entrants to university in every single OECD country now, which would have been mind-blowing in the 1970s. Those trends can be seen here in England and Scotland, and across the entire UK.

A few Members have talked about the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, income, and so on and so forth. Those intersections are interesting, and they show us powerfully how important culture is. For example, among white boys who were not on free school meals, 38% went to university. Among Indian girls who were on free school meals, 68% went. That is totally against the trend of income, and it shows the power of culture. We can see the big differences between girls and boys at every level of the income distribution.

The culture for boys when it comes to education, particularly working-class boys, is pretty disastrous. I remember exactly what it was like—I was in it at school—and it has many origins, including perhaps the toxic Victorian cult of effortless brilliance. Some people, such as Mike Emmerich in Manchester, blame it on our early industrialisation, and there is still a lingering bad idea that a man's job has to involve physical effort but not using the brain. It is deeply embedded in our culture. Indeed, I sometimes think we need to bribe J. K. Rowling to rewrite "Harry Potter" with Ron as the diligent swot and Hermione as the loyal pal. Of course, it is not J. K. Rowling's fault—she is a great hero. That unhelpful framing of boys as undiligent goofballs is in a billion aspects of our culture, from ads to films to books, and it is not at all helpful.

There are two things Members have often said in these debates over the eight years I have been here. The willingness to engage in this debate has massively increased over that time. Some people say that the performance of boys in the education system is pretty inseparable from the performance of the system as a whole given that they make up half of all people. That is broadly right, and a rising tide lifts all boats. On the other hand, there are good cases for doing things specifically to try and improve the attainment of boys in education—both those things are simultaneously true.

First, we can see the difference that structural reforms make if we compare different bits of the UK. I will not relitigate old arguments, but for lots of different reasons, the Labour Government in Wales decided not to do the structural reforms that happened in England over the Blair period and our period in government. They did not do academies, accountability measures or the knowledge-intensive curriculum. The results were startling. A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies called, "Major challenges for education in Wales" points out that—amazingly—disadvantaged children in England are now doing better on PISA than average children in Wales. There is a huge gap.

From 2009 to 2022, England went from 21st to seventh in the PISA league table on maths, while Wales went from 29th to 27th. On science, England went from

[Neil O'Brien]

11th to ninth, while Wales went down from 21st to 29th. There is a big looming gap between England and Wales. What does that mean for girls and boys? On PISA, for both England and Wales, we see that boys do better than girls on maths and science, but boys do worse than girls on reading. That gap between England and Wales is now so big that on reading, boys in England do better than girls in Wales, and on maths and science, girls in England do better than boys in Wales, so the absolute level matters. We must remember that while we have talked a lot in the debate about relativities, ultimately, it is the absolute performance that we really care about. We want to raise both levels, particularly given that we are in a global economy.

Secondly, I turn to what we will do specifically to try to improve the performance of boys, and I will give a few relevant examples. It has already been mentioned that reading for pleasure is down most sharply among boys. That is one reason why we will continue to press for action not just to get phones out of our schools, but more widely, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) said, to tackle the public health and educational problems being caused by the wider shift to a smartphone-based childhood, including on issues such as the age of consent for social media. I encourage Ministers to fight the good fight on all that stuff.

We know that boys are much more likely to end up in trouble or in fights at school. I remember that was the worst single aspect of when I was at secondary school. A few Members have mentioned exclusions. I am always a bit wary of that—that is the symptom rather than the cause. Getting behaviour and discipline right is crucial for boys, who are often the victims of violence and fights. I will not relitigate all this stuff, but we had a schools Bill that did not have anything to say on discipline. The Government rejected our amendments to add provisions on behaviour. They have abolished the behaviour hubs, which were working. It went from one third of the schools that went through the hubs being rated good or outstanding to two thirds of those schools, yet the hubs have been axed.

On forthcoming policy, as the hon. Member welcomed, boys have 71% of all EHCPs. We know the Government have said they are looking at ending EHCPs outside of special schools—that is, about 60% of EHCPs or over 300,000 children. We are not at all against reform of special needs provision. The Health Minister has said that the Government want to see a smaller proportion of pupils in special schools, too.

Given these issues are now being debated in the public domain, as Ministers think about reform, they will need to move fast—as I am sure they will want to—to answer the big questions about the ideas they have put out that in some cases are causing parents worry. For example, how will the parents of these boys—and they are mainly boys—know that their child will get what they need if they do not have an EHCP? Is there not a tension between wanting fewer pupils in special schools and ending EHCPs outside them? What did the Minister mean when she said that effective support will not be removed? What does “effective” mean? These are all questions that I am sure the Minister is thinking about. They are crucial for boys; they are crucial for everyone, to be honest. I totally understand

why Ministers are looking at this. According to the IFS, we increased funding by nearly 60%, or £4 billion in real terms, between 2015-16 and 2024-25—that is a fast rate of increase. But of course, it is vital that we get the right answers and certainty for parents as soon as possible.

I will end with a couple of questions to the Minister. In opposition, the Prime Minister said that he wanted to improve employability—we have talked about young men who are NEETS—and said,

“We will reinstate two weeks of compulsory work experience”.

How many schools are delivering that now? What is the Government's target to be delivered and by when? When will schools be seeing the £85 million that was promised in the Labour manifesto to fund that? Likewise, in opposition last year, the Government announced plans to help schools develop young male mentors and to teach pupils how to question the material they see on social media, particularly from people such as Andrew Tate. This is a rare example of total agreement between both sides of the House. We completely agree that we need to push back against terrible role models for boys—they are total, total, total losers teaching boys totally terrible ideas. We hope there will be an opportunity to prosecute some of those people, too. What has happened to the pledge to get mentors in place?

Let me pick up on something that the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), said in her excellent speech. She talked about the gender pay gap. I think this is interesting and it needs careful analysis. For 18 to 29-year-olds, the gender pay gap now does not exist. It is actually negative for the youngest of that group and it appears to get bigger with age, but it is actually not a gender pay gap per se—it is a motherhood pay gap. I commend the work of Ruxandra Teslo. I am sure the Chair of the Select Committee is very familiar with it. She shows that the later women delay having children, the higher their income and, unfortunately, the fewer children they get to have. I think I am in agreement with Department for Education Ministers in thinking that that is unacceptable and must be changed.

On that rare note of terrifying consensus, let me draw my remarks to a close by once again congratulating the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, who is quite right to bring this debate to the House. He gave an excellent speech. I am struck by the way the debates on this issue have changed even in the time I have been here. It is more clearly identified as a problem and by synthesising the arguments in such an excellent way today, he has helped to propel the argument forward.

3.40 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing this very thoughtful and important debate. He made a powerful opening speech. I add my welcome to Cian and Alex, who are on work experience here in Parliament, supporting my hon. Friend. He touches on a really pressing and important issue. We know that on average boys have lower attainment than girls. As a Government, we are determined to understand and address the drivers behind that.

All children should have the opportunity to achieve and thrive in their education, no matter who they are or where they are from. That is the driving mission of our

opportunity mission. We are determined to break the unfair link between background and success. We are determined to drive educational excellence across the country for every child and young person. To do that, many of the issues that have been highlighted need to be addressed.

The current school system has many strengths but, as set out starkly by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), we know it is not working well enough for all children. Too many are falling behind and face barriers which hold them back from the opportunities and life chances they deserve. As in previous years, girls continue to do better than boys across all headline measures. Although the gap has narrowed compared with 2018-19, there is clearly still more to do. The Department is committed to addressing that challenge.

The schools White Paper, which will be published in the autumn, will set out our vision for a school system that drives educational excellence for every child. We are working alongside Sir Hamid Patel and Estelle Morris, who are gathering views from thousands of children, parents, teachers and leaders across the year to build a solid evidence base on the barriers to attainment for white working-class children, and to look at what solutions there are to drive up standards for them. The inquiry is looking to get under the bonnet of what factors are driving underperformance, what best practice can support them and what policies can best be applied to address the challenge. That work will contribute to the regional improvement in standards and excellence teams—the RISE teams—and to our focus, as a Department, on raising attainment across the board.

High and rising standards are the key to strengthening outcomes and closing attainment gaps, helping every child and young person to achieve and thrive. We want our reforms to the school system delivered through excellent teaching and leadership, a high-quality curriculum, strong accountability, and an inclusive system which removes the barriers to learning that are holding far too many children back.

I mention the excellent teaching we need, because the quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor to improving outcomes for children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why we are committed to recruiting an additional 6,500 new expert teachers in secondary schools, special schools and further education colleges. We have made strong initial progress to deliver the key pledge, and our investment is starting to deliver. Up to 2024-25, the workforce has grown by 2,346 full-time equivalents in secondary and special schools. Those are the schools that need these teachers the most.

I agree that it is important that the teaching profession reflects the communities that it serves, and that children see themselves reflected in the role models around them. Male teachers and educators can clearly play an important role in teaching, guiding and leading the boys in our classrooms. However, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), and my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) rightly said, men are under-represented across the teaching workforce—over three quarters are female. Although that is broadly in line with international trends and has been stable in

England for some time, we need to do better. We want to see representation increase across all phases, and we are working to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in our classrooms. We know that our recruitment campaigns are reaching diverse audiences, and they widely feature male teachers.

I acknowledge the challenges that were so eloquently set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland. I agree that every child and young person should have the opportunity to achieve and thrive in education, regardless of their background. That is why we have also commissioned an independent panel of experts to review the existing national curriculum and assessment system. We want to ensure an excellent foundation in the core subjects of reading, writing and maths, and a rich, broad and inclusive curriculum that readies young people for life and work. We want a curriculum that reflects our whole society, ensuring that children feel inspired and engaged in it. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) mentioned the value of time and support for young people to take part in sport. I very much agree.

The curriculum and assessment review is considering specifically how to remove the existing blocks to progress to ensure good outcomes for children and young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds or who are otherwise vulnerable. The review published its interim findings earlier this year. It highlighted the gap in attainment and committed to addressing the challenges and barriers holding children back from the opportunities and life chances that they deserve. We look forward to receiving the final recommendations in the autumn.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) and for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) set out powerfully, school disengagement and exclusion are incredibly damaging and a significant concern. Every child deserves to learn in a safe and calm classroom, and we will always help our hard-working teachers to make that happen. Schools should take proportionate and measured steps to create calm and supportive classrooms. That is how to break down the barriers to opportunity and improve the life chances for all pupils.

However, we know that poor behaviour can be rooted in much wider issues. The Government are developing an ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty, led by a taskforce co-chaired by the Education Secretary, so that we can break down the barriers to opportunity. All schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy with effective strategies to encourage good behaviour. School leaders must develop and implement a policy that has the support of the school and aligns with its culture, but I acknowledge the challenges that colleagues have outlined.

Education has a crucial role to play in helping children and young people to develop empathy, boundaries and respect for difference. Through compulsory relationships education, all pupils should learn how to form positive and respectful relationships. We are reviewing the relationships, sex and health education guidance to ensure that it empowers schools to tackle harmful behaviour, starting in the earliest years of primary school. It will be clear that teachers must facilitate conversations with students on what positive masculinity and femininity mean in today's world, and on developing positive role models to build students' self-esteem and sense of purpose.

[Catherine McKinnell]

We will publish the revised RSHE guidance, which will include the importance of building communication skills, expressing and understanding boundaries, handling disappointment and paying attention to the needs and preferences of others. It will explore communication and ethics within relationships and support young people to think about what healthy relationships involve, beyond consent, including kindness, attention and care. It will consider the real-life complexities of relationships, including the significance of power, vulnerability and managing difficult emotions that can relate to relationships, such as disappointment and anger, and the influence of online misogynistic content and the impact of pornography on sexual behaviour, including what some people perceive as normal. All those issues will be addressed, and we want to empower schools to tackle these very important issues with young people.

Close to 1 million 16 to 24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training. That number is too high, and the consequences are serious. My hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) highlighted the cost of this not only to the individuals themselves, but to our society. Alongside the development of the youth guarantee, we are requiring local authorities to ensure that every young person receives a suitable offer of a place in post-16 education or training.

We need to address the underlying risk factors for becoming NEET, and that includes supporting young people's mental health, with access to specialist mental health professionals in every school and mental health support teams in every college. Young people need effective transitions as well between school, further education and employment to prevent those moments of disengagement. We will continue to work to ensure that young people can unlock the opportunities that we know will set them up for life.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland again for raising these really important matters of concern, and I thank all those who have contributed to this thoughtful debate. I readily acknowledge that there are a number of challenges to boys' attainment and engagement. There is much more we can do, and that is why the Government are focused on taking action to ensure that every child and young person believes that success belongs to them.

3.51 pm

Sam Rushworth: I will keep this brief, because I am conscious that the next debate is also of great importance. I thank everybody who has attended and contributed to the debate; they were excellent contributions. I am grateful for the cross-party support on this issue. I look forward to reading the Government's White Paper on school standards, to be published in the autumn, and engaging with them on that. I will write to the Minister on how we can do more to embed social and emotional learning in early years settings.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the attainment and engagement of boys in education.

Children's Health

3.51 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered children's health.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this incredibly important debate. This Government's ambition is to raise the healthiest generation of children ever. There is so much about improving child health in the 10-year plan, "Fit for the Future". I am genuinely quite excited about the 10-year plan—maybe I am sad, but that is the sort of thing that excites me. I have been a GP for 30 years, and I have a special interest in child health and child mental health. I will talk briefly about prevention, mental health and then paediatric services.

First, obesity is a massive problem in young people. At the age of five, 10% of children are obese. By the age of 11, 22% are obese—and that does not count the children who are overweight. This starts in pregnancy. We must ensure that pregnant women have really healthy diets, because that reduces obesity. When a baby is born, parents need to be aware that follow-on milks and "hungry baby" milks are basically just milk packed full of sugar. That will not do the child any good. If they are hungry, they need to change their diet and possibly go on to solids. Baby snacks often look healthy—they might have a nice, healthy carrot on them—but when we look at what is in them, they are packed full of sugar as well. Parents need to have a clear idea of what is healthy, so that they can choose the healthiest foods for their children.

The Government are going to bring in a watershed for junk food advertising—it was going to be in October, but it is now promised for January 2026. That is incredibly important, because young people are very sensitive to advertising. A recent report in *The BMJ* found more than 90 different sponsorship deals in football and six other sports with foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. We need to look at that issue, because young people look up to sports stars and are very influenceable. They have to advertise healthy foods, because otherwise we will continue to have an obesity epidemic.

In the 10-year plan I was delighted to see measures in the national planning policy framework about fast-food outlets near schools. We must stop those. They are cynically placed close to schools, and they are particularly prevalent in more deprived areas. A couple of other things that I am delighted about include free school meals for children from households in receipt of universal credit. Free school meals have an obvious relationship to obesity and tend to bring it down. I am also delighted that in the autumn we will look at school food standards, and hopefully reduce the amount of processed meat that seems to be in a lot of school foods. The other part of the 10-year plan that excites me is the mandatory health food sales with supermarkets. That has been evidenced to reduce obesity, so I am delighted about that. Let me move on quickly to physical exercise—I am keen for other Members to get the opportunity to talk—because 50% of children are not sufficiently active, and two-thirds cannot swim 25 metres.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the previous Government's lack of investment in vital leisure facilities,

such as the swimming pool in Atherstone in my constituency, which is overdue for renovation, is causing many of these problems? The lack of PE in schools and the lack of safe places for children to play, be active and get involved in sport is causing some of the obesity problems.

Dr Opher: I totally agree—indeed, my hon. Friend pre-empted some of my remarks.

Another proposal in the 10-year plan involves the investment, through Sports England, of £250 million into such opportunities for children. The Starlight Children's Foundation promotes play and exercise, and I am a particular fan of adventure playgrounds in urban areas, which allow children to cut loose, particularly after school, expend energy, and have fun in a safe setting.

I am also working with colleagues on access to nature. It is incredibly important that every child has access to nature, so that they can explore nature and have that type of exercise. I also stress that 50% of children have active travel—bike or walking—to get themselves to school. Let us increase that; let us try to get more children cycling and walking to school, as that will increase their fitness.

Dental care is also in the 10-year plan. I am delighted to see that supervised brushing is already there, and also that fluoride varnish will be applied by people to prevent dental caries from occurring. I will give a quick shout-out on asthma prevention, which is key and all about air quality. I know some young people who, since the ultra low emission zone scheme was introduced, have stopped using their inhalers because pollution has gone down. That is something we must emphasise.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On air quality, will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Stop the Stink campaigners in Newcastle-under-Lyme, who fought so hard to clean the air around schools such as St Mary's primary school on Silverdale Road? Their work helped to make the lungs of our young people that bit healthier.

Dr Opher: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right: clean air is one way to address our five most preventable health risks, and we must do more on that.

Adam Jogee: Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Government to adopt World Health Organisation levels for particulate matter 2.5?

Dr Opher: I am afraid that is not my special area, but it sounds like a good idea and I thank my hon. Friend. Because we cannot see clean air, we do not realise what it is doing, but people genuinely need their inhalers less, and particularly for young people with asthma that is incredibly important.

I want to talk quickly about early years support. In Gloucestershire, an organisation called Home-Start involves volunteers going into the homes of women who have just given birth to support them. Interestingly, women who have had that support often go on to be volunteers. It is a fantastic organisation. This week I was delighted that the successor to Sure Start, Best Start family hubs, is coming back. Sure Start was one of the most glorious things that the Blair Government did, and it affected the health of young people enormously. I am pleased

that childcare is getting much more funding. Furthermore, as set out in the 10-year plan, Healthy Start will be restarted in 2026-27, providing money to pregnant women and children aged one to four whose families are in financial difficulty, helping those who are less well off.

Mental healthcare is in a bit of a crisis. Some 25% of young people have mental health issues. We spend only 10% of NHS funds on mental health, but it contributes to over 20% of morbidity. About a million people are on the child and adolescent mental health service waiting list at the moment, and I know that Ministers are doing all that they can to bring that down. To prevent poor mental health, we need to look at exercise, as I have mentioned, and at music in schools, which is proven to reduce rates of mental ill health. I am backing the National Education Union campaign to get rid of SATs, which cause enormous tension and stress in young people.

On treatment, I am delighted that we will have mental health support teams in every school—I understand that 60% will be in place by next April, and 100% by the end of this Parliament. We will have 8,500 more mental health workers and a whole-school approach. I particularly endorse the mental health first aid training that has happened in some Stroud schools, and I have also been looking at the Young Futures hubs.

With the massive CAMHS waiting list—in my area, people sometimes have to wait for two years—and the sudden increase in neurodiversity, we need to look at schemes that use creative and social prescriptions to deal with those children while they are on the waiting list. Given the right support, I reckon a lot of them will not need specialist psychiatric assessment. I am chair of the beyond pills all-party parliamentary group. Are hon. Members aware that one in eight 12 to 17-year-olds have been put on a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor antidepressant? That is scandalous.

This year, I hosted a roundtable at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. Children are generally waiting longer than adults for care, which we must turn around. As I said, there are often long waiting lists for mental healthcare. Sadly, Harry, the son of my constituent, Louise Turner, had a sarcoma and died at the end of last year. She reports that the nursing staff and doctors were fantastic, but there was a lack of facilities, such that sometimes they would turn up for chemotherapy but there was no bed for Harry, so they had to go away and come back the next day. Going forward, we must ensure that that does not happen.

What is the solution? We need to get paediatric care out of the hospital and into the community. We need to get hot paediatrics—feverish kids—seen in the community, potentially by paediatricians or well-trained GPs. Furthermore, during GP training, which I have carried out for about 25 years, it is essential that every single doctor who becomes a GP has time in a paediatric assessment unit. The main feedback from the roundtable at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health was that we must involve children in designing paediatric services, otherwise they will not work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. To ensure everyone gets to contribute, we will have to have a three-minute speaking limit. I call Sarah Hall.

4.3 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): If we want to raise a generation of healthy, thriving children, we must stop treating children's health as an afterthought. This week, I launched a new survey asking constituents to feed into my work, and I thank everyone who has responded. The responses have helped to shape my contribution to this debate today, along with my work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on inclusion and nurture in education.

The focus of the survey was children, their education and wellbeing. I heard from parents, carers and guardians about their child's experiences in schools and in accessing health services; about their child's mental health, and the anxiety and stress caused by an outdated education system; and about barriers to accessing education because of their child's neurodiversity or disabilities. Families tell me that there are long waiting lists for CAMHS, and gaps in speech and language therapy and school-based special educational needs co-ordinator support. They tell me about narrow criteria that are limiting health and care support, and how those criteria do not reflect their child's unique needs, resulting in families feeling lost in the system.

The NHS was founded on the promise that care would be there when we need it, no matter our income or postcode, but for too many children and families, that promise is fraying. Infant mortality remains stubbornly high. Conditions such as asthma, obesity and dental decay are sending more children into hospital, and mental health needs are rising, with longer waiting lists for specialist services. Sadly, health inequalities remain stubbornly persistent and are undeniably linked to the unacceptable levels of child poverty and deprivation.

Children's health outcomes have been allowed to decline for too long. We know that the children's health workforce is working incredibly hard, but over the last 14 years it has been underfunded and undervalued. Children and young people are waiting significantly longer than adults for access to health services, with 21.5% waiting for more than 52 weeks, compared with 1.3% of adults. Those numbers represent a gap in provision. In my own integrated health board area of Cheshire and Merseyside, more than 11,000 children are waiting for the care they need. Some 44% of children are waiting between 18 and 52 weeks, and 25% of children have been waiting more than 52 weeks for treatment.

The Royal College has given Ministers a road map, including shifting care closer to home to transform children's community services, introducing a dedicated waiting times target for children's services and establishing a children's health investment standard. However, we cannot talk about children's health in isolation from poverty. We know that poverty increases the risk of poor mental and physical health, missed developmental milestones and poorer outcomes in school. Without real investment in family incomes, housing and food security, we are simply papering over the cracks.

If we are serious about giving every child a fair start, tackling poverty must be at the front and centre. That is why I was pleased to hear that Warrington will benefit from the Government's new plans to fund the new family hub model in our town. It is one thing to fund services, but it is another to ensure that they truly reach and uplift the children who need them the most.

4.6 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for bringing such an important debate. I feel strongly about this matter, having trained as a dietician, and I understand the implications that a poor diet in early life can have for a child's future. From health outcomes to educational outcomes, poor nutrition has a serious, detrimental and long-term effect. The hon. Member mentioned many other health conditions, but I will talk just about diet.

We often assume that parents understand what constitutes a healthy diet for their children, but sadly that assumption is often false. There are so many competing messages in this space. According to the British Nutrition Foundation, nearly one third of parents say that they are uncertain about how much their child should eat. More than a third admit that they regularly make their child finish everything on their plate, regardless of hunger or nutritional need. These are not bad parents; they are well-meaning families trying their best in an environment that fails to equip them with the knowledge they need and that often makes healthy choices less accessible.

Even when parents have some nutritional awareness, that knowledge does not always translate into healthy practice. Research shows that inconsistent portioning and irregular parental eating habits can contribute to poor outcomes, even among families with higher nutritional literacy. In short, good intentions are being undermined by a lack of clear, practical guidance. That is not a new problem, but it is growing with time.

As we have heard, across the UK 10% of children aged four to five are overweight or obese; by the ages of 10 to 11, that figure rises to 22%. The covid pandemic deepened the crisis. During lockdown, many families saw a sharp rise in unhealthy snacking and reduced access to fresh, nutritious food. In homes where both time and money were tight, convenience often won out over balance. The cost of inaction is already visible, and it is vast. Obesity-related conditions cost the NHS more than £6 billion a year, and the wider cost to society stands at around £27 billion annually. Without meaningful intervention, that figure is projected to rise by £50 billion by 2050.

Meaningful intervention must include access to NHS dentists. A child with a mouth full of rotten teeth cannot enjoy an apple or crunch on a carrot as a healthy snack. Dental health is really important to a healthy diet.

4.9 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): When we talk about children's health, we often think about the start of life—safe births, vaccinations and early years support—but we also need to talk about those children whose lives will be short, those with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions. Across the country, families caring for a seriously ill child face unimaginable challenges, yet too often the support they need simply is not there, especially at the end of life and especially at home.

In my constituency, we are incredibly fortunate to be served by Shooting Star Children's Hospices, which supports over 700 children and families across 14 boroughs and throughout Surrey. However, because the number of children needing that care in each individual borough

is small, those children can easily be overlooked. That is the problem with a system built around commissioning at such a local level: when the numbers are low, the needs get lost. That is why the ringfenced central funding—formerly the children's hospice grant—is so important. It supports hospices such as Shooting Star to provide respite, symptom management, bereavement support and end-of-life care, and helps give families choice at the hardest possible time. I welcome the Government's decision to confirm £26 million for children's hospices in NHS England's funding for 2025-26, alongside £100 million in capital investment across all hospices.

The truth is that the sector remains under real strain. According to Together for Short Lives, the leading voice for children's palliative care, just 19% of ICBs formally commission 24/7 end-of-life care at home, and a third are still failing to meet even the basic national standards. I have three questions for the Minister: will the Government commit to maintaining and increasing the children's hospice grant beyond 2025-26? Will they launch a proper review of how children's palliative care is funded and planned, and will the Minister hold ICBs to greater account to ensure they meet their legal duty to commission that care and report transparently on progress? We are told that the 10-year NHS plan will bring care closer to home, but right now, there is no mention of children's palliative care in that plan and no clarity on how those vital services will be funded. That has to change.

4.11 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this important debate. One of the most frequent issues raised with me in Lowestoft is dentistry, and the situation is particularly acute for children. As we have heard, one in four five-year-olds experience tooth decay, and preventable tooth decay remains one of the top reasons for hospital admission. That is why the Government's roll-out of supervised teeth brushing in our most deprived areas and the inclusion of dental services in the roll-out of family hubs are so welcome.

Children from deprived areas are almost three times more likely to have dental decay than those from less deprived areas. One in three children in my constituency of Lowestoft are in relative poverty—a poverty that is linked to, and compounds, health problems. As such, one of the most effective ways to tackle poor child health is to reduce the number of children living in poverty—something that the last Labour Government did to great effect. That record will be built on by this Government's forthcoming child poverty strategy, which I hope will set out clear and bold targets, alongside a path to reaching those targets.

As has been mentioned, one of the biggest health crises facing children today is mental health. Some 85% of children and young people's mental health services report that they are struggling to keep up with demand. I hope the Government will continue to look at the growing evidence that links access to social media and addictive smartphones with children's poor mental health, but their commitment to roll out mental health support teams to all schools and colleges by 2029-30 is hugely welcome.

I am glad that the 10-year health plan that the Health Secretary set out a week ago begins an important shift towards prevention and early intervention, and I welcome

the plan's aim to “end the obesity epidemic”. I remain concerned that the ban on advertising unhealthy food and drink will mean that brands can continue to advertise so long as they do not explicitly identify their unhealthy products, and I hope that the Government will consider how to deal with that issue.

Finally, I will speak to the physical punishment of children. It is simply unacceptable in 2025 that children have less protection from assault and battery than adults do, particularly when it has such poor health implications—for example, research from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has found that children who are physically punished are up to 2.3 times more likely to experience mental health problems. That is why 77% of healthcare professionals and 14 public health organisations want to see the law in this area changed. Following the lead of over 60 countries around the world, including Scotland and Wales, we must remove the reasonable punishment defence, which continues to allow children to be harmed. I urge the Government to see this as a children's health issue and, in the interests of children's wellbeing, use the legislative opportunity presented by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill—which is currently being considered in the other place—to end it.

4.14 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): We know the problems facing children's health, and we know the scale of those problems—there is more than enough evidence—so in the time I have I will focus on some of the solutions. I welcome the Government's commitment to rolling forward youth hubs, to recruiting 8,500 mental health workers and, through the plan for change, to introducing Best Starts, our revamped Sure Start centres. An excellent Institute for Fiscal Studies report shows the effect of Sure Start, and its findings should inform how we develop Best Starts.

I do not want to spend a long time talking about how we reframe the architecture and the organisations that deliver children's health, but I do think that is not quite in the right place. Service users fundamentally do not care about who delivers what services; they just want the highest quality services. My concern is that we have services concentrated at the local authority level for children's health, when they should not be placed there. We know that the best-run services are typically health services, because they have structural advantages in terms of data and the experience of spending capital funding and getting things off the ground quickly.

We also know that some of the experiences of children's social care are not entirely as they should be. The attempt to unify children's health and children's social care within local authorities with a director for children's services in an upper-tier local authority has had a mixed record, and it would be wise for us to think about whether children's social care—or, indeed, adult social care—ought be put at the local authority level, or whether there ought to be a different place to deliver it, perhaps at a national level and perhaps at a national health level.

In a previous life before I was elected, I ran mental health, domestic abuse and homelessness services, and I embedded caseworkers in local authority settings to support families with mental health issues, domestic abuse prevalence and substance misuse. I also delivered services as part of the last Government's community

[Tom Hayes]

mental health framework—particularly personality disorder services. The embedding of third sector organisations is definitely a positive. There are limits to what they can do, but they can do outstanding things; they can build strong relationships with people who often lack trust in statutory agencies, and they can deliver bespoke support, often beside NHS or local authority support. I would therefore want a larger role for our third sector.

In closing, I want to talk about special educational needs and disabilities. We all know that the system is broken. We know that it is adversarial. We know that parents are at breaking point. We know that there are not enough spaces in specialist provision. We know, too, that EHCPs take too long and the process is difficult. As a consequence, it can feel dehumanising. I look forward to the Government working collaboratively with families, putting them at the heart of changes to develop the best solution. I have a survey available to constituents in Bournemouth East, and I encourage them to complete it or to email me, because I need to hear from them in order to represent them to Government, so that we can get the best possible system.

4.17 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): In London, 20% of reception age children are overweight or obese, and that nearly doubles to 39% of children in year 6. The crisis of childhood obesity does not just pose future health risks; rather, it is impacting children right now. Factors include a lack of after-school activities, deprivation and poverty, the constant bombardment of fast food adverts and the concentration of fast food chains near schools. However, for the sake of brevity, I will focus on the proximity of fast food outlets to schools and the constant advertising campaign against children.

In Ilford South, there are nearly 50% more fast food chains than there were 15 years ago. Despite planning restrictions, applicants always find loopholes to exploit. That is compounded by the fact that healthy food is double the price of fast food and that the closure of youth centres means there are limited places for kids to exercise. Fast food outlets have become the cheapest, most convenient and easiest choice for kids to go after school. I welcome the new national planning policy framework, which empowers local councils with stronger powers to block fast food outlets from opening near schools, allowing authorities to prioritise children's health.

The second insidious factor coercing these children into consuming fast food is the relentless barrage of advertising. Alarming, many adverts are specifically designed to target children. Bite Back, a youth-led movement challenging the food system, surveyed some of the UK's largest companies and reported that 78% of products specifically aimed at children were classed as unhealthy. For children from deprived areas, the advertising campaign is even more severe, because junk food ads are six times more likely to appear in deprived areas than wealthier areas. These companies are exploiting children—especially those in poverty—for profit. Bite Back puts it just about right: fast-food advertising is “enticing, effective and everywhere”.

Childhood obesity is not simply the result of poor personal choices or bad parenting; structural factors coerce children into making unhealthy choices. As a

Government, it is our duty to recognise the social and financial cost of allowing this to continue, and we are showing courage and making progress. By empowering local councils, banning advertising and delivering the NHS 10-year plan, which centres prevention, we are laying the groundwork for lasting change. We may not reap the benefits tomorrow or next year, but in five or 10 years we will see children living longer and healthier because of the choices we make today.

4.20 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Today I want to speak about a group of young people who are too often overlooked in our healthcare system: teenagers and young people with cancer. Every day in the UK, seven young people are told the devastating words, “You have cancer.” That is not just a statistic; it is a wake-up call for all of us.

Cancer remains the biggest disease-related killer of young people in our country, yet their unique experiences and their physical, psychological and social needs are too often sidelined. If we are serious about improving outcomes for them, we need to act on three fronts. First, we need faster diagnosis. Young people must be given clear, accessible information about the symptoms of cancer, and our primary care system must be better equipped to spot those symptoms early.

Secondly, we need access to clinical trials. I welcome the conversation that representatives of the Teenage Cancer Trust and I had only last week with the Minister for Public Health on this very issue. Young people currently participate in trials at lower rates than other groups, so they miss out on cutting-edge treatments that could save lives.

Thirdly, we need to address mental health. More than half of young people with cancer experience poor mental health, and almost nine in 10 psychologists say that our current services cannot meet demand.

Cancer does not just interrupt a young life but collides with it at a time of exams, discovering new relationships, identity growth and development, and the least that we can do is make sure that our systems do not fail young people. Let us ensure that the next national cancer plan reflects this reality, and let us give all these young people the care and support that they deserve.

4.23 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this debate. Like many colleagues in this House, I stood for election on a promise to help raise the healthiest generation of children in our country's history—a bold ambition, but a worthy one. In order to get there, we need to look beyond the doctor's office or the dinner table.

One of the most powerful and often overlooked tools that we have is physical activity—sports and play, and the chance to be outside. When sports and play are a part of a child's daily life, they become a training ground not just for the body, but for life. In Stafford and across our villages, I have seen brilliant teachers and community workers help children to build the skills and confidence they need to stay engaged. One young constituent, Tane, spoke honestly to me about what he sees among his peers: rising mental health struggles, too much time online and a worrying dip in resilience. He is

right, because when children do not get the opportunity to move and play, it affects their wellbeing and education, but also their future.

Where else but in sport do children learn how to lose with grace, win with kindness and keep going when things get tough? But not all children have parents who can afford to pay for clubs, kits or transport. For many, school is the only place where they will ever get to be part of a team or even discover a sport they love. That is why PE should never be seen as optional; it must be a core part of every school week. I welcome the Government's renewed support for school sport partnerships, and their commitment to equality between girls and boys in sport, but we can go further. That means multi-year funding settlements that schools can count on, and a clear ambition that every child, no matter their background, has access to sport and play.

In Stafford, I have been campaigning for more inclusive public play places. Families of disabled and neurodivergent children tell me they avoid parks because they have nothing that their children can safely enjoy. Campaigners have spoken powerfully about this, as Christine McGuinness did only yesterday. Play is not a luxury; it is essential for children's development, their health and their joy.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way. For every Christine in Stafford, there is a Christine in Newcastle-under-Lyme too, and one uniting point that my hon. Friend and I will no doubt put to our colleagues at Staffordshire county council is for them to play their part, and to play their part fast.

Leigh Ingham: I am already on record as criticising Staffordshire county council today, so I will hold off in this debate—although it could be better at everything.

My commitment to play is why I co-sponsored the amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), that seeks to provide in law for sufficient play opportunities, especially inclusive play opportunities. I call on the Government to invest in potential, and to give every child the opportunity to grow up healthy, confident and, importantly, resilient—ready not just for school, but for life.

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

4.26 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I would like to begin by paying tribute to a wonderful charity based in Mid Sussex called Group B Strep Support. Ever since its founder, Jane, lost her own baby, Theo, 30 years ago, Jane and the team have been campaigning for better outcomes for pregnant women who contract group B strep, because the impact on their babies can be profound; it is the most common cause of life-threatening infection for newborn babies. I open by asking the Minister whether she will meet the team from Group B Strep Support so she can better understand the potential of better screening of pregnant mothers.

As a mother myself, I do not take for granted the health of my children. All of us who are parents know that the health of our children can turn on a sixpence. We also know that the system that surrounds children

and families and keeps children healthy has been allowed to crumble. As hon. Members have said, we are in the middle of a children's health crisis in this country. This week, the Children's Commissioner produced a damning report on the health of children across the country. The review told us that children in England are facing "Dickensian levels" of poverty, and are going without basic needs like heating, a place to wash, somewhere to eat breakfast or safe transport to school. Hon. Members use the word "unacceptable" a lot in this place and it may be overused, but in this case it is very true. We should be ashamed that children are facing this reality in 2025.

Our young people, who should expect to grow up to be part of a prosperous, happy and successful nation in the coming years, are being let down. Under the Conservatives, things got worse and worse. On their watch, in the period from 2022 to 2024 alone, the number of children waiting for over 52 weeks for an appointment increased by 60% for elective paediatric services and by 94% for community health services. However, this situation is not inevitable. The UK has world-leading researchers, passionate healthcare workers and a proud tradition of protecting public health. Britain's children should be among the healthiest in the world. We are a wealthy country with a welfare state and universal healthcare.

However, we lag behind our peers. One in 11 children lives with asthma, and our country has one of the highest emergency admission rates for school-age asthma in Europe; it is avoidable, yet it is still happening. The number of children living with life-limiting conditions has risen by 250% in less than two decades. Some 2.5 million children in England are living with obesity, as other hon. Members have mentioned this afternoon, and over 1 million of them already have health complications. Almost one in five children now struggle with their mental health, which is a 50% increase in just five years.

However, children are waiting longer than ever to be seen. Since 2020, paediatric waiting lists have grown by over 166,000 children, but the number of consultants has barely budged, with over 50,000 children now waiting for more than a year to be seen. The Conservatives let those problems pile up; now the Labour Government cannot afford inaction.

The Liberal Democrats believe that every child deserves the best start in life, no matter their background, postcode or parents' income. We also think that it benefits us all to have happy and healthy children growing up across the country. We would start by fixing the NHS from top to bottom, which means ensuring that everyone can see a GP within seven days, or 24 hours if it is urgent. I welcome the announcement in the NHS 10-year plan that same-day appointments will become available where necessary. My colleagues and I will push the Government to ensure that that pledge becomes a reality.

Fixing the NHS also means ending the scandal of children turning up to hospital with a mouth full of rotting teeth because there is no dentistry nearby. It means rebuilding the primary care and community services that have been starved of funding for over a decade. I know from conversations with my constituents in Mid Sussex that those problems are very real, and with them happening in what is a relatively well-off part of the country, it is clear that they are systemic.

[Alison Bennett]

However, it is not just about treating illness; we have to be determined to prevent it. That is why we would reverse the Conservative cuts to public health and invest in programmes that get children moving, eating well and thriving. We would tackle the poverty that drives so many health issues by ending the cruel two-child limit and reversing the benefits cap. We would expand free school meals to all children in poverty and work towards universal free meals in primary schools. We were glad to see the Government listen to Liberal Democrat calls for an expansion of free school meals, and are campaigning for that to go even further, because no child should go hungry at school—ever.

When it comes to mental health, we would transform the system from the ground up. That means having mental health hubs for young people in every community, regular check-ups at key points in life, a dedicated mental health professional in every school and a proper cross-Government strategy to understand and tackle the root causes, from bereavement to bullying and social media pressure. Children's mental health is not just a health issue; it is an education issue, a family issue and a justice issue. It needs more than one Department and more than one Minister.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues have led the fight for early intervention, for holistic support and for real accountability. We have championed ideas such as a register of bereaved children, because how can we help if we do not even know who needs support? I ask the Minister to therefore commit to implementing such a register.

We face a real challenge, but we have the ideas, the evidence and the plan. Now someone has to get on and deliver the change that children across the UK so desperately need, so I urge the Government to take action. Let us build a country where no child is left behind and where every child and parent has, at the very least, the opportunity to be healthy and to look to the future with confidence.

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

4.33 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Before I start, I should declare my interest as a consultant paediatrician and a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) mentioned earlier. I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

Getting the right start in life is one of the most important factors in adult health and wellbeing. We must ensure that the NHS is providing the best treatments and preventive care available for children, while prioritising safety and convenience for patients and cost-effectiveness for taxpayers. I have seen significant improvements in paediatric care in my career. We must look broadly at the social and environmental factors that affect children's health and ask what more we can do to help protect and prevent illness in children. Prevention is better than cure, which is one of the Government's three shifts, with which I agree and on which I wish to focus today.

Often children brought to hospital to see consultant paediatricians have conditions that have been caused, or further complicated, by social and environmental

factors. These are things that medics cannot treat on their own, and, as every professional knows, we must work with parents, families and children to achieve the very best outcomes. One very clear example is the childhood obesity crisis, which many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned already this afternoon. Research shows that 36% of children in year 6—these are 10 and 11-year-olds—are now overweight or obese. I have seen some extreme cases in my practice—for example, a nine-year-old who weighed over 80 kg—of young patients who have suffered serious illness because of their weight. These are the tip of the iceberg, but they are undoubtedly part of a much broader shift.

We know what causes obesity: lack of exercise and a diet too high in calories. But this is more complicated than that. There are complex problems with roots in broader issues such as poverty and family work patterns. The Government cannot determine what each child eats, but there are things that they can and should do to help support parents and their children. What is the Minister doing to encourage exercise, participation in sport and active travel to school? What is she doing to improve the quality and availability of food for parents and families? What is she doing to improve the quality of school food, to build nutrition education into the curriculum and to help children learn about managing their own health and how to cook healthy food?

I know the 10-year plan includes reference to the reformulation of some products, but there is a risk that manufacturers encouraged to remove sugar from products will simply replace it with sweeteners and other chemicals. What is the Minister doing to ensure that they do not solve one problem and then walk unwittingly into another?

The hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) mentioned tooth brushing. We often hear that tooth extractions are the leading cause of hospital admissions among young children. Can the Minister provide details on the steps that she is taking to improve youth dental outcomes, such as broadening access to NHS dentists, pursuing fluoridisation schemes and encouraging the use of fluoride varnish?

Parents have a responsibility here too. According to the chief dental officer, who I spoke to the other day, children who brush their teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste, reduce the amount of high-sugar drinks they consume and reduce the sugar in their diet can significantly reduce the risk of needing fillings and having dental decay.

Another area raised today is mental health. Young people face mental health pressures from home and school worries, friendship concerns and many other factors. In particular, we know that the covid lockdown had a serious impact on children's development and socialisation. We also know that social media is causing increasing harm to children—whether by contributing to anxiety about body image or personal achievements, or by exposing children to harmful material and ideas. The previous Government's Online Safety Act 2023 was a welcome step in addressing some of these issues, but the Government rejected a Conservative amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to help reduce the use of phones in schools. What more does the Minister plan to do to encourage children away from their screens and back towards a healthier existence with their friends and families?

I also want to discuss neglect. A total of 25,350 children are currently on a child protection plan for reasons of neglect—a marked increase from 20,970 in 2014. Organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children have highlighted the fact that numbers are typically underestimated in neglect cases, but we should not underestimate the harm caused to health and development by neglect. What steps are the Department and the Government in general taking to get a more accurate picture of neglect and to intervene on behalf of the children who are suffering?

One area of improvement is the balance of acute and community care, and, again, the Government have talked about this in their three shifts. We know the Government are keen to move acute care into the community, but does the Minister agree that we should ensure that core community care is available more widely and more quickly in the community first before giving them extra work to do? Too often in my practice I see children with paediatric problems who have been referred to hospitals because of long waits and capacity problems in the community. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that there is enough supply in the community sector to deal with the problems that children face?

In summary, children's health is a large and complex policy area. We know that we can make good progress when we treat these complex conditions with new research and novel treatments. We know that most children will get better—in fact, one reason that I enjoy paediatrics is that almost all the patients get better, because they are robust, resilient and great fun. We must help parents do things that help protect children's health today and prepare those children to manage their own health tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I now call the Minister, who has up to 5 pm, although we do need a few minutes at the end for the lead Member to wind up.

4.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this debate. He is a tireless advocate for children across the country. I also pay tribute to his campaigning on social prescribing before he came to this place, because it is now a key part of our 10-year plan for health.

This issue is dear to my heart. One of the reasons I stood for Parliament is that nearly a quarter of the kids in Skelmersdale, the biggest town in my constituency, live in poverty. As many colleagues have pointed out, the state of children's health is a national scandal. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, and as was referred to by the shadow Minister, this is a complex issue that straddles a variety of areas. It is about active travel—and I am delighted that the Minister responsible for active travel, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), is on the Front Bench with me today—as well as air pollution and access to green spaces.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) highlighted links between children's health, education and poverty. The hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) made a contribution,

and her expertise in diet and nutrition was really insightful. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) spoke about children with life-limiting illnesses and end-of-life care and palliative care for children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) talked about junk food advertising and dentistry. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) talked about family hubs and Best Start, which we have launched this week, children's health and social care infrastructure and the third sector. I was really pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) raised the issue of fast food outlets and junk food advertising, which I will cover in my response.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) talked about children, young people and cancer, and mentioned the Teenage Cancer Trust, which I met recently along with my hon. Friend, and I was delighted to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) spoke about how important play and sport are. We are working across Departments in our mission-led Government to deliver the healthiest generation ever. I can confirm that the NHS works with the Starlight charity to support the provision of play facilities within hospitals.

Over 2 million children are not active, and we need to change that. The Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are committed to investing in school sport and have confirmed funding for next year's primary PE and sport premium. We are working across Government to develop new school sports partnerships, and a national network model was announced by the Prime Minister in June.

Lord Darzi's review set out in black and white how badly the previous Government let our children down. Tooth decay is the most common reason why children aged five to nine are admitted to hospital. Referrals for mental health services for children and young people have tripled since 2016, and waiting lists for health services have grown faster for children than for adults. That must change, and it will change.

This Government are committed to raising the healthiest generation of children ever, and work to deliver this ambition has already begun. One of the biggest things we can do to improve a child's life chances is safeguard their mental health. That is why by the end of this Parliament we will put a mental health support team in every school in England to break the vicious cycle of poor mental health, low attendance and bad behaviour.

My right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is rolling out free breakfast clubs so that kids start school with hungry minds not hungry bellies. To combat tooth decay, we have invested £11 million in supervised tooth brushing for three to five-year-olds in our most deprived communities. We are going further than ever before to tackle long waiting times for children through our elective reform plan. We have already delivered more than 4 million appointments, which is double what we promised in our manifesto.

On children's social care and neglect, which the shadow Minister talked about, we are committed to rebalancing the system towards earlier intervention. That is why the spending review committed to reforming children's social care, including through a new £555 million transformation fund.

[Ashley Dalton]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden for raising the important matter of funding for children's hospices, and I agree with her about their crucial role. As she said, we have committed £26 million for children's hospices this year, alongside £100 million of capital funding. Future funding will be announced in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud mentioned that it is crucial to involve young people in our conversations and policy development. I spoke recently at a Children's Hospital Alliance event and a Children's Commissioner roundtable, where I listened directly to the views and voices of children and young people to make sure that they fed into the 10-year health plan. Our neighbourhood health offer builds on that feedback, and we have re-established the children and young people's cancer taskforce and insisted that children and young people are around that table.

Last week we published our 10-year plan for health, which sets out how we will fix our broken NHS and make it fit for today's children and for future generations. We on the Government Benches will not rest until every working person receives the same kind of healthcare that the wealthy expect.

The three shifts that underpin our plan are the building blocks to ensure that children get the best start in life. The first is from treatment to prevention. We know that a baby's first 1,001 days, from conception to the age of two, set the foundations for later years, so we are establishing Best Start family hubs, building on the legacy of Sure Start, which was a lifeline for working families under the last Labour Government. Earlier this week we published the "Giving every child the best start in life" strategy, and we will provide funding to every local authority in England for Best Start family hubs, because no parent should have to face the challenges of parenthood alone.

We are also taking firm action on obesity, which many Members raised today, and which affects nearly one in five children leaving primary school. Our action includes restricting junk food advertising, banning the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks, updating school food standards, strengthening the soft drinks industry levy, introducing healthy food sales reporting and, ultimately, using that reporting to set new sales targets.

The Government have regulations in place to set nutritional, compositional and labelling standards for commercial baby food, and we continue to challenge the industry to take further action, providing advice and guidance for parents. Enforcement of nutrition legislation is the responsibility of local authorities. Good nutrition in the early years is vital. We recognise that there are opportunities to support parents and make the healthier choice easier by encouraging businesses to improve baby foods. I will set out our plans on that soon.

We are also determined to fix the special educational needs and disability system and restore the trust of parents by ensuring that schools have the tools to better identify and support children before issues escalate to

crisis point. This autumn, the Government will bring forward a schools White Paper, which will detail our approach to SEND reform, ensuring joined-up support for children and young people.

On the shift from analogue to digital, going beyond the paper red book, the "My Children" function on the NHS app will become the digital companion for parents to access their child's health information throughout their childhood. Over time, parents will be able to record their children's habits and developmental milestones, and use artificial intelligence to access help and advice when needed.

On the third shift, from hospital to community, we will roll out neighbourhood health centres in every community, building care closer to where children live, learn and play. That includes multidisciplinary teams made up of GPs, nurses, health visitors, paediatricians, mental health, social workers and the third sector, providing joined-up preventive care and supporting children with complex and chronic needs.

Before I wrap up, I want to say a few words on inequalities. Building a fair Britain is central to our 10-year plan. As the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said in Blackpool last month, we will review how health need is reflected in funding for general practice, with a sharp focus on money following need. Child poverty is a stain on our country. We are determined to fix this, which is why we are rolling out free school meals to all children in households on universal credit. From April 2026, we will be increasing the value of Healthy Start payments by 10%. I am also a member of the child poverty taskforce, and the strategy on this will be published later this year.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud for raising this vital topic and all other colleagues for speaking today. When he launched our manifesto, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister promised to restore "The bond that reaches through the generations and says—this country will be better for your children."

That is what we are doing with our 10-year plan. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and all other colleagues to get this done.

4.50 pm

Dr Opher: I will not keep hon. Members long; I know it is late on a Thursday and people want to get back to their constituencies. I thank all hon. Members, including the Minister and Opposition Members, for staying and giving excellent speeches.

If we get children's health right, it will bring a whole lifetime of benefits. That is why child health is so important. It is about getting them to do regular exercise, which will continue for life, and to have a decent diet, which will also continue for life, making them the healthiest generation we have ever known, so I thank Members and the Minister very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered children's health.

Disabled Bus Passes

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

4.51 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is a pleasure to stand here today and raise, once again, the issue of restrictions on the use of disabled bus passes. The Minister will be well aware of this matter, which I have raised with him on a number of occasions, and I have already had the opportunity to discuss it with him directly, for which I am grateful. However, I want to use today's debate not only to underline the real and lasting impact that these restrictions have on disabled people's lives, but to make a clear case for why it is the Government's responsibility to address this inequality.

Currently, under the English national concessionary travel scheme, eligible disabled people are entitled to some limited free local bus travel. It is a policy rightly designed to help those who, for physical or legal reasons, are unable to drive. The scheme plays a vital role in helping disabled people to stay connected with healthcare, work, education, family, and the wider community and society.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Young people in post-16 education or apprenticeships, including my son George at Linwood's post-16 provision, are unable to learn to drive as easily because of their complex needs, yet while their parents currently have to pay to get them to college in the morning, they can use their free bus passes to get home. That is completely counterintuitive and is restricting the choices of young people at a time when they should be expanding their independence. Does my hon. Friend have any comment on that?

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention; she speaks extensively about an area in which I know she is a champion. I completely agree with her. If we are giving people disabled bus passes, we are doing that for a reason, and those reasons often do not apply only from 9.30 am onwards.

That brings me to the next part of my speech. From 11 pm to 9.30 am on weekdays, the English national concessionary travel scheme entitlement becomes a postcode lottery and is dependent on whether a local authority or transport authority chooses to extend the benefit and, crucially, whether it can afford to do so, from some already stretched local budgets. Disability Action Yorkshire, a charity based in my constituency and one whose work extends across the wider region, brought this issue to my attention earlier this year, and indeed last year at a local panel event, where local people pointed out the barriers they faced to participating in our society. Service users rightly point out the absurd contradiction in providing a travel path for disabled individuals that is designed to improve accessibility, only to then restrict its use to peak hours.

The absurdity lies in the obvious truth that disabilities do not appear only at peak times. There are approximately 870,000 disabled bus pass holders in England, representing about 10% of all concessionary travel users. The Department for Transport has on several occasions

pointed to the fact that 77% of local authorities offer some form of free travel before 9.30, suggesting that the issue is relative minor, but framing it in that way obscures the reality on the ground. In many areas, including my constituency, free travel is still not permitted until after 9 am, making travel to work, education or early medical appointments financially and logistically difficult for disabled people.

In fact, research shows that 35% of transport authorities offer unrestricted, 24/7 access for disabled passengers. The result is a postcode lottery, and the majority of disabled people remain constrained by an arbitrary time restriction that does not reflect the demands of their daily lives. Let us be clear: the time restriction may be more relevant for older pass holders, who make up 90% of concessionary users and are in general less likely to be commuting to work or education. But that simply does not apply to many disabled people, with disabled bus pass holders typically being of working age.

We live in a country where disabled people continue to face unnecessary and unacceptable barriers, whether physical, financial or social. We must be honest that we are simply not doing enough to break down those barriers. Removing the weekday time restriction on disabled bus passes would be a straightforward, immediate and meaningful step in the right direction.

Ending the restrictions would do more than improving access to transport. It would promote greater independence for disabled people. It would support health and wellbeing by reducing social isolation and making it easier to attend early morning medical appointments, which are often difficult or costly to reach under the current rules. It would also contribute to environmental goals by encouraging greater use of public transport over less sustainable alternatives. Most importantly, by allowing disabled people to travel freely, we enable fuller participation in community life, whether that is volunteering, social engagements, work or education. In doing so, we would take a meaningful step toward greater social inclusion and a more equal society for disabled people.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on such an important topic; he is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that this is of particular importance in rural areas because bus services are sparse and travel distances are long? I have been approached by campaigners from Mencap Herefordshire who have ran an amazing campaign on this topic. Does he agree that the postcode lottery between different authorities means that there is a great unfairness for disabled people and that the best way to deal with this is through national, not local, change?

Tom Gordon: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's sentiment. My constituency is in north Yorkshire—a vast rural area where we have exactly the same challenges that she describes in her own patch.

The impact of this restrictive rule is particularly clear when we listen to young disabled people themselves. In a recent conversation with Whizz Kidz, a charity that supports young people with disabilities, it highlighted the specific harm this restriction causes for young wheelchair users. The charity recently conducted a survey asking whether free 24/7 bus travel would make a difference. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming response was yes. Young people said that all-day access to free bus travel

[Tom Gordon]

would significantly boost their independence, help them build social connections and develop crucial life skills. As one individual put it:

“We’re normal young people who therefore can’t afford taxis, can’t fit in Ubers but still have social needs. If you want us to be able to integrate and contribute economically, we need the opportunity to build social capital and skills.”

While bus travel is by no means perfect, it remains the most consistent and accessible option for many disabled people. It does not require pre-booking and offers regular services and allows for greater independence. In contrast, other modes of transport are much less accessible. One constituent shared how they have missed trains because pre-booked assistance failed to show up, been unable to use underground or metro systems, which was cited as a common issue, and struggled to find accessible taxis, especially outside major towns and in rural areas. That experience is not an exception; it is a reflection of the systemic gaps in our transport networks, which fail to accommodate disabled passengers reliably and fairly.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People has highlighted that for those with sight loss, bus travel is often the only accessible option. Pavement parking, dangerous e-scooter driving and inaccessible crossings all make transport on foot far too difficult. Some 95% of respondents to its recent research said that they use buses at least monthly. It is therefore clear that if we are to restrict concessionary access to buses, we must first ensure that alternative modes of transport are truly accessible and affordable—something that, as my constituent’s experience makes clear, is far from being the case today.

At a time when disabled people face extra burdens and cuts from every angle, we must find ways to support our disabled community. The current cost of living crisis has had a disproportionate impact on disabled people. They are more likely to face fuel poverty, skip meals and struggle with rising costs across the board.

Disabled households are also more likely to be among the poorest in society, with around a third of adults in the lowest-income households living with a disability. Scope recently published its “Disability Price Tag” report, which demonstrates that disabled households need on average an additional £1,095 a month to have the same standard of living as a non-disabled household. These are not luxuries, but necessities for daily life. Whether medical equipment, higher energy bills or accessible transport, they are unavoidable costs.

One of the crucial benefits of removing the 9.30 am restriction would be to significantly improve access to employment, education and training, much of which begins before 9 am.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Tom Gordon: Many of those opportunities start before 9 am. Disabled people can still board a bus earlier if they pay, but we have just established that disabled people already face much higher daily living costs. Those on low or no income are therefore disproportionately affected by this decision and their opportunities impacted.

That financial barrier makes travel during peak hours a burden that many cannot afford, limiting their opportunities before they have even begun the day.

Bernie, a blind bus user living in one of the few areas with 24/7 concessionary travel, described that access as a lifeline. Living rurally, he relies on buses from as early as 7.30 am to get to work, and says it would be near-impossible without free travel. There are unique challenges faced by disabled people that many without that lived experience find hard to understand. For example, as a blind person, Bernie feels at risk counting money on the roadside. Similarly, another respondent with vision and hearing loss said her conditions worsen later in the day, making early travel essential. Yet in her village, the first concessionary service does not arrive until after 10 am. Those examples highlight why disabled people need consistent, unrestricted access to transport, and why a postcode lottery simply does not work and is not fair.

The previous Government’s approach to supporting disabled people amounted to a patchwork of short-term fixes and empty promises. The current Government’s rhetoric on personal independence payments—although that has changed recently—and disability support continues to fall short. If the recent wave of dissent from Government Back Benchers over these issues is not evidence enough of the need for urgent change, I am not sure what is. The Government have made it clear that they want to encourage disabled people into work. The Minister here has a perfect opportunity to dismantle one of the many barriers they face. I urge him to do that.

The solution here is not just achievable; it is affordable. Research by Whizz Kidz suggests that removing time restrictions would cost £8.8 million, reflecting only 1% of the annual spend on concessionary travel across England. That does not even include companion passes. If we are serious about improving opportunities for disabled people—the Government have said repeatedly they are—then this is a logical, low-cost place to start. It is a matter of fairness and equality.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have been waiting with bated breath to see if the hon. Gentleman would come on to companion bus passes. I thank him for the leadership he has shown on this issue and for co-tabling—with me, the hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), and the inimitable hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who sadly is on his way to Northern Ireland this evening—early-day motion 1638 specifically on companion bus passes for the disabled. This is where a disabled person cannot use a bus alone. We have the strange situation where in two-thirds of authorities his or her disabled bus pass is allowed to cover a companion to go with them, but in one-third of local authorities it is not. I cannot think of anything more futile than giving a free pass to somebody to use a bus service which they cannot use without a companion for whom they have to pay.

Tom Gordon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He speaks very eloquently on a situation that I agree is entirely futile. We should not give people companion bus passes which are, to all intents and purposes, useless. That is a fair place to start. As part of this issue, we need to do more to ensure that people who require a bus companion have access to the services they deserve.

I anticipate that the Minister is likely to inform me that this is a matter to discuss with local transport authorities, which have discretionary powers to offer free travel at peak times. Yet we must confront the reality that local decision making alone is not delivering fairness for disabled bus users across the country. I commend East Sussex council, which has used bus service improvement plan funding to extend concessionary travel to disabled people throughout the day. Similarly, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has announced a pilot to offer round-the-clock free bus travel to older and disabled people. I hope that colleagues across the country, but especially the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire will follow suit. Let us be clear, however: that is a temporary solution.

Without national leadership and ringfenced funding specifically for disabled travel concessions, we cannot expect consistent provision across the country. Despite previous recommendations for local authorities to fund discretionary changes to the restrictions through funds such as the BSIP, the reality is that many simply cannot afford to.

Vikki Slade: I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, which is a real opportunity to discuss BSIPs. One problem with BSIPs is that they run for a short period. Individuals struggle to make decisions about where to live, whether to purchase a car, or about investing in an alternative for mobility over a long time. They think, “What if the bus situation changes in a year?” The BSIP covers a short period, and people do not have stability. From an equalities point of view, a permanent decision on that would be helpful.

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. She has stolen the next line from my speech, but I shall forgive her on this occasion. I wonder whether she was reading over my shoulder.

BSIP funding is allocated only on a year-by-year basis, offering no long-term security or reassurance for disabled people who are affected by these restrictions. Even where local authorities are willing to fund all-day concessions, the lack of guaranteed, ringfenced support means that provision is patchy at best. In East Sussex, only 1% of BSIP funds were needed to cover the reimbursements of offering full-time concessionary travel for disabled people—a modest figure with a significant impact. That shows clearly that the issue is not necessarily one of affordability, but of political will and prioritisation.

We can take York and North Yorkshire combined authority, the local transport authority for my constituency, as an example. Of the £12 million allocated to the region, funding has been directed toward valuable but highly localised initiatives: bus station upgrades and improvements in Skipton, Whitby, Selby and Malton; bus stop improvements in Helmsley, Easingwold and Leyburn; and discounted family travel in York city centre. Those are all worthwhile investments, but they offer no benefit to constituents who require access with a disabled bus pass, especially those living with disabilities, who remain excluded because of outdated restrictions. I do not want a patchwork solution that fixes the problem only in my area, but one that will apply across England and bring everyone forward.

Sadly, it is equally clear that where budgets are stretched, discretionary travel arrangements are the first thing to be scaled back to cut costs. Recent data from Local

Government Association has highlighted the £452 million gap in Government funding for the concessionary travel scheme. It is therefore not likely that local authorities will be able to fund enhancements themselves when Government funding is already falling short of the required amount. Hampshire county council recently moved in the wrong direction, in the light of funding shortfalls and budget constraints, by removing their discretionary services, including free peak time travel for those with companion passes. That sends a worrying message. We cannot rely on local authorities alone to deliver change. Leadership must come from this place and central Government.

The Government cannot continue to wash their hands of responsibility by framing this as a matter solely for devolution and local transport authorities. The simple truth is this: it was the Government who introduced time restrictions under the English national concessionary travel scheme, and it is the Government who hold the power to remove those restrictions. National problems require national solutions. If we are serious about building a fairer and more inclusive society, the Government must stop kicking the can down the road and start acting with the urgency and authority that this issue deserves.

I urge the Minister to reflect not just on the policy, but on the people affected by it. This is not about politics; it is about fairness, dignity and equality of access. The barriers facing disabled people are already too high. Let us not allow a bureaucratic time restriction to be one of them. Ending this arbitrary time would promote independence, reduce social isolation and help disabled people into work, education and healthcare. The power to change that lies with the Government. I urge the Minister and his colleagues to act now: lift the restriction and help to build a transport system that truly works for everyone.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing the debate and providing the opportunity to discuss disabled bus passes, and I thank other Members for their contributions.

I appreciate the concerns that the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough has raised. The Government know the value of the English national concessionary travel scheme, or ENCTS. We want everyone to have straightforward access to high-quality public transport and are committed to improving services so that they are more inclusive and enable disabled people to travel safely, confidently and with dignity. I know, however, that disabled people continue to face unacceptable barriers in their everyday use of public transport, and we are determined to address them. I am committed to working with the sector to drive forward these much-needed improvements.

Regarding the specific concerns raised about concessionary bus travel, let me first remind Members of the statutory obligations of the ENCTS. The scheme provides free bus travel to those with eligible disabilities and those of state pension age—currently 66—between 9.30 am and 11 pm on weekdays and all day on weekends and bank holidays. However, local authorities in England have the power to offer concessions in addition to their statutory obligations—for example, by extending the times of use.

[Simon Lightwood]

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough pre-empted me saying the following: Department statistics report that 77% of travel concession authorities offer extensions to the beginning of the statutory time period, allowing passholders to travel before 9.30 am on weekdays. Local authorities can also offer companion passes to disabled passengers as a discretionary enhancement—a power we have seen taken up by two thirds, or 66%, of authorities, from Durham to Devon. Indeed, York and North Yorkshire combined authority goes above and beyond the ENCTS on times and companion passes.

Sir Julian Lewis: The Minister, I think, has conceded a key point: he has admitted that some duties are discretionary to councils, and some are statutory. The point about companion bus passes for those disabled people who cannot use a bus without a companion is, as early-day motion 1638 makes abundantly clear, that inclusion of the free companion bus pass should be statutory specifically for those disabled people who cannot use their bus pass without a companion. There is nothing discretionary about that; they simply cannot use the bus pass without the companion. Therefore, it should be part of the same statutory element by which they get the free bus pass in the first place.

Simon Lightwood: I thank the right hon. Member for his extensive intervention. Every single local transport authority in the country has the ability to go above and beyond the ENCTS. In fact, every single local transport authority under this Government has received funding to support buses. Unlike the previous Government, who offered a “Hunger Games”-style competition, we have done it by a fair formula.

The Department conducted a review of the ENCTS, in which many of the important issues discussed today concerning scheme eligibility and travel times were considered. I will not prejudice the outcome of the review, but I want to reassure Members that accessibility and affordability remain central in our commitment to improve bus services for those who rely on them most.

As we are all aware, we face a particularly difficult fiscal climate and fiscal inheritance. The ENCTS is vital in supporting local bus travel, assisting with access to essential local services and helping those who use it to stay active and avoid isolation, and we must ensure that it remains financially sustainable. The ENCTS costs around £700 million annually, and any changes to the statutory obligations would therefore need to be carefully considered in terms of the impact on financial sustainability.

More widely, this Government are committed to improving bus services across the country. The Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, which we introduced in December, puts the power over local bus services back in the hands of local leaders right across England and is intended to ensure bus services reflect the needs of the communities that rely on them.

Ellie Chowns: It makes sense for bus services to reflect local needs, but whether someone has a disability and needs to use a bus is not a locally determined thing. There should be fair access to these services wherever someone lives in the country. Currently we have a postcode lottery regarding the ability to use bus passes

24 hours a day. The point of the debate is to ask that it is organised nationally, so that there is fair access and every disabled person's bus pass can be used at any time of day, and there are not some parts of the country where it works and others where it does not.

Simon Lightwood: I recognise what the hon. Member is saying, and I will go on to outline some of the other areas where the Government are helping. Improving accessibility is central to our mission. The Bill will help us to deliver safer, more reliable and more accessible networks. It includes specific measures to make bus travel more accessible and inclusive, including through more consistent approaches to the inclusive design of bus stations and stops. The Bill will also require local authorities to produce a bus network accessibility plan, assessing the existing accessibility of bus networks in their areas, and identifying actions that they will take to improve them further.

The voice of disabled people will be at the heart of these reforms. We will develop bus stop guidance collaboratively with organisations that represent disabled people, and local authorities will be required to consult disabled people and organisations representing them when making significant changes to their bus networks. In addition, the Government have committed to publishing an integrated national transport strategy this year, which will set the long-term vision for transport in England. A key part of the strategy will be to create the conditions for a transport system that works together to deliver for its users and that makes it easy for people to get around. Everyone should be able to access real-time information, and simplified, integrated ticketing, and we have been exploring those themes as part of our policy development.

Vikki Slade: Will the Minister give way?

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I did not hear who called out first, but I will give way to the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett).

Alison Bennett: I thank the Minister for giving way, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) for letting me take the Floor. I am pleased that the Minister has outlined the forthcoming integrated transport strategy.

Over 18 months ago, Wivelsfield railway station in my constituency was allocated funding to make both platforms step-free. That still has not happened. We are still waiting for an update, and I wonder whether the Minister could ask the Department to provide one.

Simon Lightwood: Under the previous Government, up to 50 stations were funded, with feasibility studies under the Access for All programme. I do not know whether the hon. Member's station is part of that, but I am happy to take up that subject outside the Chamber.

We also know that these plans will be backed up with funding. That is why the Budget allocated more than £1 billion to local bus services for 2025-26, including £12.5 million for York and North Yorkshire combined authority. Funding allocated to local authorities to improve bus services can be used to fund discretionary

enhancements to the ENCTS, and we have reaffirmed our commitment through the funding allocated as part of the spending review.

Vikki Slade: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way again. I am incredibly bothered by the issue of consistency. A disabled driver can use their blue badge at any time of the day, but somebody who is not able to drive is restricted to being able to use their bus pass only after 9.30 am. That seems to be a simple unfairness in the system for people who do not have the option to drive. We have an opportunity to make a tiny change that would make a massive difference.

Simon Lightwood: I reiterate that every single local transport authority in the country has the ability to go above and beyond—

Ellie Chowns: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I will not give way again to the hon. Lady. Every single local transport authority in the country has the ability to go above and beyond the ENCTS statutory obligations. Every single local transport authority has been given money to improve bus services, and that can be used to top-up the statutory provisions. I reiterate that the Department has conducted a review of the ENCTS, and many of the issues raised today are included in that review. I will not prejudge the outcome, but I say to hon. Members once again that accessibility is central to it.

Tom Gordon: I thank the Minister for giving way. I hope he notes that I was quite measured in my speech, and I genuinely believe that he wants to put disabled people at the heart of the review. When the Department looks at the impact on the financials and on spending, will it look at how if disabled people can get to hospital appointments, opportunities in education and out spending their money in our economy that might feed into funding the system?

Simon Lightwood: As I mentioned earlier, under the bus services Bill, local authorities will be tasked with producing a bus network accessibility plan—assessing bus networks in their area and identifying actions that they will need to take to improve access. Through the bus grant, local transport authorities can put in place mitigations to improve the accessibility, frequency and reliability of buses in their area.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions, particularly the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough for taking the time to raise this matter. I am sure we will have many more conversations about this and I applaud his persistence on the issue. I hope this response assures hon. Members that this Government are committed to working with local leaders and bus operators to help deliver better, more reliable and affordable bus services for passengers.

Question put and agreed to.

5.20 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 July 2025

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Victims of Terrorism: State Support

1.30 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered state support for victims of terrorism.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. In a week when we remember the victims of the 7/7 attacks and all terror attacks, I am grateful for the opportunity to open this important debate to consider our response to what should be one of the gravest responsibilities of any Government: the duty of the state to stand with and support British victims of terror.

Terrorism is not simply an attack on individuals; it is an attack on our way of life, on our shared values and on the very idea of a free and open society. When civilians are targeted in terror attacks, they are targeted as proxies of the state. That places on our Government—indeed, on each and every one of us—a special, inescapable obligation to ensure that those citizens are recognised, supported and treated with dignity, yet historically that obligation has not been fulfilled.

Previous Governments promised change and failed to follow through, offering thoughts and prayers when the attention of the world's media was on them while quietly ignoring and dismissing the pleas and plights of victims. I know that the Minister, as a veteran of the war on terror, will be all too aware of these issues. It is my hope that the debate is an opportunity not only for us to shine a light on the topic, but for parliamentarians of all parties to demonstrate to the Minister our strong interest in seeing this Government be the one who finally resolve this issue once and for all and substantively improve support for victims. No fluff—just change.

I commend the Minister on his recent announcement on issuing a Government tender for the establishment of a victims of terrorism support hub. May I commend Pool Reinsurance for its financial backing and support of the hub, investing millions in support for victims of terrorist attacks past, present and future? I know that we have a long way to go in improving support for victims, but this support hub, if implemented effectively, with correct oversight provided, will make a huge difference to the lives of victims of terrorism across the nation.

More generally, where have we been falling short? Before coming to the House, I, like many members of the public, was blissfully unaware of just how lacking our current support system was. We would all assume, perhaps understandably, that support for victims of terrorism is a given. After all, why would not we support those people? To think that they would go without support flies in the face of all we see reported on the news. Government pledges talk of resilience and strength

and of how we will not be cowed in the face of terrorism, but as the election loomed last year I was contacted by my constituent Travis Frain, who was injured in a terrorist attack on Westminster bridge and this House in March 2017 when he was just 19 years old. Travis told me his story. I would like to share a portion of it with hon. Members now.

While in hospital immediately after the attack, Travis received fantastic support and treatment from doctors, nurses and paramedics in the emergency department, but after his eight-day stay in hospital and two operations he was discharged home and simply told to contact his GP and say that he had been involved in a terror attack. He received no family liaison officer or point of contact of any kind in the police; the Metropolitan police deemed him not injured enough to receive one.

When Travis contacted his GP, he had to wait several weeks for an appointment, by which time his stitches had been left in for far too long, causing further and unnecessary scarring. He told his GP that he needed physiotherapy and that he wanted to offload what had happened to him, sharing it with someone trained and able to cope with such a traumatic situation and details; someone other than his friends and family. He was told that there would be a long waiting list for both services. After six weeks, he received a physiotherapy appointment but was told that he could be offered only non-contact physio. He was provided with a sheet of paper with suggested exercises and told to return in a few months.

Travis had to wait nearly 13 weeks for any form of psychiatric assessment, after which he received a phone appointment. By that time, having received little or no support, he was suffering with sleep issues, struggling to get to sleep and to stay asleep as well as struggling with nightmares, night-terrors and so on. The doctors told him that they were not able to provide any one-to-one support and the only advice they could provide for his struggles with sleep was to open the bedroom window for an hour or so a day to let in fresh air and drink a cup of warm milk before bed.

Travis was forced to start using his student finance to pay for private medical treatment, serving only to push him and his family into deeper financial worry at a time when the entire country would have assumed and expected the Government would wrap around him and such people to provide them with the support they rightly deserve. Since the attack, Travis has been working with other victims to improve support for victims of future attacks, and I am pleased that he has joined us here today. His is just one story of many, and I expect we will hear others in the debate.

Before I move on, Travis said something that stuck with me: survivors of terror can be an incredibly powerful voice in the prevention of future attacks, but only if we afford them the support and assistance they deserve. By investing in their support, we are not only investing in their recovery, but in a more secure and safer Britain. With that in mind, I hope the Minister will join me in thanking organisations such as Resilience in Unity, which is based in my constituency, for their incredible work to incorporate the voices of those with lived experience of terrorism in the prevention of radicalisation. Their work is undoubtedly having a significant effect on our national security space, and only serves to provide further justification of why it is so important that we improve support for victims of terror.

[*Andy MacNae*]

As the Minister will be aware, after a campaign by the charity Survivors Against Terror during the 2019 election, both major parties committed to implement Martyn's law to improve security of venues and crowded places. It has been wonderful to see that it has now received Royal Assent, but parties also promised to consult on a survivors' charter—a comprehensive guarantee of rights and entitlements for survivors. The charter was not designed as an aspiration, but as a clear blueprint for justice and dignity. Six years on, however, there has been sadly limited progress to respond to the charter. I want to set out the eight key tenets of the charter in full here, because every one of them is essential, and they will do well to frame the debate today.

The first tenet is guaranteed proactive personal support. As so many survivors have testified, it is not enough to offer passive signposting or vague advice. Proactive support means dedicated caseworkers, continuity of care and outreach that ensures no one slips through the cracks. The Government should maintain a dedicated database of people affected by terrorism to ensure proactively they are receiving the support they deserve and need. Victims should not be—as was the case with several of my constituents including Travis and survivors of the Sousse attacks in Tunisia and the Manchester Arena attacks—simply discharged from hospital after an attack and left to their own devices without any point of contact in the police, continuity of support from the NHS, or any form of assistance with their physical or psychological recovery.

The second is guaranteed access to rapid psychological triage and services. There is a good report by Survivors Against Terror, which I recommend. It reveals the scandal of survivors left to waste away for years on waiting lists for trauma counselling, in total distress and often forced to pay privately for therapy just to stay alive. One Manchester Arena survivor described being “in an appalling state of psychological distress”, unable to leave home. We are a first-world country and we can and should do better.

The third is guaranteed immediate financial assistance. Terror attacks destroy not only lives but livelihoods. Families can lose their main breadwinner overnight. Others face sudden costs of travel, funerals or accommodation. Immediate financial assistance must be available without bureaucratic delays.

The fourth is guaranteed state compensation funds. Hon. Members will likely be aware of concerns that the Ministry of Justice's criminal injuries compensation scheme is thought to be not fit for purpose, and survivors of terrorism are faced with a system so unresponsive that nearly three quarters of them are reported to have felt that the process was neither fair nor sympathetic. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority demands thousands of pages of paperwork from victims, forcing them to retraumatise themselves continuously for miserly small amounts of compensation. It has, in many cases, demanded repayments years later, reduced awards for irrelevant reasons, and retraumatized survivors with invasive evidence requests that require them to provide grisly evidence of their injuries. Like those young girls in the Manchester Arena attack, who had been peppered with fractures and shrapnel wounds across their bodies, they are forced to list their top five injuries, which will

then be calculated in decreasing order of compensation awarded. Are we so inhumane that we treat our fellow citizens with such disdain for what is often a very small amount of money? It is particularly disappointing, therefore, that the Ministry of Justice recently confirmed that it is shelving the long-awaited review of the compensation authority. The Minister might want to comment on that.

The fifth is guaranteed legal support. Survivors and bereaved families often face complex legal challenges: coroners' inquests, criminal trials, civil claims and compensation appeals. Too often, they are left to navigate that alone. The charter rightly calls for guaranteed legal support to guide survivors through this ordeal.

The sixth is guaranteed recognition. Recognition is more than a symbolic gesture. A recent report showed that 97% of survivors support the establishment of a national day of remembrance and tribute to survivors of terrorism. That would bring us in line with our international partners in France, Spain, Germany, Canada and the United States, which already observe such a day and recognise its importance. Other nations have even created national honours to mark the sacrifice of victims. Given that we have recently implemented initiatives such as the Elizabeth Emblem for first responders killed in the line of duty, I think the UK could consider following suit.

The seventh is guaranteed memorialisation. This calls for a commitment to support a permanent national memorial for all British victims of terrorism here and overseas. Survivors and bereaved families deserve a place where their loss and resilience can be honoured publicly and permanently and for the wider public to become better educated on the threat of terrorism. We have only to look at places like the US, where the 9/11 and Oklahoma City national memorial museums fulfil that exact purpose, ensuring that the next generation does not forget.

Eighth, and finally, is guaranteed comprehensive, long-term support. Trauma does not fade on a timetable, as many of us who have experienced loss know too well. For those with additional or different needs, such as children or adolescents or those from underrepresented communities, long-term support must be guaranteed, resourced and proactively offered so that no one is left isolated after the initial months have passed and the conversation has moved on.

Taking all that together, I believe that we must act now to put right years of neglect. I hope that today's debate will mark the beginning of a renewed movement in this House towards the betterment of support for victims of terrorism—both those who are already dealing with the impacts and those who will be affected by future attacks.

Survivors have waited years for action. They waited through repeated reviews into compensation, mental health and memorialisation, many of which remain unpublished or unimplemented. I am glad that, just months into his term, my hon. Friend the security Minister published in part a long-awaited Home Office review into support for victims of terrorism, especially as it sat on the previous security Minister's desk for two years after it was completed. However, more clarity is required on the 63 recommendations identified; it is not enough to publish just two.

As I move towards my conclusion, I note that in almost all the seats in the Public Gallery sits a victim of terrorism—I welcome you and thank you for being here. It should be clear to all of us that there is no Member of this House who does not have at least one constituent directly impacted by these issues. There is one clear and shared message from their many testimonies: the current system is not working. It does not recognise the unique nature of terrorism as the deliberate attempt to destroy public morale. It does not recognise that citizens have been targeted precisely because they are British. It does not recognise the dignity that survivors are entitled to as a matter of right.

I call the Minister to respond to three key requests. The first is to publish in full all, or as many as possible, of the 63 recommendations identified in the Home Office review of support for victims and set out a road map for implementing them with an explanation of why the Government feel that any need to remain unpublished, for instance for security reasons. The second is to update us on the Government's statutory consultation on the establishment of a national day for victims of terrorism, which concluded last month, and provide a timeline for when it will finally be implemented. The third is to share his understanding of how long it will take to set up the survivors hub that the Government have promised to implement and how long it will be before its services are up and running and available to victims. I am sure the sense of urgency will be not lost on the Minister, for another attack could happen at any time.

We must be clear that this is about not charity or pity, but justice: justice for those who, through no fault of their own, became participants on the frontline of a battle to protect our democracy and way of life. This debate is about more than policy; it is about who we are as a country. When terrorism strikes, it strikes at our shared values and our shared humanity. In standing by the survivors, we reaffirm our common purpose. If we fail to act, we are complicit in a further betrayal, and we will have allowed those who set out to divide and terrorise us to succeed by abandoning the very people that they harmed.

Let us commit today that no British victim of terrorism will ever again be left to feel that their country has abandoned them. Let us be the Parliament that finally acts to improve support for victims of terrorism—that proves to every survivor of terrorism that this country stands strong and unbowed in the face of terror.

1.43 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mrs Harris. I first met Travis Frain, the constituent of the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), when I was Security Minister at the Home Office. Travis has been instrumental in the survivors movement. He was one of a number of brave victims, survivors and family members I had the privilege to meet. Another was Figen Murray, the mother of Martyn Hett, who was killed at Manchester arena. She has campaigned so hard and showed immense courage and conviction in pursuing the creation of Martyn's law in the most terrible circumstances imaginable. That law will ensure better organisational preparedness in planning for and, in the worst case, responding to a terrorist attack.

We have lost two dear colleagues and friends from this House in Jo Cox and Sir David Amess. We are reminded daily of the bravery of all those who protect our society when we walk by the memorial stone to PC Keith Palmer.

For so long in our country, the Northern Ireland troubles were ever present. We must never underestimate the achievement of the Good Friday agreement, and the peace it has so far afforded should never be taken for granted. It can feel like there are times of frequent terrorist outrage and times of lull, but in reality, if we look at the timeline of terrorist outrages here and around the world, there has been little let-up at any time, even if the nature, the driving ideologies and the methods may change.

Terrorism permeates public consciousness, and it ravages the lives of those injured or bereaved. For everyone else, because it is largely indiscriminate in who it targets—members of the public in everyday, “it could happen to anyone” settings—it is intended to erode our sense of safety and security.

In 2025, we live in an age of ongoing threats from a diverse range of actors, including extremist Islamism, extreme right-wing terrorism and the growth of a broad ideology category termed “mixed, unclear or unstable.” Today there are more than 80 terrorist groups proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000, but those groups are only part of it.

Terrorism is now possible without a big organisation and, in recent years, it has been as much about individuals acting alone having been radicalised online. Terrorist attacks no longer require sophisticated weaponry when such destruction, devastation and loss of life can be caused with simple materials, even just a car or a van. While the national threat level remains substantial, our security services remain on constant alert.

Of course, today's debate is about giving a voice to the survivors of these terrible attacks. I know the Minister will continue to strive to ensure that survivor groups are always heard. We know from past experience the power of survivors in providing support to other survivors. I highlight the work of Survivors Against Terror and its survivors' charter. We also know the importance of both short-term and long-term mental health support for survivors. On the 20th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings in London, the group's publication of a collection of survivor testimonials is a timely reminder to us all.

The Home Office victims of terrorism unit recently published recommendations to improve support for victims and survivors of terrorism. I hope and trust that Ministers will be able to deliver against those recommendations, particularly more timely and specialist trauma treatment, improved communication on mental health support and financial compensation, and strengthened support for children and young people in accessing mental health support, including as they transition into adulthood.

I particularly commend the work of Travis Frain, who survived the Westminster Bridge attack. He has worked tirelessly both as an advocate for victims of terrorism and in the fight against violent extremism, from acting as national chair of the counter-terrorism youth advisory group to founding the Resilience in Unity project, not to mention co-founding Survivors Against Terror, campaigning for the victims of terrorist attacks and working on many other charitable endeavours, including the National Emergencies Trust.

[*Damian Hinds*]

There are many others like Travis who have devoted so much of their lives to working with other survivors. I especially commend all those who, in the wake of such unspeakable tragedy, devote their energies to promoting understanding, togetherness, security and peace. Their important work contributes to our shared sense of humanity.

This week we mourned the loss of Lord Tebbit. He and his wife were both seriously injured in the bombing of the Grand hotel in Brighton. Lady Tebbit was terribly disabled for life. I will never forget hearing Jo Berry CBE, the twin daughter of Sir Anthony Berry, who was killed in that bombing. Jo has dedicated her life to conflict resolution, founding Building Bridges for Peace, which promotes peace and conflict resolution across the globe. Her willingness to reach out, in a way that 99% of us simply could not, is truly incredible—in the correct sense of the word—and her story remains a most striking and challenging example to us all. We should be doing all we can to facilitate the telling of stories like those of Jo, Figen and others. I encourage Ministers in both the Home Office and the Department for Education to work together to see what more can be done to support and facilitate that.

This debate is particularly appropriate in this terrible anniversary week, as we commemorate those killed in the 7/7 attack. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating it and the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen for securing it.

1.50 pm

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing today's debate.

This debate gives us an opportunity to consider the people impacted by acts of terror who are too often reduced to numbers and statistics. It is so important that our support systems recognise the individuals behind the tragedies, as only then will they be able to deal with the range of challenges faced by victims of terror.

That is how Tessa Jowell, whom I had the pleasure of working for, approached the issue through her role as the Minister with responsibility for humanitarian assistance after 9/11 and in liaising with survivors and bereaved relatives after the 7/7 bombings here in London. I will talk about her work today, as well as what we have learned since.

As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said, this is a poignant week in which to have this debate. The 20th anniversary commemoration events across London this week have reminded us all of the horror of 7/7, in which 52 people were killed and 770 injured, with countless lives touched.

When my constituent Christian—a survivor of 7/7 who is now an advocate for other victims of terrorism, especially young people—asked me to speak today, it brought home the very real and raw individual horror of those attacks. I am pleased that Christian joins us in the Gallery today. He was only 13 years old on 7 July 2005. He had just begun to commute by himself into central London for school. That morning, just before arriving at Green Park station, his underground train came to a halt in the tunnel. The driver informed

passengers that power fluctuations on the line had brought the whole underground to a standstill and that the train would terminate at Green Park. In reality, the underground had just been targeted by suicide bombers.

Christian ran the rest of the distance to school, where he was told that his school had shut for the day and that parents would come to collect their children. Christian had no way of contacting either of his parents, so he headed home with his best friend and his friend's mum, who lived near Russell Square. As they walked towards Russell Square, they stepped on to the road near the British Medical Association on Tavistock Square when, in Christian's words:

"A complete deafening thump presented the torn shape of a London bus. The roof stretched out across the road towards us, and the graphic contents spread in every direction. The image was clear but there was no reference or knowledge of terrorism for comprehension. I did not understand what had just happened."

The trauma of what Christian witnessed at Tavistock Square led to his being unable to speak about his experience for many years. That suppression continued for 11 years—an entirely understandable and predictable response on a human level, especially for a child, but one that could have been prevented by better intervention. Ultimately, Christian suffered with post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health problems due to the severe psychological trauma inflicted by the attack and what he witnessed. Better and, crucially, quicker support might have helped to alleviate that.

Tessa Jowell spoke of how the "golden hour"—how victims are treated in the immediate moments after the first impact—is essential and crucial. That extends further with "A Survivors' Charter", authored by Survivors Against Terror, speaking of the "crucial immediate few weeks". Those are the weeks in which support is most important and effective. We must understand the difficulties that people face when seeking support during that time, and we must ensure that survivors are proactively offered effective support, rather than their having to seek it. That support must adequately deal with both the depth and breadth of trauma faced by victims and their families.

Tessa recognised the depth of this impact. In her lecture on the 10th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings, 10 years ago this week, she said:

"Pain of this kind is not like a hurdle you scale. It is a stain that may fade over time but it is always visible when you care to look."

The decision was made within two days of 7/7 to open a family assistance centre, which was intended to be a one-stop shop for assistance. It was modelled on the centres set up in Madrid and New York after their terror attacks, which were open 24 hours a day, providing a helpline, counselling, legal briefings, workshops and other services. Tessa was assigned responsibility for co-ordinating the centre's implementation and for providing Government support for victims' relatives more broadly.

After Tessa sadly passed away in 2018, Gerald Oppenheim—the chair of the London Emergencies Trust and former chair of the London Bombings Relief Charitable Fund, set up in the aftermath of 7/7—paid tribute to her work. Undoubtedly there were faults, as the work of Survivors Against Terror has highlighted. Government contact was slow, co-ordination was lacking and compensation was often too difficult to access. To her credit, Tessa acknowledged her shortcomings and was intent on learning from them. She said:

“You have to be prepared to stand and take the anger and frustration of families and take their experience as a resolution to do better next time.”

We could all learn from that approach, both today and in our broader work in this place.

I am confident that, 20 years on, the Government are making important strides and that this is seen as a cross-party issue. We heard from the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) about the efforts following the Manchester bombing, which were supported by Members on both sides of the House.

A new 24/7 dedicated support hub for victims and survivors, currently out for tender, will aim to provide comprehensive support, and there will be better, more proactive communication with victims to bolster awareness of the support available to them in the hours and weeks after a future terrorist attack—those are positive moves.

Undoubtedly there is more to be done, and I encourage the Government to sustain Tessa’s legacy, her compassion and her willingness to learn. I also encourage them to reflect on the experience of Christian, my constituent who is here today, because looking at the individual, not the statistic, is far more revealing of the impact of terrorism and the support we must provide to victims.

1.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris, and I say a special thank you to the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for bringing this motion forward. He and I talked beforehand, and it is very clear what he wants to achieve—indeed, it is the same reason why we are all here; we want to achieve it as well. As others have said, we have commemorated this week the anniversary of the London bombings. What a timely debate this is. The hon. Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) told the story of what happened to his constituent and his constituent’s friend. Although I was not in London at that time, I remember vividly the killings, the murders, and the victims and the destruction that took place. It is a timely debate to remember those who suffer the impact long after the headlines change.

I declare an interest as someone who has known the devastation of loss due to terrorism. I represent Northern Ireland—that is no secret; the accent gives it away, although to be fair to the hon. Gentleman who spoke before me, his accent would be perhaps similar through his family connections. The reason I am making this speech here is the murder of my cousin Kenneth Smyth on 10 December 1971. He was a sergeant—

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way; I understand why he might need to take a moment to compose himself. This debate is an opportunity for those of us whose friends and family have served in the armed forces or security organisations and lost their lives to pay tribute to them. Although today is about the victims of terrorism, we also think about those who run towards danger and face down terrorism where victims cannot.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for that. Yes—it is very real for us. I think of my cousin, 54 years ago, and even today, 54 years later, it is still as real for my family and myself. It is something that I do not

think I will ever forget. Those here in the Public Gallery today will know the same agony, pain and suffering that we have. We suffer every day because of it. My pain is no more than anybody else’s—definitely not.

I think of those who carry on the fight; I think of my cousin, Shelley, who will always push for justice for the murder of her brother. They say that time heals all things, but I believe that the heart retains a special memory, and that that will never dim for so many people. I commend my cousin Shelley for all that she does, and all the others in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and across the whole of Northern Ireland for what they do.

Liam Conlon: The hon. Gentleman is the Member of Parliament for a lot of my family, as he alluded to. They will be incredibly proud of him speaking up on this issue. I had the pleasure of visiting the WAVE Trauma Centre in Belfast, which the hon. Gentleman will know very well. It does fantastic work with survivors. In Northern Ireland, in response to the troubles, which were a 30-year conflict, people experience intergenerational trauma. The trauma is passed down, which is why we see one of the highest suicide rates in western Europe in Northern Ireland—I think it still has the highest suicide rate in western Europe. Sharing those stories is powerful and is a point of hope for so many people. My family and friends in Strangford are very fortunate to have an MP who speaks up on these issues so well.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman, my friend and colleague, for that intervention, and I apologise, Mrs Harris.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): No need.

Jim Shannon: I will mention others who are very important to me. As the leader of my party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), said in a recent debate on the European Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism, Northern Ireland has endured the brutality of terrorism for decades, and the legacy of so many atrocities remains in many hearts and homes to this day, right across all of Northern Ireland—not just in Strangford, which the hon. Member for Beckenham and Penge referred to and which I have the joy, honour and privilege to represent.

I think of the families of the Kingsmill massacre, where 10 Protestant workmen were slaughtered. It is as real today as if it had happened just yesterday. They still await justice. When I think of state support for the victims of terrorism, I think of accountability in the process of justice. I think of those who, to this day, hold on to the candle-like figure of justice that might just come their way, so that the person who murdered someone will be accountable. I say to the hon. Gentleman that, with fairness, it is not just about the support given; it is also about justice and responsibility. It is about feeling that the state—my country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—has been able to satisfy our quest for justice, so that those who carry out the crimes are accountable.

I think of La Mon in my constituency. They were having one of their dinners for the Irish Collie Club. Someone planted a bomb—there was a massive inferno of fire—and basically burned them alive. Accountability?

[*Jim Shannon*]

Nobody has been held accountable for that—but they should be. I think of the Enniskillen bombing. People were attending a Remembrance Day service; again, the IRA put a bomb there among men, women and children and just killed whoever was close to it.

I think of the Darkley Hall massacre—people were worshipping God. I think of the Tullyvallen Orange Hall, where Orangemen were killed just because they were Orangemen. I think of the four Ulster Defence Regiment men murdered at Ballydugan; I knew three of those men personally, and I often think of them—indeed, I think of them nearly all the time. No justice—no one made accountable; but there needs to be. That is what we want to see. That is what I want to see. My heart burns for justice for all those people who have lost loved ones over the years—for those families.

The inquiry into the Omagh bomb is currently sitting. Today, I was pleased to hear that Mr Speaker—and I am sure others also caught it in the Chamber—has agreed to what the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) asked for last night. He has agreed to the disclosure of the information that is relevant to the Omagh bomb, so we are going to have that on Monday, I understand. I do not know it yet, but that may give accountability and responsibility for those who carried it out.

Yet the pursuit of truth is too often obstructed, whether by the police ombudsman's office or through political calculation, as displayed by the Irish Government's ongoing stymieing of the truth of their role in our past. I think of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan. They were murdered on the border as they travelled home. The story is, very clearly, that those two men were murdered while returning, and the reason the IRA knew they were coming through was that someone in the Garda Síochána passed the information through to the IRA, who then made sure that they were targets. Accountability? No one has ever been made accountable for that. Indeed, the Irish Government run away from it. It is time that they stood up and made sure that the inquiries that we all wish to see actually take place.

Again, it is the same thing for my cousin Kenneth, who I referred to earlier. The three people who murdered him and his companion were looking for victims for supported violence. When Kenneth Smyth was murdered, his best friend was Daniel McCormick, who just happened to be a Roman Catholic—but that did not matter to the IRA, of course. As far as they were concerned, he was a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. Therefore, he was a target, and he was murdered as well. I want to see justice for him and his family every bit as much as I do for my cousin.

When it comes to support and financial restitution, they gave Daniel McCormick's wife and three children, one of whom was disabled, £3,500 pounds, I think. My goodness—it might have been back in 1971-72, but £3,500 pounds to rear your children and bring them up! They are all, of course, young adults today. The point I am making is that when it comes to restitution, we do not seem to have it. There can be no discussion of state support for victims without highlighting the need for justice for them. If you offered my cousin Shelley £100,000 in compensation, or the truth and accountability for

Kenneth's murder, I know what she would take. She would take the accountability and the need for truth. Those are the things that I would love to see.

However, we must also be practical and say that there are those who need that financial support as well, and that is also the thrust of this debate. All those people suffered that trauma, that ache and those recurring nightmares—perhaps we do not understand those things in their entirety, but they understand them, every day of their lives. We need to ensure that those who need our financial support get it.

With the death of a father or mother comes undoubted financial difficulty and disadvantage. It is right and proper that true victims of terrorism, while they can never be adequately compensated, are supported—and that is what this debate is about. That is why I welcome the commitment from the Minister and Government to this strategy, this policy and this way forward.

That leads me to my final point, which is to ensure that those victim makers, whose hands are not clean, but drip with blood, cannot ever access support or any form of financial compensation from this or any other successive Government. I welcome the news that this Labour Government, the Minister, the Prime Minister and others have said they are to ensure that Gerry Adams and other architects of heartache will be precluded from claiming compensation.

Whereas a libel case in the Republic of Ireland may seek to whitewash history—as it often does, unfortunately—I say unequivocally in this House today, using a phrase that has been said a thousand times to me, and which others will know: the dogs in the street know their own, and they know what Gerry Adams did. To ever conceive that he be due a form of compensation spits in the face of every victim of terrorism and indeed spits in the face of justice.

Today, we stand strong beside the victims of terrorism across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I respect the Minister, as I think we all do. He has lived a life; he is an honourable gentleman. He has served in uniform—he served in Northern Ireland—so he understands the issues and comes with the knowledge and experience that I believe is necessary for his role, both in this debate and in the future. The legislation will ensure that only victims, and never victim makers, are eligible to receive state support or help. I respectfully ask the Minister: when will it come to the House, and what measures will be put in place to ensure the Attorney General's past support of Gerry Adams, as his legal representative, will not be a factor in any role that the Attorney General's Office plays in the legislation?

To the true victims of IRA terrorism, of loyalist terrorism and of extremist terrorism across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, support must always be given, and by extension to their families, and it must be withheld from the perpetrators. I believe in my heart that the Government must be crystal clear about that.

2.11 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this hugely important and timely debate. As chair of the recently constituted all-party

parliamentary group on terrorism and security, he is a dedicated advocate on this subject—yet another issue on which he and I have a shared interest.

Terrorism is a cowardly act, targeting not only individuals, but the values we hold dear: freedom, democracy and the freedom to go about our lives without fear. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) rightly reminded us of the terrible attacks on 7/7, the tragic attacks on our dear friends Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, and how PC Keith Palmer was sadly taken from us, not far from where I stand today. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for sharing with us, with immense bravery, his personal pain and anguish. He brings incredible expertise on this topic to the Chamber.

When terrorists strike, they leave behind not just headlines, but long trails of pain and trauma. Families are torn apart, survivors bear both physical and emotional scars, and communities are left devastated. That is why we in this place have a huge responsibility to get the support for victims of terrorism right.

As an MP from the north-west of England, I want to touch on the Manchester Arena bombings in 2017. That evening, thousands of people—many of them children—left home to attend a concert, and either had their lives changed forever, or sadly never returned home at all. It was an event that I will never forget; I checked my mobile phone and found that an attack had happened, unaware of its scale, nature or severity, and struggled to comprehend why anyone would undertake such a cowardly and heinous crime. What should have been a joyful occasion ended in horror when a suicide bomber detonated a device in the arena's foyer as fans were leaving. Twenty-two innocent lives were sadly taken, and more than 1,000 people were injured. The entire region of Greater Manchester, including my community in Bolton, was shaken to its core.

Among the dead was Martyn Hett, a young man from Stockport. His mother, Figen Murray, has since become one of the most determined campaigners for change in this country. Figen has consistently advocated for Martyn's law, which finally received Royal Assent in April. It will require venues and public spaces to assess the risk of terrorism and take proportionate preventive steps to protect the public. Importantly, it will embed a culture of vigilance and preparedness, ensuring that safety is never an afterthought.

This is not about creating a climate of fear; it is about equipping venues, from concert halls to community centres, with the training and procedures necessary to act swiftly, to communicate clearly and, most importantly, to save lives. Martyn's law or, more formally, the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025, honours the lives we lost by protecting the lives that we might still save, and I commend the Minister for taking it forward.

While protection is key, we must go further and faster to support victims if and when attacks sadly do happen. Although some people have lost loved ones or family members, and others have continued to battle long-term trauma, the way communities came together to support each other after the Manchester Arena attack was inspiring. But we have to recognise that the state's support for the survivors and the families of the victims of the bombings was too slow and fragmented.

Earlier this year I, too, met with Travis Frain, who is in the Public Gallery and has already been mentioned by his MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale

and Darwen, as well as by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire. Much like Figen Murray, Travis has had to become a campaigner simply to shine a light on the failings of the current system—and he was rightly awarded with an OBE for his efforts. Travis made me aware of the difficulties of navigating legal processes, accessing mental health support and applying for compensation, all while dealing with the trauma of a terrorist attack.

At the time I thought, "This simply cannot be right. The state can't be placing a burden on people who've already endured more than anyone rightly should." So I welcome the Minister's recent announcement of the UK-wide victims of terrorism support hub, which will act as a single point of contact to connect victims and families with the help they need, from trauma-informed therapy and financial guidance to peer support and legal advice. I commend the Minister and the civil servants involved in this initiative. More importantly, I commend the victims of terrorist attacks in the UK and their families, who have never stopped fighting to ensure that others do not have to go through what they went through.

We have taken a landmark step forward, but I share colleagues' beliefs that we can still go further to do the right thing by these people, so I would like to ask the Minister to pursue four key initiatives to support victims. First, I echo the calls made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen regarding the survivors' charter, as advocated for by the Survivors Against Terror charity. Drawing on comparative analysis from countries such as Australia, Canada, France, New Zealand and the USA, the idea is that the charter will provide a list of guaranteed and legally enforceable rights for those affected by terrorism. It will thereby codify the state's obligations to victims and survivors, providing them with legal certainty and ensuring they are able to get the support they need.

Secondly, on the criminal injuries compensation scheme, some survivors report having their claims denied for arbitrary reasons, they experience significant delays in their applications being processed, and they fear that the means by which victims of terrorism can claim compensation has sometimes been cruel and ineffective. A number of victims have had to endure waiting for years to hear back from the compensation scheme. This is not justice. We need a scheme that is streamlined, trauma-sensitive and rooted in compassion. What assurances can the Minister provide for victims, many of whom are watching the debate, that the calls to reform how the compensation scheme operates will be heeded?

Thirdly, our mental health services are facing huge problems, but we must prioritise ensuring that adequate mental health care is available and accessible for the survivors of terrorism. Too many are stuck on waiting lists or provided with inappropriate therapy, some of which we have already heard about. That is simply not good enough. Specialist care should be available quickly and for as long as it is needed.

Finally, the legal support is so important. We cannot expect victims and the bereaved to have to navigate layers and layers of bureaucracy without any support. We need to have these people's backs, whether that is when they provide evidence at inquests and inquiries or when they navigate how to obtain compensation. All too often, survivors either go unrepresented or have to rely on pro bono advice given by lawyers.

[Phil Brickell]

Terrorism is designed to divide us—to spread hate and fear—but after Manchester we saw the opposite. We saw vigils in Albert Square and we saw young people in my constituency in Bolton raising money for victims as a clear sign of solidarity. We must ensure that every victim of terrorism, whether in Manchester, Westminster or anywhere else in the UK, is treated with dignity, fairness and enduring care and support.

The Government have already taken some important steps forward after years of dither, but the best message we could send to the families of victims and all those who have campaigned tirelessly on these issues over the years would be to publish the 63 recommendations identified in the Home Office's review of support for victims. Transparency now will allow us to work together to deliver equitable and realistic change. I hope the Minister will address those points directly.

2.20 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing a debate on this subject, and pay tribute to all Members who have spoken. The hon. Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) told the story of Christian; we have heard heart-rending stories about the experiences of real victims, who are with us today.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I want to think first about the victims of the 7/7 bombings in London, which we marked this week. We remember those 52 lives taken as well as the hundreds injured and the thousands who are the friends and families of those people. We also reflect on other attacks here in the UK. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) talked about the Manchester Arena bombing and its effect on him and his constituents. We should also reflect on the Westminster bridge attack, the London bridge attack, the Borough market attack and many more.

We should also think about British citizens who have fallen victim to terrorism overseas, whether at the Bataclan theatre in Paris, the Sousse beach massacre in Tunisia, or the Bali bombing, for which there is a memorial that I walk past when going along King Charles Street. There are so many—too many to mention.

So often, survivors and bereaved families demonstrate extraordinary resilience, but they need more by way of support from the state. They deserve more than just our admiration. Support must mean trauma counselling. Dare I say it, trauma is a word that has become overused in recent years, but it has no more apt application than on this subject. Support must mean long-term care and access to justice, including legal representation during inquests and coroner proceedings.

The criminal injuries compensation scheme is not tailored to terrorism victims and does not fully recognise their needs. It is also subject to strict criteria and time limits for applications. We have seen some developments in recent years, including the Ministry of Justice's 2020 proposals called for a stand-alone scheme for victims of domestic and overseas terrorism designed to improve awareness of and access to support.

It is unacceptable that victims of terrorism and bereaved families should not automatically be eligible for legal aid. When the state is involved in an inquest,

whether due to policing, shortcomings in security or broader systemic issues, public bodies attend with full legal teams funded at the public expense; meanwhile, families have to navigate the justice system alone. I therefore regret that the 2023 Ministry of Justice review of legal aid for inquests rejected automatic non-means-tested legal aid for bereaved families after state-related deaths, including terrorism. That was a missed opportunity.

The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen mentioned what other countries do. France does this better: victims of terrorism and their families there are automatically entitled to legal representation paid for by the state. We also need to rethink how we structure financial protection against terrorism in this country. Today, terrorism insurance is seen as an add-on, an afterthought or, worse, an opportunity for excessive profit. In France, terrorism coverage is automatically included in property insurance policies—it is not treated as a luxury—whereas in the UK it is applied unevenly. I have constituents who are freeholders in the relative safety of Devon who are having to purchase very costly schemes, yet there is no requirement for insurance in places where we might see a higher risk of terrorism. We also have to address survivors' longer-term needs in respect of mental health care and social support, and education for trauma-affected children.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) pointed out that PC Keith Palmer fell just yards from here, showing enormous bravery in seeking to protect the democracy that we hold dear. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke movingly about the terrorist attack that led to the loss of his cousin, who was plainly very much loved. The term "victim" can suggest somebody who is helpless, but that is not entirely the case because, thankfully, some people are very much prepared to step into the line of danger. I think of my friend Captain Rob Carnegie, who was not directly a victim of terrorists but died on the Brecons while training to fight terrorists.

Today, the Intelligence and Security Committee has published a report on Iran. This is also an opportunity to consider incidents of terrorism that have been averted. The Secret Intelligence Service website points out that, along with MI5 and GCHQ, it has protected London during the 2012 Olympics, enabled the disruption of the AQ Khan network that was proliferating nuclear technology to countries of concern, and helped to encourage the disbanding of the weapons of mass destruction programme in Libya.

The Liberal Democrats are encouraged by the Government's March 2025 commitment to new and strengthened support for the victims and survivors of terrorism, and we urge them to do more. The recent Home Office report rightly highlighted the need to reduce bureaucracy, provide clearer guidance and address the unique needs of victims, especially children and young people. We must ensure that the new 24/7 support hub is not just well intentioned but well resourced. The Liberal Democrats believe in compassion backed by action, which means the Government should guarantee automatic legal aid for victims and bereaved families at inquests, fully fund and empower the 24/7 support hub, and provide long-term mental health care and practical support for victims of terrorism.

2.28 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair today, Ms Harris. As other hon Members have done, I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing this important debate. The timing of it is perfect. I commend other hon. Members who have spoken for their thoughtful, powerful and persuasive arguments. So often in this Chamber and the other one, we have political ding-dong. Sometimes that is effective, and sometimes heat does create light, but this debate has been totally different; it has been from the heart and from experience, and it has brought real compassion and humanity to this very important issue.

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), made a good job of précisising some of the arguments. I will try not to repeat what he said, but I want to highlight some of them.

I will kick off with the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen. He made eight requests of the Minister, and I take this opportunity to amplify them in so far as I am able. I particularly focus on the three primary requests with which the hon. Gentleman finished: to publish the 63 recommendations of the Home Office review; to put forward a national day for victims of terrorism; and to get a date—hopefully an early date—for the opening of the victims and survivors of terrorism support hub. I repeat those requests for the Minister to respond to.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made an incredibly thoughtful speech, in which he recalled the right hon. Lord Tebbit—he died just a couple of days ago—who was badly injured in the Brighton bomb, and his wife even more so. I bring my own very limited experience of this; both of my parents were blown up in that bomb, so it is real for me as well.

The hon. Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) told the story of Christian. He was 13 when he was covered in trauma; I was 14. His scarring and injury have been so much worse than my own. The hon. Member highlighted the need for support in the first hour—the golden hour—but also the long-term support that is required, and he quite rightly said that this is a cross-party issue. I will be quite brief, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) showed how raw the impact of terrorism is, even 55 years later. He lives it today just as much as he lived it then.

The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) highlighted the Manchester Arena bombing. He focused on the survivors' charter, criminal injuries compensation scheme—I will return to that in a minute—and the need for legal support for victims dealing with the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. I could not agree more. Two careers ago, I was a barrister and represented applicants in front of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. I know the scheme is out of date, but the approach to compensation was one of penny-pinching and seeking to avoid paying compensation for victims of crime, rather than lessening their burden. There is definite work to be done. The hon. Member also highlighted the need to publish the 63 recommendations from the Home Office review.

This debate addresses our fundamental duty as a state: how we care for those who have suffered the most grievous of harms—the physical and emotional harms

that have stemmed from the wish to terrorise, divide and coerce our citizens and way of life. I want to take this opportunity, as others have done before me, to pay tribute to every victim, survivor, witness and family member whose life has been irrevocably altered by terrorism.

Actions and events that play out over a fraction of a second leave lasting traumas, as we have heard—and, indeed, demonstrated—throughout the course of this debate. As one survivor of the Manchester Arena terrorist attack said:

“It has been on my mind every single day since it happened...It is going to have a lasting effect.”

How right that is.

Successive Conservative Governments have committed to supporting victims of terrorism. We have always protected counter-terrorism budgets; these are meaningless numbers, but £2.5 billion was allocated to our intelligence services. Following the series of terrorist attacks in 2017, we created the victims of terrorism unit, establishing co-ordinated support for the first time.

Theresa May, as Home Secretary, strengthened the legislative power of the state with the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. Her successor, Amber Rudd, established the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), during her time as Home Secretary, proscribed five extreme right-wing terrorist groups. By 2024, the Government were delivering £1 billion annually in counter-terrorism funding.

Coming back to the criminal injuries compensation scheme, in 2020, it was announced that there would be a review, with proposals for a standalone scheme for victims of domestic and overseas terrorism designed for the unique trauma involved. Yet it feels as though that has essentially been shelved. I do not want to make a political point—that is not the tone of this debate—but I would be grateful if the Minister could explain why it has been shelved, when, on the face of it, the review supported having a standalone scheme. The impact of terrorism on victims is different from the impact of harms caused by crime.

I welcome the recent tender announcement for the victims and survivors of terrorism support hub, but it is funded, as I understand it, by a grant of £2.5 million covering 3.5 years. I stand to be corrected by the Minister; if he has a different figure, I would be grateful to hear it when he responds. By my rough account, it is about £700,000 of support a year, so we will ask this hub to do an awful lot. It will have a wide and important remit. How will around £700,000 a year be sufficient to answer the real need that this organisation is designed to address?

Since 2020, the Home Office has funded a number of organisations to help victims of trauma. Victim Support provides a 24/7 contact centre and initial needs assessments. The South London and Maudsley NHS foundation trust, which has not been mentioned so far in the debate, delivers specialist clinical mental health support. The Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation facilitates peer-to-peer support networks, which are very important, while Cruse Bereavement Care offers specialist bereavement support.

Although I welcome the tender process for the hub, the wording currently suggests that a new provider will be selected competitively. I wonder whether we risk

[Jerome Mayhew]

creating a hollow hub. There are concerns that if it does not take advantage of the expertise that the existing organisations have built up, creating a wholly new, standalone body may lead to duplication and a loss of institutional memory and expertise. There is a solution to that, but I want to hear the Minister recognise that as a potential problem and tell us whether the Department is alive to it as a concern.

Next, we come to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which is often impersonal and defensive. A Survivors Against Terror survey of 130 victims found that only 7% felt that the CICA was sympathetic, while 72% felt it was unsympathetic. Whatever the outcome of the process, that demonstrates that it is failing—there is clearly something profoundly wrong. Additionally, 68% found the process unfair and unreasonable, and fewer than half could speak to someone for help. As Brendan Cox, the husband of our murdered colleague Jo Cox, stated:

“CICA is broken...An organisation that is supposed to be helping survivors recover and rebuild is instead consistently doing them harm.”

However, in May, the Government announced that it would not reform the CICA's scope, the time limits associated with application or its rules. That feels like a significant error, so I ask the Minister: why do the Government appear to be prioritising existing CICA practices over the experiences and concerns of applicants through that process over many years, and particularly those who have experienced terrorism?

Under our current system, victims can wait years. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth, has mentioned the French system. It has a guarantee fund for victims of terrorist acts and other offences, which proactively contacts victims within days and provides emergency monetary advances within the first month. However, here in the UK, as a Manchester bombing survivor stated five years after that terrible night:

“I am still waiting for CICA to settle my claim.”

The ultimate support we can offer victims is to ensure there are no more of them, which brings me to the crucial matter of prevention. The Shawcross review found that the Prevent programme had suffered from mission creep and cultural timidity in tackling Islamist extremism, which remains responsible for 75% of the work of counter-terrorism investigations. We must recognise that head-on and not shy away from it. I would therefore welcome it if the Minister could provide concrete data demonstrating Prevent's fundamental rebalancing since the Government accepted all 34 of the Shawcross recommendations.

In summary, I seek a response on four key areas. First, I would be grateful if the Minister set out his thinking on how the relatively limited funding for the victims and survivors of terrorism support hub will fulfil the hopes and ambitions we all have for that new organisation. Secondly, on integration, can he guarantee that the trusted and experienced organisations I referred to—the South London and Maudsley NHS trust, the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation and Cruse Bereavement Support—will be mandated as part of the new hub or that it will call on their expertise? Whatever the mechanism, can he guarantee that their expertise and service will not be lost as a result?

Thirdly, on compensation, what is the rationale for not progressing the CICA reform, despite what I think is overwhelming evidence that it should be reformed? Fourthly, on prevention, what evidence demonstrates that the Shawcross recommendations are being implemented? Our duty to support victims is a moral obligation. Victims do not need another layer of barriers; they need immediate, compassionate and properly funded support. They need a dedicated terrorism compensation scheme—like the one the previous Government proposed—that would, importantly, put an end to the failing bureaucracy of the CICA. Those targeted by terror have faced humanity's worst; they deserve society's best in return.

2.41 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this debate on what has been a deeply important and emotive subject. It has been an excellent debate, and we owe him a debt of gratitude for bringing us all together today. I join him in paying tribute to and thanking Travis Frain. My hon. Friend rightly recognised him for his bravery in sharing his story, and for the work he has done over many years to raise awareness of these important issues. Travis's story is a powerful one, and it is ingrained in the minds of all of us who were here in this House on that terrible day.

A good deal of ground has been covered, and I will shortly come to the various points that have been raised. Before I do, I want to add my voice to the message of sympathy and solidarity that has been a prevailing feature of this debate. This debate has served as a powerful reminder of the devastation caused by terrorist attacks and the responsibility we all bear to support those who are affected by them. It is also a timely debate. This week we mark 20 years since the 7 July London bombings—an atrocity that is seared into our national memory. Above all else, we look back and think of the 52 victims who lost their lives, and we stand with their families, the survivors and everyone who was affected.

I will shortly come on to some of the areas that were highlighted during the debate, but before I do, I want to take the opportunity to summarise the Government's position. Just as we remain totally focus on preventing attacks, we are, of course, equally committed to ensuring that those affected by terrorism receive the highest levels of support to recover and rebuild their lives. Over the years, I have had the great privilege of meeting many victims and survivors of terrorism. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to them, and to pay tribute to and thank all who have joined us in the Public Gallery today. I have today—as I have on many other occasions—been moved by their strength and unwavering dedication to advocate for change, not just for themselves, but for others who may one day walk the same difficult path.

It was clear to me, coming into Government, that we must do more to ensure that victims and survivors receive the support they so need, and that their suffering is not forgotten. That is why the Home Office undertook to complete a comprehensive review of the needs of victims and survivors, placing their voices at the very heart of the process. The review identified the key challenges and is helping to shape our response, to ensure that support is meaningful, accessible and enduring.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Several Members have raised the issue of the 63 recommendations, which I know the Minister will touch on. I also recognise that the Minister published some of the findings of the Victims of Terrorism Unit report in March, which is appreciated, because previously there was a bit of black hole in terms of information. That is genuine progress, and I think we all recognise that the commitment to the support hub will make a genuine difference to people. I pay tribute to the Minister for taking that step, while joining the call for the full transparency and publication of those recommendations.

Dan Jarvis: That is a very helpful and constructive intervention. If my hon. Friend bears with me for a moment, I will have a bit more to say about the review and the important point he made about transparency.

We are introducing a dedicated support hub to provide a single point of contact for victims and survivors in the immediate and long-term aftermath of an attack. We are also moving forward with plans for a national day to remember and recognise victims and survivors of terrorism, following consultation on the subject earlier this year. Those plans represent the first steps in our wider commitment to ensure that victims and survivors receive the support they need and deserve.

I want to come to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen. I understand the calls for greater clarity on the publication of the Home Office's review into support for victims and survivors of terrorism. As Security Minister, my priority has always been on implementing meaningful improvements to the support that we can offer. Although the review is an internal document and was never intended for publication, I reassure the House that the measures that we are now implementing directly reflect the insights and recommendations it contains. Those actions span multiple areas identified in the review, from mental health and financial support to legal guidance and care for children and young people.

It is, however, important to me that we are transparent about the challenges that victims and survivors experience. That is why, on 19 March, we published a summary of the review's findings on gov.uk, so that victims, survivors and the public could see the key themes and challenges that emerged. The published summary reflects the full breadth of themes identified in the review, not just the two individual recommendations. We remain absolutely committed to keeping stakeholders informed as we move forward with implementation.

I am very grateful to victims and survivors and their loved ones, and all those members of the public who participated in the public consultation. The consultation ran from 19 March to 11 June. We are now carefully analysing the consultation responses to ensure that every voice is heard, and to help determine our next steps. We will publish the consultation's findings as soon as that process is complete. Once the full outcomes are available, I look forward to updating the House further.

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, people experience unimaginable loss, life-changing injuries and deep psychological trauma. No one should have to experience that, and certainly not alone. That is why, on 3 July, we launched a commercial process to establish a dedicated support hub for victims and survivors of terrorism. The

hub will offer a single point of contact to help victims and survivors navigate support, while providing specialist support to address their complex needs. The intended design of the support hub was shaped directly by those who have been affected by terrorism. I want the new hub to meet those needs and provide victims and survivors with the highest level of support, by offering a 24/7 communication channel, dedicated caseworkers to provide one-to-one support, specialist psychological support and interventions, access to psychosocial treatment options, help with practical needs, tailored support for children and young people including peer-to-peer support, assistance in applying for state compensation and other financial support, and practical and emotional support through state, legal and coronial processes.

Our aim is for the hub to be available by summer 2026. The hub will set a new standard for how we care for those affected by terrorism, both in the immediate and in the long-term aftermath of an attack. It will ensure that support is not only comprehensive but trauma-informed, recognising the deep and lasting impact that terrorism has on individuals and on their families. That is more than just a change in approach; it is a transformation in how we deliver care.

Crucially, we are backing that commitment with the funding that it deserves. Just last week I was pleased to announce that, through our partnership with Pool Re, the Home Office has secured up to £3.5 million to fund those vital services, but in response to the points made by the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), I give him the assurance that I will keep a very close eye on the numbers. I also acknowledge the important point that he made about ensuring that we retain institutional knowledge.

I should like to address a number of important matters that have been raised. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) spoke with real authority and experience on these matters, and he rightly paid tribute to Figen Murray. We will hear a bit more about Figen in a moment, as well as about our dearly missed colleagues Jo Cox, Sir David Amess and PC Keith Palmer. I thought the right hon. Gentleman gave a very accurate picture of the threat that we face today, and I know that he will want to join me, as will all hon. Members, in paying tribute to the police, the security services and all those who work so hard to keep us safe. He also reflected on the horrific bombing in Brighton. It is right that we remember all those who lost their lives and whose lives were changed forever. It is particularly good to see Jo Berry, who is here with us today in the Public Gallery, and I join the right hon. Gentleman in sending condolences to the family of Lord Tebbit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) spoke movingly about the late great Tessa Jowell and her work, and also of his constituent Christian, who is with us today in the Public Gallery. It is incredibly hard to imagine what it must have been like for Christian on that day, but his story and his trauma remind us of why we all need to do everything that we can to support the survivors of terrorism.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke incredibly movingly about his experiences of terrorism in Northern Ireland. He and I have discussed these matters over many years. He is such a great champion for his constituents and for Northern Ireland, and

[*Dan Jarvis*]

I know that the House will be very grateful for the powerful testimony he gave today, including his points about the importance of truth and justice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) spoke about the trail of trauma left by terrorism. He spoke very movingly about the Manchester Arena bombing and about the extraordinary campaigning work of Figen Murray. I am sure that all Members will be aware of her extraordinary campaign. It has been incredibly inspiring, and I am so proud that this Government brought in Martyn's law. Figen is not here today—I understand that she is having a day off, a day off that still involves her doing work—but if she were here, I can categorically guarantee that she would insist that I also mention the other members of her campaign team, Brendan, Nick, Nathan and, of course, Stuart, who is with us today in the Public Gallery. I hope that I have gone some way towards addressing the four points that my hon. Friend raised, but I am very happy to discuss it further with him should he so wish.

I do want specifically to address the point that he and other hon. Members raised about compensation, because we have heard today about the real and ongoing challenges that victims and survivors face in accessing the timely and adequate financial support that is essential to rebuilding lives and enabling recovery. We recognise that navigating compensation schemes and financial assistance can be complex and at times overwhelming, especially in the wake of trauma. The support hub will seek to address that by offering practical, trauma-informed support throughout the process, from initial application to appeal, where that is appropriate. By providing guidance and advocacy, the hub aims to ensure that victims are supported while their claims are progressed. We are also working closely with CICA to explore ways of improving the overall experience for victims, including clearer communication and the more compassionate handling of cases.

Finally, I reflect briefly on the contributions made by the hon. and gallant Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) and the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham. I agree with the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham that the matters we are debating should not be party political. We need to work together to secure the best outcomes for victims, survivors and their families. That is the approach that I will always take.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about Prevent, but I am running short of time. I can say that we have implemented the recommendations of the Shawcross review. We have also appointed Lord Anderson to be the independent commissioner for the Prevent programme.

The Home Secretary and I take such matters incredibly seriously, and we do everything that we possibly can to ensure that the Prevent programme is fit for purpose.

To close, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen for securing this timely and important debate, and all Members who have contributed to today's discussion. The issue matters enormously to us all, and that has come through with crystal clarity in every contribution. I pay tribute once more to the extraordinary courage and strength of every victim and survivor of terrorism, especially those who are here with us. A number have bravely shared their stories throughout the review, to ensure that their lived experiences have helped shape its outcomes. Many have campaigned tirelessly to raise awareness of the issues impacting victims and survivors.

The Government take their responsibilities in this area extremely seriously. We have listened and I have set out that we are acting. We will transform support by delivering a dedicated support hub. We will introduce a national day for victims and survivors so that the country can stand alongside them in reflection and solidarity. We will continue that important work to deliver the change that has long been called for. At its heart, this is about doing what is right. It is about supporting people who have endured trauma and loss in the most devastating of circumstances. It is about showing compassion, empathy and humanity. Put simply, it is about upholding the values that we all cherish and that terrorists seek to destroy.

2.57 pm

Andy MacNae: I thank the Minister for his response and every colleague present for their brilliant contributions to the debate. I was just reflecting on how many Members present have been personally touched by incidents of terror. For so many of us, it is removed by just one or two persons. This is a personal matter for so many Members of this House, and it was enormously reassuring to hear the cross-party and consensual nature of the debate—the recognition that the subject is something I think we all feel a great imperative to address. I hope that our guests in the Gallery will feel reassured that this is a Parliament that, across the Benches, is absolutely committed to delivering true change in this area.

Through the all-party group, which we formed recently and of which colleagues present are members, we have an opportunity to support the Minister in all the work being done to deliver on those commitments now and in the coming years. I thank everyone, and you, Mrs Harris. I hope that the debate has given everyone a great sense of reassurance.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered state support for victims of terrorism.

London's National Economic Contribution

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered London's contribution to the national economy.

It is an honour and a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mr Western, for this important debate on London's contribution to the Government's national growth mission. I am proud to be a London MP, and of the contribution that our great city makes to our country, and to the world. It is disappointing that, in some quarters, London-bashing has come back into fashion. People want to talk down our city for their own political agendas or—dare I say it—play vigilante for likes on social media. I hope that today we can instead focus on the mutual benefits that a strong London economy brings to the UK.

We all know that the problems inherited by this Government are far bigger than London alone. For too long, our country has missed opportunities to unlock growth and potential for all our people and places. Since the global crash in 2008, productivity has flatlined. Stagnation has taken hold, hurting not just London's prospects but the prosperity of every community across the UK. Regional divides were allowed to deepen, potential was wasted, and growth was squandered. The promise of levelling up proved nothing more than a gimmick: more hanging baskets than a genuine effort to tackle regional inequality. It is welcome that we have a Government determined to change that with their relentless focus on tackling regional inequality by delivering good jobs, putting more money into people's pockets and giving local communities real power over the decisions that affect them.

The Green Book review and the commitment to place-based growth are important steps forward because every community deserves a fair chance to thrive, but we should be clear that tackling regional inequality must never mean holding back our greatest national economic asset. That has never been a strategy for success. London is one of the most successful cities in the world, a gateway for global talent, investment and trade, and an economic engine that drives prosperity far beyond the M25. We finally have a Labour Government working hand in hand with a Labour mayor to deliver, for example, the London growth plan that I know the Minister recently helped to launch, which is a blueprint to boost productivity and build the infrastructure that matches that ambition. It aims to ensure that London contributes an extra £27.5 billion in tax revenue by 2035. That is money for our NHS, our schools and our public services everywhere in this country.

To unlock London's full potential, we need to be clear about what more needs to be done. I know that colleagues will talk in this debate about ensuring that our streets are safe, with properly funded policing, and that our councils have the resources they need to deliver basic services to some of the most deprived communities in the country. I will cover three areas at the outset: first, ensuring that London remains a magnet for global talent, attracting the skills that we need to lead the industries

of the future; secondly, delivering the homes that the capital needs, which means social and genuinely affordable homes that support strong, thriving communities and provide the foundation for growth; and thirdly, a transport system fit for a world-leading city.

Let me start with talent. The recent immigration White Paper offered some welcome signs, by recognising that the global race for talent is accelerating and Britain must compete in that race. We want a controlled immigration system with democratic consent, and the Government are right to prioritise that, but we must not let that system become a barrier to attracting the people who will drive our future growth. Many businesses in Kensington and Bayswater tell me that they are struggling to hire the people they need. I believe that we need urgent reform of how we attract talent. That means the global talent visa, of which only 4,000 were issued last year. I think we should aim for at least 10,000 a year, to send a clear message that Britain and London are open for business, and for talent. We should also introduce a credible investor visa—not a return to the failed pay-to-play schemes of the past and the golden visa fiasco, which was tainted with corruption, but a genuine pathway for entrepreneurs in high-growth sectors like biotech and clean energy.

The west London tech corridor, for example, is ready for exponential growth, but it needs capital, talent and leadership, and world-leading institutions like Imperial College London rely on international talent to stay globally competitive. The proposed UK-EU youth experience scheme is therefore an important step forward. I know that businesses welcome it, including those in hospitality, where cost pressures have been acute. We should build on it, because if we want Britain to lead in the industries of the future, we must be a country that welcomes talent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for rightly bringing this forward. For the record, I wish to see London doing extremely well, because if London does well, I think we all do well. In 2024, 264 foreign direct investments arrived in London, which indicates not only the importance of London but the potential that people see for investment. Does he agree that when it comes to encouraging foreign investment, there has to be a spin-off for Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh as the three regional capital cities? The Minister may have committed to this, but perhaps he can build on it: London does well, and the spin-offs are for the rest of us.

Joe Powell: I agree with the hon. Member. Before this debate, I was looking at the Transport for London budget. It contributes £11 billion to the UK-wide economy through the construction of what we hope will be new trains on the Jubilee line, the DLR and hopefully the Bakerloo line, and supports 100,000 high-quality jobs across the country. Transport and manufacturing are sectors that have huge spin-off potential across the country.

Another such sector is housing. It is a huge relief that we now have a Government who recognise the true scale of the challenge and are prepared to put serious investment and policy change behind it. In my constituency, there are 3,000 families on the social housing waiting list and more than 2,000 people living in temporary accommodation. The housing crisis is not a victimless problem. Many colleagues see it every week in their surgeries and inboxes.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that London has the highest housing costs in the whole country and a quarter of Londoners live in poverty? Coming down the track towards London is the Government's fair funding review, under which local authorities in London could lose up to £700 million in funding. This comes after hundreds of millions of pounds were cut from local councils under the Conservatives' austerity programme. It could hit my boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham, and Kensington and Chelsea, which we share, particularly hard. Does he agree that the Government's funding review should measure deprivation after housing costs so that the level of deprivation in London is accurately captured?

Joe Powell: I thank my neighbour for his intervention. We all welcome a fair funding settlement that recognises the huge levels of regional inequality in this country, but it is correct and fair for it to be based on accurate and up-to-date data and for that data to include the very high proportion of Londoners' incomes spent on housing, which pushes up the poverty numbers. We have some of the most deprived communities in the country, often hidden within quite wealthy boroughs, so we also need to capture the geographical areas of deprivation. I also suggest that the Government include the daytime population, because lots of commuters come in and use council services but are not necessarily captured in the census.

Temporary accommodation, as we know, costs London councils £4 million a day. Obviously, the long-term solution is to build the houses that we need, but in the short term we should not hit everyday services that people need on the back of that budget.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing today's debate. It is timely, both in terms of London's potential and current contribution to growth and the fair funding review. He mentioned the £4 million per day that London local authorities spend on temporary accommodation. My own local authority, Westminster city council, spends £66 million over and above what it would be expected to spend on temporary accommodation. These costs are a function of the long-standing failure to build the genuinely affordable homes that we all know are so desperately needed. Does he agree that the additional temporary accommodation costs that London local authorities face should be recognised in funding settlements, and in the capital funding assessments of the affordable homes that are built? Does he also agree that the systemic problems that we have with homelessness in London need to be recognised in order for us to really fulfil our potential?

Matt Western (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members to keep interventions short.

Joe Powell: My hon. Friend is right. There is obviously no quick fix to this problem. It takes time to build new housing and ramp up the pipeline for it, but the current situation is not tenable. London boroughs compete against each other for increasingly expensive temporary accommodation with very low levels of quality. First and foremost, that hurts families and residents, affecting their life chances and preventing them from playing a full role in the economy. It is an urgent issue. I know the

Government are working on a temporary accommodation plan—we have discussed that in the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. We hope to see more detailed proposals of how to fix this problem in the short run while we build the housing that we need.

The target of 1.5 million homes in this Parliament hugely depends on building in London. Of that 1.5 million, London's target is to deliver 88,000 homes a year in this Parliament, so the spending review announcement is critical. The £39 billion in the affordable homes programme, including £11.7 billion for London, the 10-year rent deal and the new low-interest loans will make a real difference.

I was also pleased to see something that I have been calling for, which is equal access to the building safety fund for housing associations. Many housing associations have been putting more capital into remediation and not into building new homes. My strong belief is that the legacy of Grenfell must be that everyone, no matter where they live, can access a safe and healthy home. We should not have a false choice between building the homes that we need and building safety.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. He mentions the need to ensure that the legacy of Grenfell is kept in mind and that building safety is at the forefront of building homes in London, but has he noted that, in the last quarter, there were zero starts on housing in 23 out of 33 London boroughs? Much of that was not because of a lack of funding—there is huge investment from the Government—or because of planning issues, but because of the Building Safety Regulator being very slow in agreeing to applications. Does he agree that the Government might need to look at the resourcing of the Building Safety Regulator? Keep the regulation, but put more resourcing in.

Joe Powell: My hon. Friend is right. It is welcome that the Building Safety Regulator will be getting 100 new staff, and that Andy Roe has come in to chair it. I am sure the Minister can give more detail. We also need to see faster progress on remediating buildings in London. The new London remediation board, co-chaired by the Greater London Authority and central Government, is really important for that too. The reason this is important for growth is because it is sucking time and capital out of the system to build the new homes that she talks about.

I agree that the statistics on new starts have to be turned around. Everyone in this city, including the key workers who will not always access social housing allocations—the teachers, nurses and police officers—need different housing options, including different affordable housing products. Those are the people we are increasingly pushing out of central London, and out of London altogether, which is a huge challenge for our city.

Housing and transport go hand in hand, and both are fundamental to delivering growth. Without modern, reliable public transport, we cannot unlock the new homes that London needs, or drive the business growth that will power our city's future. For too long, the Conservatives held back Transport for London with short-term and inadequate funding that prevented it from planning for the future. That is why I really welcome this Government's commitment to a long-term funding deal. Sustainable investment of £2.2 billion over, I think, four years will deliver things like new trains on the

Piccadilly line and the docklands light railway—the Bakerloo line, too, I hope—as well as new signalling on 40% of the tube network and a new tram fleet. As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the TfL supply chain is critical across the country, supporting high-quality jobs everywhere, but we must go further.

It was pleasing that in the spending review the Chancellor recognised, for example, the potential growth and housing benefits of the DLR Thamesmead extension, and committed to working with TfL to explore all options for its delivery. I ask the Minister to keep up the momentum on that project and look into alternative financing that might be able to come in and get it moving as soon as possible. I am sure hon. Members will talk about other vital projects such as the west London orbital.

Deirdre Costigan: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me an opening to mention the west London orbital, which is another important project in connecting up west London and opening up opportunities for both employment and housing. Does he agree that both TfL and the Government should look at innovative and creative funding options such as tax increment funding as a possibility for such initiatives?

Joe Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A combination of financing instruments was used to fund the Elizabeth line. That approach has huge potential for big infrastructure projects in London, including the proposal for a new St Mary's hospital. It cannot be right that we are reliant on the Treasury capital budget for projects that we know will pay back over and above in the long term. There is a strong appetite to explore how different financing mechanisms could get these projects moving.

We should harness London as one of our greatest assets, not at the expense of other regions or of tackling regional inequality but for the benefit of the whole country. We should tackle regional inequality head-on, and I believe that London is part of the solution to that problem.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. Just a gentle reminder please to speak through the Chair—so “you” is me, as Members will appreciate. At this juncture, I do not think that we need to put a time limit on speeches.

3.17 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for securing this important debate. London is an economic powerhouse, which generates revenue for the entire country. The capital city's contribution to the economy is nearly 25% of the UK's entire GDP.

While redistribution of revenue across the UK is important, it should be noted that London has some of the highest rates of poverty. In particular, it has the highest rate of child poverty, at 35%, compared with a national average of 29%. Disparate income bands and living standards are more evident in London than anywhere else in the UK, but the cost of living is also greater in

London than in any other area. The average London house price is more than double that in the rest of the country.

I raise those points because the Government's changes to local authority funding will mean that London councils face a funding shortfall of an estimated £500 million. Consequently, most London boroughs will have to raise council tax by the maximum amount each year to raise revenue for the funding of key statutory services. It also means that some councils will be threatened with bankruptcy.

Redistribution of wealth across the UK is important, but the absence or poor use of measurements in the Government's fair funding formula will produce unfair results for Londoners. The index of multiple deprivation is being used as a need driver in the fair funding formula, but, as the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) pointed out, that index does not include a measurement of deprivation after housing costs. London residents pay the highest average rents in the country, so excluding that statistic will result in an unfair measurement of deprivation, and London residents will lose out unfairly.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): The hon. Member is making excellent points. On deprivation and the cost of housing, does she agree with me that when we factor in London's housing costs, London becomes the poverty capital of the country? Without vital funding for housing in London, London does not grow. If London does not get the funding it needs for housing, it holds the rest of the country back.

Sarah Olney: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. She is exactly right. Housing costs in London are far above the average for the UK as a whole. The average Londoner has to pay these costs out of an income level that is on average higher than across the country as a whole, but not to the same magnitude. Measuring deprivation based only on income before housing costs is a key unfairness for Londoners, because their housing costs are so much greater. She is absolutely right that if we underfund London, as will happen if the measure of deprivation after housing costs is not used, London will be underfunded and that will threaten the economic development and growth of the UK as a whole, because London is so essential to what happens across the UK.

The number of visitors that an area receives is also being used as a factor in the funding formula, but the review is using figures from the 2021 census. We were still coming out of the pandemic when those figures were collected, so London had significantly fewer visitors than in an average year. As somebody who has regularly travelled from outer London to inner London over the last few years, from 2021 to 2025, I can assure the Minister that the number of people on our tubes and trains has grown significantly. My data is anecdotal, but I am sure my impression is shared by many Londoners who made similar journeys in that period. If visitor numbers are to be used as a measure to feed into the fair funding formula, it is vital that up-to-date figures are used. I urge the Government to review the formula with updated figures to ensure that it does not produce inaccurate results, which will again result in unfair distribution of Government grants.

[Sarah Olney]

I and Liberal Democrats in general very much welcome the Government's announcement of a 10-year infrastructure plan—a clear vision for housing, the economy and social infrastructure, which is required to drive growth and investment—but I am disappointed that the Government have yet to announce whether the £1 billion provision from the structure fund will be allocated towards the repair of Hammersmith bridge in my constituency, which, as I am sure the Minister knows, has been closed to motor traffic for six years. We remain uncertain about whether the Government intend the bridge to be repaired and whether they will commit to providing the funding for those repairs. Any indication of their position from the Minister will be welcomed by my constituents.

The closure of the bridge has affected local residents and commuters, particularly disabled and elderly residents, who have been cut off from the other side of the river, and emergency services remain unable to cross. It has also had a massive impact on businesses just south of Hammersmith bridge that relied on the passing trade. We look forward to the announcement of what the structures fund pot will be used for, and hope very much that some funding towards Hammersmith bridge will be included. I urge the Government not to miss that opportunity.

The bridge itself is a tourist attraction in my constituency. It is one of London's oldest bridges—there has been a bridge on the site since the 1820s, and the current structure dates from the 1870s—and I dare say the fact that it is a museum piece is one of the many issues that has prevented funding from being allocated for its repair until now. It is one of many wonderful tourist attractions in my constituency. Kew Gardens was the second most visited paid-for attraction in the country last year. We also have the wonderful wetland centre just south of Hammersmith bridge and many other wonderful tourist sites, not least the park after which my constituency is named.

London as a whole is visited by more than 20 million tourists every year, who bring with them significant contributions to our economy. A key factor for tourists is to feel safe when choosing London as a destination, but the capital's reputation as a safe city to visit is on the decline. It is vital that London has visible and sufficient policing to tackle crime and keep visitors and residents safe, but the Chancellor's spending review did not include additional funding for the Metropolitan police, despite their commissioner warning that “eye-watering cuts” would have to be made if funding were not provided.

The cuts will be felt in my constituency. The disbandment of the dedicated royal parks police unit is of great concern to my constituents. The parks police serve Richmond park diligently, ensuring that crime and antisocial behaviour are kept to a minimum. Their removal will mean that our already stretched safer local neighbourhood teams have to take on additional responsibilities in their absence.

The Richmond Park constituency used to be home to three police stations, but after years of cuts not a single one remains, even though Barnes is one of 72 wards in London that are more than a 13-minute drive away from the nearest police station. These cuts cannot continue, and I urge the Government to stick to their commitment of increasing the police presence in London and across the rest of the UK. I receive daily emails from my

constituents expressing their concerns about theft, violent crime and the lack of visible policing. Will the Government be able to provide assurances that my constituency will not have fewer officers serving it at the end of this year than before Labour took power?

Investment in London can and does boost economic growth, which provides investment for other regions. I urge the Government to understand and acknowledge the significant contribution that London makes to our national economy. London must not be short-changed by the Government. I encourage them to review the criteria for their fair funding formula, to invest in the repairs to Hammersmith bridge and to release more funding for the Met to ensure that residents and tourists feel safe walking our streets.

3.26 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) on securing this vital debate.

If we are serious about national growth, we must invest in London. That should not be in dispute after what we have heard today. London is the UK's top global city. It is home to more than 9 million people and generates almost one quarter of our entire economic output. Its net contribution to the Treasury now stands at a record £43.6 billion. That is why we need to invest in London—because London invests in the UK. It is essential.

On the way to this debate, I was talking to—or, more correctly, arguing with—a non-London MP, who was saying, “It's about time we got some of that money out of London.” This is the environment that is being created when we talk about taking from London instead of saying that we need to invest in London and in the regions. We have heard how much tourists spend in London—a whopping £16.3 billion, even while still recovering after the pandemic. If the Government introduced a VAT exemption for tourists, that figure would be boosted, and an overnight accommodation levy of just £1 would bring in some more money, which could be used for the development of London by the Mayor of London. We need to stop the narrative that London is somehow separate from the rest of the UK and that we take from London to invest elsewhere. That was the attitude of the last Government, and it is the wrong attitude; it should not be carried over to this Government.

Let us take as an example the Bakerloo line, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater mentioned and which I travel on regularly. It is the oldest train service in the UK, and by gosh, when we are on it we can feel that. It very much needs to be upgraded. It runs right through my constituency of Brent East. If we invested in the Bakerloo line, not only would that make my life easier—although I know this is not about me—but the project would add £1.5 billion to the UK economy and support 150,000 jobs and more than 100,000 new homes. What is there not to like about investing in the Bakerloo line? In addition to that, two thirds of TfL's suppliers are outside London—the new trains are built in Yorkshire—so that economic wealth is spread right across the regions. This is not London versus the regions; it is London working with the regions for the betterment of the UK. We can and must grow together.

The same applies to our safety and infrastructure. A safe and functioning London not only supports residents and businesses here, but ensures that our capital remains open to global investors, visitors and institutions. As we recently read, people now see London as the place to be and invest in. Companies are moving from the US to the UK: they want to invest here because of our infrastructure and our diversity, which we are proud of.

The reality is that after a decade of Conservative cuts and neglect, our emergency services are under huge pressure and are struggling to survive. The Fire Brigades Union had a lobby here yesterday. Ten or 20 years ago, there was talk of reducing the fire service because we had so few fires. Now, with the advance of electric cars, mopeds and bikes, we have more and more fires, so we need to invest. The Metropolitan police has delivered £1.2 billion in savings since 2012-13, and there is now talk of frontline cuts. We just cannot have that in London. That is a threat not just to London's safety, but to our economic stability.

Past investment has delivered. To those who say, "That's not the case," I would point out that the Elizabeth line unlocked 55,000 homes, created tens of thousands of jobs across the country and added an estimated £42 billion to the economy. This is how we invest and make money. Not only that: the Elizabeth line has the best air-conditioned trains in the city—I think everyone appreciates that right now. We need to repeat that success, not retreat from it. We need to praise London.

Productivity in London has fallen since 2008. The Conservatives created funding formulas that pushed funding away from the areas that needed it the most. The then Prime Minister talked about that during the election—quite embarrassingly so. Since 2010, my borough of Brent has been forced to cut a whopping £222 million in funding due to the Tory austerity measures, and we still need to deliver. We need to stop cutting and start investing.

We are now behind cities such as Paris and New York in productivity. That should concern every single one of us in London and elsewhere. We need to work with London. I am concerned about the local government funding reforms, because although we are rightly introducing a new focus on deprivation, not including housing is a skewed way of looking at it. Often in my constituency, 70% of people's earnings goes on housing.

I am always proud to see our London MPs—they are some of the best MPs in the House. I urge the Minister to reconsider the reforms and ensure that they reflect the unique, pressing challenges that London is facing. We should not shy away from that; we should be proud of what London brings to the UK. This is about not special treatment but sound economic judgment. A thriving capital fuels a thriving country. We do not have to choose between London and the rest of the UK. In fact, choosing London is choosing national growth, so let's invest in our capital, our transport, our safety, our housing and our skills. Let's back London, and let's all love London.

3.34 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I too thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for securing this important and timely debate.

Often, when people think about London's economy, they think about the City banker at the Bank of England or the towers at Canary Wharf, but London's economy is so much more than that. The value of London's economy is dynamic and diverse, and it is visible in outer as well as inner-London boroughs such as Hillingdon, which my constituency lies in.

Uxbridge and South Ruislip is central to London's economy and our industrial landscape. We are home to major manufacturers such as Coca-Cola Europe and General Mills, which makes everyday products that hon. Members might know, such as Green Giant sweetcorn, Old El Paso and many other good—but perhaps not good for the waistline—products. They are key contributors to the UK's food sector, which the Government are rightly elevating in their new national food strategy. We are also home to key transport and logistics businesses, with two airports—Heathrow and RAF Northolt—and major freight routes linking up the rest of the country.

We are home to key life sciences organisations and institutions. I recently had the privilege of meeting AAH Pharmaceuticals, which distributes huge amounts of pharmaceutical products just in time to local community pharmacies across the country. There is also our contribution to the defence sector, which the Government are rightly backing with increasing proportions of GDP to rebuild our armed forces. We are home to armed forces industry businesses making parts for our submarines and frigates, our RAF Northolt base, and our service personnel and other associated contractors. The care and health sector also features prominently in our borough, and provides jobs for thousands of residents. The economic case for the role of care is clear, and it is a key growth sector for our economy in London, as well as the country more broadly.

In Uxbridge and South Ruislip we are not just delivering today's jobs, but tomorrow's economy. I have had the privilege of meeting with Brunel University, a national leader in engineering and life sciences with a recently opened new medical college. Uxbridge college, our further education institution, has just agreed a partnership with MIT in the United States on engineering, which shows the future-facing nature of our education sector, underpinning the UK's goal to become an innovation superpower. It is vital that we invest in further and higher education and our skills sector if we are to grow.

London's economy contributes £500 billion annually to the UK economy. That is both central and outer London. Although we do not agree on much, I am sure the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) would agree that industrial clusters in outer-London boroughs such as Hillingdon are important in their own right, and are exactly the sort of regional engines of growth that our industrial strategy should back. The strategy talks clearly about supporting city regions and clusters with key industries, and Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and Hillingdon more broadly, are perfectly fitted to that model.

There is a growing view that London should take a back seat in investment compared with other parts of the economy, but that is a false economy. When London grows, other regions grow too. The links between regions and nations in the United Kingdom are clear in terms of jobs, tax revenues, exports and supply chains. I remember being the cabinet member for the economy

[*Danny Beales*]

and regeneration in Camden for seven years, when I was involved, to my pleasure, in the knowledge quarter developing around life sciences, tech and AI, with huge multinational businesses, spin-outs and start-ups. It was not just a story about the growth of London and King's Cross; businesses there were connected to the Cambridge and Oxfordshire arc, and places such as Leeds and other northern cities. Growth in the knowledge quarter benefited the whole UK economy. That is true of so many of London's economic growth clusters.

Growth in London is not automatic, and it cannot be taken for granted. It needs fostering and investment. That has not always happened effectively over the last 14 years. Issues such as energy grid constraints, particularly in west London, are holding back growth, house building and the expansion of key institutions and organisations. It is vital that we deal with grid connectivity if we are to support London's growth. Transport investments are key to growth not just in central London, but outer London too. Freight infrastructure needs investing in and we need to support workforce mobility. I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) when she praises the value of the Elizabeth line, and not just because I take it to work four days a week here in Parliament; it has generally transformed so many parts of our city and other growth towns along the way to Reading and Maidenhead too.

I recently visited the CLIP project, the Central line improvement programme, and it talked directly about how new trains for the Piccadilly line were being built in places such as Derbyshire. There were huge links with jobs, skills and growth through the investment that TfL is making. We need to go further and faster to keep our city moving. The Elizabeth line, particularly the Maidenhead and Reading branch which serves West Drayton, is nearing capacity due to its success. It needs extra trains quickly, and I hope the new stock that this Government have supported financially will serve the Reading and Maidenhead branch. We also need investment. It is a shame, having completed Crossrail 1, that Crossrail 2 is still just an idea and there is not a spade in the ground. Ideally, spades would have continued to move and the digging machines would have moved forward in building Crossrail 2, and we would now be planning Crossrail 3 and 4 to meet the city's needs and unlock growth potential for the UK economy.

As hon. Members have mentioned, policing and crime is not just a safety issue; it is an economic issue too. Business growth and confidence depend on public safety and people being able to invest, open businesses and go to businesses and high streets with the confidence that they will be free from crime and disorder. Policing in London performs two roles—a local policing role, and vital central and national roles too. That was not always considered when funding was allocated. As hon. Members have mentioned, we vitally need investment in the Met to ensure that it can do both those things to the best of its ability.

Deirdre Costigan: I thank my hon. Friend, and almost constituency neighbour, for giving way. Does he agree that it is important that we have more police on the ground in London, which I believe this Government are ensuring, but also important that those police have powers

—which has not happened over the last 14 years? Therefore, would my hon. Friend welcome this Government's new Crime and Policing Bill, which will bring in respect orders and will also ensure that police can take action against shoplifters who were getting away scot-free under the last Government?

Danny Beales: I completely concur. I have recently been visiting shops, including Sainsbury's, in my constituency, and have been told of the awful situation over the last 14 years, with theft and shoplifting skyrocketing, and people having a licence to shoplift with the £200 rule under the last Government. Staff in those shops welcomed the news when I told them about the protections for shop workers and the scrapping of the £200 rule. Lots of other measures in the Crime and Policing Bill are strongly needed and much overdue. I completely concur with that point.

Housing has also been mentioned and is vital. I welcome this Government's record commitment and investment into housing. I believe around £11 billion of that investment will come to London; that is crucial. We have huge amounts of stalled sites, some half-built, in Hillingdon. In Uxbridge, at the St Andrew's site, the concrete core is up, but the cranes went a number of years ago due to the Liz Truss mini-Budget chaos. A number of other sites, including at the former Master Brewer, have planning permission for hundreds of homes which could make a vital contribution to solving our housing and temporary accommodation crisis. They need bridging capital, investment, loans and investment in affordable housing. I welcome the Government's commitment to move forward on that agenda.

The industrial strategy is clear that the UK's prosperity depends on long-term strategic investment in the places and sectors that deliver. Uxbridge, South Ruislip and Hillingdon are among those places that are delivering in food, logistics, care, science, innovation and skills. If we want Britain to grow, we must back London—and Hillingdon—not just its banks, but its factories, freight depots, research hubs and colleges.

3.43 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for securing this debate.

London is not where I was born, but for so many of us who come to our great city, it is where our life begins. As a wide-eyed, bushy-tailed teenager arriving to study at Imperial College—as has been mentioned already—in the early 2000s, I felt the visceral sensation of my life changing. London is, and always has been, a melting pot, smorgasbord, tapestry and every other cliché you can find to describe the world's greatest city—as I am sure all of us present in Westminster Hall agree. That is why it is the honour of my life to be the Liberal Democrats' Front-Bench spokesperson for this city, which I love so dearly.

As I sat in St Paul's cathedral earlier this week for the commemoration of the 7/7 attacks, I reflected on what makes London so special: everyday heroes and ordinary working people, who face unbelievable challenges in a city that stands astride hemispheres and cultures, but who get up every day and carry on.

It is often tempting to separate economic progress from cultural pride, but I think they are one and the same. It is the hard work and energy of Londoners that make this city contribute so much to the nation's economy and society. Yet they face immense challenges: some of the highest rates of child poverty in the nation; crumbling hospitals; crimes such as knife crime and tool theft that destroy lives and livelihoods; profound infrastructure problems that hold back growth and cut off opportunities, not least for the disabled or disadvantaged; and lingering environmental problems, with pollution thick above some of our major roads and dense in our great river.

I cannot pass up this opportunity to ask the Government not to leave London behind or simply continue to tack to the record of the last Conservative Government in failing to take steps to keep London as a world city, and a liveable one too. Yet I fear they are veering dangerously close to that path. Let me start with the hike in employers' national insurance contributions. If we were looking for a way to actively stymie London's innovation and business environment, which is already dealing with global shocks and Trump's tariffs, that misguided tax policy would be right up there.

If Britain is an island of shopkeepers, London is its longest high street. Our economic activity makes up more than a quarter of the nation's annual GDP. Were it simply the case that such growth was generated just by the hands of a few financial institutions in a glass tower above the City, that would be less impressive. However, it is in the enterprising small businesses—the family-run restaurants that punch above their weight—and the world-leading research institutions, big and small, that London's real economic powerhouse sits. London's care workers, bus drivers and street cleaners, who keep our city liveable for ordinary people, despite the rising cost of housing, are the fuel that keep the engine going. To hammer them with what turns out in practice to be a jobs tax is totally misguided.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has shown that the £25 billion a year the hike is supposed to raise is far too optimistic, and the figure seems to be much closer to £10 billion. Indeed, that figure could be more readily and justly raised by reversing Conservative tax cuts for big banks, increasing the digital services tax on the largest multinationals or the remote gaming duty for online gambling firms, reforming capital gains tax to make sure that the super-rich pay their fair share rather than hard-working Londoners being hit by the tax because of the ballooning housing market, or funding His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to collect the tax that is owed and currently dodged by companies and individuals wealthy enough to afford the best advice.

Governing is about choices, and the Government have made the wrong choice for Londoners and the whole country with the NICs hike. Will the Minister outline whether a review of the policy, or at least exemptions, will be considered at the autumn Budget?

The Government have also chosen not to seriously grip the mantle of the reform that would turbocharge growth most of all: fixing the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal that has left London languishing outside the European market in so many meaningful ways. It is good that they have begun some of the work of normalising our relationship with our biggest neighbour and trading partner, but they will not budge on the most critical issue of all, which is a new customs union with the EU that would boost growth and, by extension, tax receipts.

Nobody wants to return to the Brexit wars of the last decade, but the Government would do well to remember that nobody voted to make themselves poorer on that day in June 2016. Whether Londoners or the British people, remainers or leavers, nobody wanted to be worse off—and we were all promised by both sides that we would not be. There is a significant opportunity to right that wrong as we normalise our relationship, and the Government are just not taking it.

In much the same way, the Government are failing to invest in the infrastructure that London needs to deliver its share of the growth that Britain needs. Even though we welcome the 10-year infrastructure plan, many of us noted that there was no commitment in the spending review to the capital funding needed for the Bakerloo line extension. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) so vividly explained, Hammersmith bridge—such a vital artery not just in her constituency but across west London—remains shut, with no commitment to a proper funding agreement to get it permanently reopened. Parts of outer London, like in Sutton in my constituency, remain in effect cut off from the TfL network, because of either poorly performing bus and national rail services or the complete absence of tram or tube infrastructure in the borough. To be absolutely correct about that, we have half a tram stop in Sutton, but we tend not to count that.

London is not just Soho and Chelsea: it is places like Sutton, Hillingdon, Hornchurch and Enfield—proud boroughs with combined populations of millions that must play their part in growing the pie, and that need commuter transport investment to do that. Where infrastructure projects happen, they seem either to be delivered at great delay and overspend, like the new Piccadilly line trains, or to be unimaginative white elephants, like Mayor Khan's Silvertown tunnel. The new four-year deal for TfL outlined in the spending plan presents a chance to change that. I invite the Minister to outline whether the Government will now look at finally delivering progress on reopening Hammersmith bridge, on the Bakerloo line extension and on the DLR extension to Thamesmead.

It is just not good enough. Many Londoners are left asking why London's contribution to the nation does not mean that its voice is heard. Compared with its peers around the world, London does not have anything like the appropriate devolved powers. In the patchwork of devolution that has been woven in this country this century, London's settlement is looking increasingly threadbare and outdated.

The Greater London Authority has nowhere near enough power to shape the mayor's agenda and hold them to account, and the mayor's powers are themselves too limited. Not enough money raised in the city can be spent in the city. Local councils, the bedrock of London's governance, are ignored, prevented from working strategically across the city, and powerless to stop year after year of funding cuts. How else can we explain the actions of a Government who are pushing ahead with a new funding settlement that could leave some councils losing 70% of their spending power? That is particularly foolish at a time when councils are doing great work to boost London's growth, with superb research and development schemes such as the London cancer hub in my borough of Sutton, which could create thousands of new jobs locally.

[*Luke Taylor*]

Perhaps the most pertinent question is: who really speaks for London? It certainly isn't Sadiq Khan, who promised us that with

"the winds of a Labour Government at our backs"

he would be able to deliver for Londoners, but on the day of the spending review made himself completely unavailable for media comment. Where was the voice that London needed on that day? He is evidently not as affective, and this Government not as receptive, as we were led to believe. As a result, I fear Londoners are being sidelined in respect of the industrial strategy and fiscal policy.

Why, for instance, is London excluded from the new £150 million creative place growth fund, and from the British Business Bank's new nations and regions investment fund? Why have the Government not listened to calls, from not just the Liberal Democrats but the private sector, to replace the apprenticeship levy with a skills and training levy that is properly integrated with devolved powers over skills, to give businesses the flexibility they need? Why have the Government not even listened to our calls for lifelong skills grants? I hope the Minister can explain.

We must level up all parts of Britain. There are regional imbalances in this country that are totally unjust—I know that more than most, having come here from rural Lincolnshire—but there is no path to growing Britain without a strong, dynamic, self-governing London. As I stand here having recounted so many of the challenges that London faces in continuing to contribute to the nation's economy, I wonder again in frustration why, in my role of Liberal Democrat shadow London spokesperson, I am not able to shadow a Minister for London—although I mean no slight on the Minister who is here. There has been one, on and off, for 30 years, and the Government's decision not to appoint one is a gross oversight for all the reasons brought up in this debate.

Dawn Butler: It is actually not unusual that when there is a Labour Government and a Labour mayor—like when there was a Tory Government and mayor—there is not a Minister for London. Also, on the hon. Member's comments about our Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has been the biggest business mayor London has seen. He has been a better advocate for London than any Tory or previous mayor. It is a little bit unjust to refer to him in the way the hon. Member did.

Luke Taylor: The hon. Lady gives a stirring defence of the Mayor of London. We are trying to make the point that there is no cross-Government holistic view of London's priorities. Londoners need a voice inside the Government: our interests ought to be not divided out across Departments and responsibilities, but co-ordinated and addressed holistically. That is the point about a Minister for London who would be able to co-ordinate Departments and responses.

There needs to be conflict with the Mayor of London—somebody fighting for London and against the Government, whether that is a Labour Government, a Conservative Government or, heaven forbid, a Liberal Democrat Government. We need that conflict, challenge and alternative view, because their goals often do not align perfectly. There has to be that champion, and I do not

believe that the voice of the Mayor today is loud or clear enough in that regard. I take the hon. Lady's points in the positive way that I am sure they were intended.

We deserve the attention, investment and confidence of greater devolution—even more powers for the Mayor to do as he sees fit, as the London regions and councils should direct. We need to keep on doing our bit to drive the economic value and contribute to our great country.

3.56 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak for the official Opposition in this debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for having secured it.

Although there will always be a degree of party political difference—I am sure the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) achieved some cross-party consensus when he said "heaven forbid" the idea of a Liberal Democrat Government—what came across clearly in every Member's contribution, including from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), was the sense of valuing the success of our capital city, and understanding the contribution it makes not just to the people who live here and choose to make it their home, but to our country as a whole. That is my starting point.

In preparing for this debate we will all have been sent a lot of information from many organisations that represent different aspects of life in our capital, but is clear that the contribution of London's economy to the rest of the country is vital. It is vital because it is the biggest income earner for our country, because it makes a huge net contribution to tax receipts, which support public services across the whole country, and because it is the one genuine world city that places the United Kingdom in an internationally competitive economic league. That is why it has such an incredibly diverse population. In my constituency alone, which is not by any means one of the most diverse in London, well over 100 first languages are spoken by local residents, yet they all have in common the essential fact of being Londoners.

As we consider the decisions that the Government will have to make, and the policies they are considering, I would like to highlight a number of points that arise partly from the views brought forward local authorities and business organisations, but also from the day-to-day concerns we hear from Londoners.

A number of Members highlighted the challenges around housing, which is an important place to start. We recognise the nature of our city: housing remains in huge demand and, as several Members highlighted, is significantly more expensive than it is in the rest of the UK. In Greater London, 300,000 new homes already have planning permission. However, we have to acknowledge that there has been a 66% reduction in new home starts in the last two years, and in the last 12 months a 92% reduction in new home starts through our housing associations, which are the main provider of social housing. There has also been a 27% rise in the last 12 months in the number of people sleeping rough on the streets of our capital city. There is, then, a rapidly accelerating challenge around housing and, overall, a collapse in London's delivery of house building in recent years, compared with the ambitions that the Government have set out and many London boroughs have enshrined in their housing targets.

We need to ensure that the aspiration the Government set out in their Planning and Infrastructure Bill is reflected in the actions that take place in the market. The very significant loading of that additional housing funding towards the tail end not of this Parliament, but of the Parliament after means that many of those London boroughs are asking when they can expect to see the additional resources that will help them to deliver that aspiration. Decisions that have been made, for example, to further ringfence the ability of local authorities to spend homelessness funding that they already have further constrains their ability in particular to address issues around rough sleeping.

We also need to recognise that, although many have made reference to the challenges of the local government funding formula, the NHS funding formula also creates very significant variations in the levels of funding, particularly within the capital. Just as, on the whole, inner London boroughs under governing parties of all colours have enjoyed significantly better per capita levels of funding than those in outer London—reflected in widely differing levels of council tax—we know that certain parts of our London NHS are significantly better funded.

The Minister will have been in the Chamber and heard many of his colleagues talk about their hope that the new 10-year plan for the NHS will see the further development of walk-in services and urgent care centres to keep people out of A&E. The NHS, because of its funding pressures, is looking to close those services at Mount Vernon Hospital in my constituency, creating further pressure on an already hugely pressured A&E in the constituency of the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), who will be aware of this already, as the hospital is under the same NHS trust.

We need to make sure that not only local government, but the national health service are thinking about how they can deploy their resources in the interest of Londoners across the capital. We also need to reflect on the diversity of London's economy. As a number of Members have mentioned, when we talk about London we tend to think of glass towers in the City inhabited by billionaire international bankers. However, 44% of the London borough of Havering is farmland, as is 23% of the London borough of Hillingdon and 35% of the London borough of Bromley. As well as attracting international capital and the cutting-edge technology industries, London also remains significant through the contribution that agriculture makes to the life of people in our capital.

Those of us in outer London, where most of those farms are located, will have heard loudly and clearly from local farmers—whose land is often not just farmland, but often a crucial part of the green belt, which maintains and supports the environment of our city—how concerned they are about the impact of measures such as the family farm tax. The family farm tax has a disproportionately large impact on London, because that farmland is of significantly higher value than equivalent sites in other parts of the country, due to its location in Greater London.

Danny Beales: I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. Does he agree that, although the farmland and the farmers of London are deeply important, that is one crucial measure—alongside a number of others that the Opposition have not supported—that will raise billions of pounds to invest in our NHS? Hillingdon

hospital now has £1.4 billion, after only getting £70 million from the last Government, to be actually built after 14 years. Is it not the case that every constituent in Hillingdon will benefit from that and every constituent in London will benefit from billions of pounds more in our NHS and in education?

David Simmonds: I am glad to hear my neighbour express his strong, vocal support for the family farms tax. I am sure his constituents at Goulds Green farm, Maygoods farm and other such places will be listening attentively to the position he takes as they reflect on the impact that will have on their businesses and the contribution they make to the local authority.

Given the wealth it generates and the contribution that it makes, London needs to have those world-class services funded correctly. The hon. Member will know, as he was a by-election candidate before becoming a Member of Parliament, that Governments of all parties, broadly speaking, have made commitments. We need to make sure those are delivered and that some of the changes made, particularly on London's fringes, do not have a detrimental impact. I suggest to the Minister that it is worth having a consultation going across Government on what the impact of some of those decisions around the London fringes will have on the provision of NHS services in the capital.

The fact that London is not immune to those worldwide trends means that issues around crime and personal safety remain very significant, and particularly salient in their impact on our tourist industry. All of us work in this city and will be very aware that, in the good weather as the summer holidays get going, our public transport is full of people from all over the world coming to stay in London hotels, spend money in London restaurants, go shopping, and take their children to see London museums. Making sure that we live in a capital city that is safe, and where the traditional reputation of the United Kingdom as a safe reputation is maintained, is incredibly important. I pay tribute to the work that one of my local councillors, Susan Hall, the Conservative leader at the GLA, has been doing to make sure that those issues remain active and at the forefront of mayoral thinking.

We know that Mayor Khan was the only police and crime commissioner in the whole country to give back to the previous Government the money that he was given for extra police officers in the capital, because he chose not to spend it on that. That has left a deficit in our police numbers across the city. We need to ensure that our police have not just the resources but the connections with other local public services that enable them to do an effective job of cracking down on crime. That is a process of long-term change. In the past, many retailers asked for and were granted additional powers, via the Security Industry Authority, to enable their in-house staff to, for example, carry out arrests of people who are shoplifting. The cost of insuring those staff has run well above what any of those businesses contemplated. We must recognise that we are therefore facing a new policing paradigm, around shoplifting in particular.

In conclusion, although this is not just about the Minister's Department, we need to hear from him that the Government are sighted on the value that London adds to this country. There has sometimes been a sense, particularly in the debate about the local government funding formula, that any formula that does not extract

[David Simmonds]

significant resources from London and redeploy them elsewhere will not find favour with this Government. I appreciate that the Minister is under pressure from colleagues across the country who want the deployment of additional resources, but a 27% rise in rough sleeping in the capital and the collapse in the delivery of social housing under this mayor is putting acute pressure on London's local authorities. The levels of deprivation in some parts of this city are especially acute, given that London's median income is around £10,000 a year higher than that of the rest of the United Kingdom, which means the dynamic around housing costs is particularly powerful.

We need to ensure that this city can continue, from its thriving economy, to contribute 22%—although the figures are debated, and it depends which lobby group you ask, it is between a fifth and a quarter—of our country's GDP, or around £12 billion net, after public expenditure, to the wider Exchequer of the United Kingdom. That is £64,000 a year GDP per capita against a UK average of £37,000 a year. That economic competitiveness is living proof of the effectiveness of trickle-down economics. We know that, from the international billionaire who decides to build a new business headquarters in the city, to the trades, the workers who deliver it and maintain it, everybody benefits from the success of London. This is, and must remain, a city where people from all over the world and all over our country want to come to live and work, to study, to make a home or to raise a family. As this debate has showed, we all recognise the stake that we have; for all of us, as Members of Parliament, London is not just a place where some of us choose to live, but the place where all of us spend our working lives.

4.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair for the first time, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) on securing this important debate. He set out a compelling case for important things that he wants to see with regards to housing, attracting the best talent and transport. I will seek to mirror those points, make a couple of points of my own and cover other points that hon. Members have raised.

This debate is timely for a couple of reasons. I will not wave a prop—not knowing your tolerance for such things in the Chair, Mr Western, I dare not test your mettle—but I speak 90 minutes after my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution introduced the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill in the Chamber. That Bill will make the Greater London Authority an established mayoral strategic authority, which will mean the Mayor of London will benefit from a right to request powers to add to the devolution framework, or to pilot them in London where he thinks they will help him to deliver growth. It is also timely because multiple colleagues have sought to tempt me on the fairer funding formula, and I will cover those in my remarks as well. That consultation is under way; I think colleagues have probably contributed to it in what they have said today, and there will be opportunities to do so until 15 August.

I am sure it is no surprise to hon. Members to hear me say that economic growth is the No. 1 mission of this Government. For that to be successful, we must have a successful London. It is the world's greatest capital city—no Nottingham, perhaps, but a peerless global city. I was resisting going to Huddersfield, for the benefit of the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal); but I think I have laboured that one enough.

London's success is Britain's success, exactly as colleagues have said, and we, as the Government, are committed to playing our role in that. I was really pleased to be with the Mayor of London and with London councils as he set out his long-term vision for local growth in the recent London growth plan, and we will play our role in that success. I know Mayor Sadiq Khan does not need garlands from me, but he is an outstanding example of how values-led, progressive leadership, sustained over time, can really drive change. I will talk about some of that economic success, but I think it speaks to his work.

As hon. Friends and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), have said, London's success powers the country's prosperity. It represents nearly a quarter of UK GDP and 8.6 million jobs. I think too of its cultural power and all those things colleagues have talked about, the tourists during the day and what they will be doing tonight in the night-time economy.

Mr West, you may forgive me if my mind wanders about three and a half miles north of here to Lord's today, as England bat against India; again, that is an example of how—every weekend, it seems—huge global events take place in this city. We have world-leading educational institutions; multiple colleagues have mentioned Imperial College. We have thriving creative clusters such as the East Bank, and pioneering innovation districts such as the knowledge quarter, as my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) said. All of those are good—good for London, good for Londoners, and good for all of us in the country.

It was impossible not to be struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip said about all that is going on in Hillingdon, alongside his constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner. In one borough alone, there is an extraordinary contribution to Britain's story—not just to its economy as a whole, but to its contribution across the world as well.

Making the most of that talent, those assets and those opportunities means that the Government and London's leaders, including the Mayor, must work together to realise the city's full potential. I want to talk a little, in the spirit of my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater's speech, about how we can contribute in areas such as housing, talent and transport, and to touch on regeneration as well.

Starting with housing, it is no secret, as the Opposition spokesperson mentioned, that we are committed to historic levels of house building, both to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, as colleagues have said, and as a fundamental for unlocking economic growth. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) talked about housing affordability. It is hard not to be struck by research from the GLA that indicates a 1% increase in housing affordability in London could yield a £7.3 billion

boost in economic output over a decade. There is a clear return there, a point my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater also made.

We are working in partnership with the Mayor of London to unlock and maximise London's contribution to the 1.5 million homes target, including through the establishment of a City Hall developer investment fund. We are also keen to support strategic site development through the new homes accelerator, working with local authorities and other stakeholders to overcome regulatory obstacles and provide on-the-ground support for high-potential sites such as Beam Park, High Road West and Billet Road. In addition, the Euston Housing Delivery Group is committed to transforming the Euston area into a vibrant and inclusive neighbourhood, in collaboration with Camden council, and delivering thousands of new homes, including a range of affordable housing options.

That of course links to something that I was very proud of: the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), announced at the spending review a new £39 billion social and affordable homes programme. That will run from 2026 to 2036, and we will allocate up to 30% of its funding—nearly £12 billion—to the GLA for delivery in the capital. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner made important points about social housing; I hope that addresses those to some degree.

There are important points still around housing. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) made an important point about the Building Safety Regulator—one that has been raised with me by the GLA, the Mayor's office and beyond on multiple occasions. I want to be clear that this Government believe that safe buildings are a moral imperative. No one knows that better than the constituents of the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater. It is a moral imperative that people have housing. I think every day of the 6,000 children in bed and breakfast accommodation across the country. There are 180,000 in temporary accommodation, and that is before hidden homelessness. We have a moral duty to them to ensure that houses get built.

We have worked closely with the BSR to help it resolve some of its operational challenges. We have put more resources in and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater said, injected fresh leadership through the excellent Andy Roe, who is widely accepted to be brilliant in the safety space and as an operational leader. I look forward to the impact that will make. My hon. Friend mentioned the London remediation board, which I co-chair with the excellent deputy mayor for housing, Tom Copley. That is crucial to ensure that people are living in safe homes and that those who are out of their homes, in many cases for a long time, are able to be in those homes. That board has my full commitment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater mentioned access to Government schemes for remediation. I am delighted that, through the spending review, we have been able to equalise access for social housing. That is a two-for-one benefit: it will get buildings fixed faster and more social homes built. I look forward to that kicking in and seeing its impact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater mentioned talent. We have to be aware that, in a global economy, the race to attract the strongest

talent is fierce—that might speak to your beloved Arsenal's struggle to find a centre forward, Mr Western. That global race is hotly contested. It is about getting the tools right and, as my hon. Friend knows well from his outstanding work on economic crime before he came to this place, about making sure that the routes are effective and deliver what we want, which is getting talented people through.

We offer a number of different routes: the innovator founder route for entrepreneurs; the global talent route for leaders and future leaders in key fields; the high potential individual route for those at an early stage who have high potential; the Government-authorised exchange scheme for short periods of work experience; and, for overseas businesses, assigning workers through the global business mobility route. My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater made further suggestions—I will make sure that he gets a response from the Minister for Migration and Citizenship.

On transport, as multiple colleagues have mentioned, we cannot unlock the housing we want to deliver without proper infrastructure. We do not want to build homes that people cannot get to and from. That is why we recently announced the almost £2.2 billion multi-year capital funding settlement for TfL, which covers the spending review period. That is the largest multi-year settlement for London for over a decade and gives TfL the funding certainty to improve and enhance the quality of the capital's transport infrastructure. That investment is crucial to delivering economic growth.

We recognise that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Brent East (Dawn Butler) and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip said, funding for London helps to grow the economy across the country and supports UK industry in the supply chain. Two thirds of TfL's UK supply chain is money spent outside London, so there is benefit for everyone.

Natasha Irons: I want to highlight the local impact of that £2.2 billion, which means that my community in Croydon will finally get new trams. Croydon is not the only place in London that has trams, but we have the oldest trams in the country, and the sustainable, multi-year funding settlement means that my outer London borough will get the transport it needs for the people in my community to access the opportunities of central London. Does my hon. Friend agree that a Labour Government and a Labour Mayor working together with long-term funding and a grown-up conversation leads to prosperity for everybody?

Alex Norris: As my hon. Friend says, the evidence is there. With the spending review, we talk about billions of pounds here and hundreds of millions of pounds there, but I always think that these things have to be real in people's lives, and that will be very real in the lives of the people in her community. The impact of the shared vision is so important. As I said, we will feel that across the country through the supply chain. TfL has procured Piccadilly line trains from Yorkshire, supporting up to 700 skilled jobs: 250 in construction and 1,700 in the onward supply chain. What an outstanding bit of investment that is.

Hon. Members made multiple different points on other transport infrastructure, and indeed offered the Treasury and the Department for Transport a future list for more to do. The Government are providing £25 billion

[Alex Norris]

for the delivery of HS2 phase 1, including the Euston terminus, which will improve connectivity to the south-east. Emulating the success of King's Cross, that will help to transform Euston into a destination where people live and work, not just a gateway for travel, although it is an outstanding one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater mentioned DLR Thamesmead, as did other colleagues. We are committed to working with TfL to explore opportunities for delivery in that space. I want to link it just briefly to the industrial strategy, because that was a very important national document showing where our country's economic future lies. All the things in the industrial strategy—even the most national, even the most global, even the most profound, whether it be an employer, a sector or a cluster—are all local somewhere. Of course, I would say that as the Minister for Local Growth.

London has a really important part to play in that. As the Minister responsible, I am pleased that the industrial strategy zones action plan has set out enhanced support for the Thames freeport, focusing on clean energy, added-value manufacturing and advanced logistics. The freeport has unrivalled global connectivity to more than 130 ports in 65 countries. The Thames freeport includes the ports at Tilbury, London Gateway as well as Ford's Dagenham plant, and will create 21,000 jobs, building on London's deep maritime history. When we put national flags in the sand, we of course make sure that London is a core part of that.

I would like to turn to the subject of Hammersmith bridge. I did not have anywhere else I could fit it into my speech, Mr Western; from a port to a bridge, it is not so far away. I want to assure the hon. Member for Richmond Park that central Government are committed to working closely with TfL and with the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham on that restoration project. There is that sign of good faith: central Government have committed £17 million so far to it, including £4.7 million for repair of the bridge hangers. I will make sure that Ministers have heard the hon. Lady's plea for greater progress and certainty in the future. Her points were well made.

Similarly, I will turn to the fair funding formula, which has been a consistent feature of the debate. Hon. Members have made their points and made them strongly. I want to say very clearly that we are in the middle of a consultation, which runs to 15 August. I know that Members' local authorities will be making contributions. I have no doubt that London Councils will and that the Local Government Association will. Members also can and should contribute to it themselves. Their points have been made very well and I will make sure that the Minister for Local Government hears them.

I may be slightly less forthcoming, I am afraid, for the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), on tax policy ahead of the Budget, because he invites me to cause some serious trouble. I am afraid, even though my instinct in life normally is for a degree of jeopardy, that is a degree of jeopardy too far for me.

I want to turn to the issue of regeneration and speak to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East made about global competition with New York

and Paris. We should always be seeking to win those competitions, and that is part of our important work as a Government, with the Mayor of London, on the regeneration of Oxford Street. Oxford Street is one of those great beacon locations in the world. It has 120 million visitors a year, and I suspect all Members present have visited at some point. In 2022, it contributed an estimated £25 billion to the economy, but there are challenges. There are things that all high streets are facing, such as competition from online shopping, but there are also things that are peculiar to Oxford Street, such as congestion. That is why the Mayor of London and the Deputy Prime Minister have announced proposals to regenerate and pedestrianise Oxford Street to ensure its continued success, and that includes the establishment of a mayoral development corporation. We know that that is a good way of co-ordinating delivery, and I have no doubt that that will help us in the global competition to attract more visitors and more investment, to create more jobs and to drive more growth.

I hope that I have been able to give colleagues that clear commitment from the Government that we understand that London's success is Britain's success, as well as give that clear sense that it is no one's interest, whether that is those in Nottingham or anywhere else in the country, to try to pull London down in the hope that that might in some way be successful for the rest of us. That has never been my version of politics or life. I have never thought that my neighbour's success is my detriment. In fact, I think the evidence shows exactly the opposite. We need a thriving London, and having a thriving London is part of having a thriving country. We can do both things at the same time: have a capital that remains and continues to be the greatest global capital and have growth across all our nations and regions. Those are twin prizes that are common across all parties and all of Parliament, and we can achieve both of them.

4.24 pm

Joe Powell: I thank you, Mr Western, for chairing this debate, and all the non-London Members for sitting through a discussion about London's economic growth potential. I will not go over all the great contributions from hon. Members from across the House, but I will summarise a few areas in which there has been quite a high degree of consensus.

I thank the Minister for his reassurance that this debate will, in itself, contribute to the fair funding consultation, and in particular, that there will be an emphasis on accurate and reliable data that fairly captures the diversity of London's challenges and opportunities. Whatever decision is made, London councils would appreciate an appropriate transition period to ensure that that can be worked in. Whether it is a combination of reserves and whatever else that will be needed to make it work, the transition period will be key in that fair funding review.

On transport, similarly, there have been lots of suggestions for great projects to build the pipeline. I would emphasise the analogy my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) gave with Crossrails 1, 2 and 3. It takes time to get these projects up and running, even beyond the spending review that has just been agreed. Even projects that were not in the spending review will need a bit of pump-priming to get started, because planning permission and raising private

finance alongside public money takes time. We need to build that pipeline for those projects of the future; they will not come overnight.

A number of hon. Members talked about policing and the need for both reform and investment. I think the Met have indicated their openness to future reform. In fact, the Met commissioner published an opinion article just a few days ago about what some of those reforms might be. In real terms, funding for the Met is going up by 2.3% over this spending review, but—I hate to say it—they had £1 billion taken out of their budget over the last 14 years. It will take time to catch up, but reform alongside investment is crucial for the Met.

On housing, we look forward to the Government's long-term housing strategy and the temporary accommodation plan. That is an issue clearly hitting both inner and outer London. Temporary accommodation may once have been more of an inner London problem, but it is now spreading across the country, as boroughs increasingly compete against one another. There are other pressures on that type of housing as well, which I will not go into.

I will end where the Minister arrived, with his Department's big new Bill. I agree with the Minister that it provides an opportunity to cover some of the points hon. Members have made about governance.

We have talked about whether to have Ministers for London or not, and powers or not. Given that London had the first devolution deal with the Greater London Authority Act 1999, many other parts of the country have now overtaken London in terms of the sophistication of the governance arrangements and what powers are devolved. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) made great points about whether there should be an overnight visitor levy. It is great that we will have devolved powers to tackle dockless e-bikes in that Bill. That is a big win for many of our constituents, who write regularly about that issue, but it should not just be about dockless e-bikes. Our ambition can be greater than that. I hope that in the course of the Bill, we can have an ambitious London section that addresses some of the governance questions that could help unlock growth.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered London's contribution to the national economy.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 10 July 2025

CABINET OFFICE

Grenfell Tower: Procurement Act 2023 Investigations

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): We will never forget the 72 lives lost following the Grenfell Tower tragedy eight years ago. The Government are grateful to Sir Martin Moore-Bick and the Grenfell Tower inquiry team for laying bare the truths in their reports.

When the Grenfell Tower inquiry published its final report, the Prime Minister made clear the whole Government's commitment to pursuing full accountability, including through the criminal justice process. Further to the statement made by the Parliamentary Secretary, Minister Gould, on 26 February 2025, formal notices were issued to the seven suppliers named in that statement commencing debarment investigations under new powers in section 60 of the Procurement Act 2023.

Since that notification, my officials have been working to progress these investigations, which has included seeking views from relevant stakeholders. The Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan Police Service have made me aware that they have significant concerns that the debarment investigations could lead to unintentional prejudice to both the criminal investigation and to any future criminal proceedings and the Government have accepted their representations that the criminal investigation must take priority.

At the request of the CPS and MPS, I have therefore decided to pause these seven debarment investigations until criminal investigations and any prosecutions are concluded. I recognise that this decision will feel like yet another delay in the community's long wait for justice, and I have not taken this decision lightly. I understand how important the criminal investigation is to the bereaved families, survivors and the wider community, which is why I am taking this action to protect the integrity of any subsequent criminal proceedings in pursuit of delivering justice. The Government fully support the MPS in its investigation.

The debarment investigations are being paused without any conclusion having been reached. The pause does not in any way prevent contracting authorities from making their own decisions in respect of the eligibility of these suppliers to bid in their procurements and be awarded public contracts, provided they do so in accordance with the Act. The Government remain committed to holding organisations to account and I am considering what other steps can be taken to ensure meaningful action to address failings related to the Grenfell Tower fire. We will continue to engage with the MPS and CPS to ensure any future action does not impede the work of the police.

If the criminal process results in convictions, where appropriate, I will recommence or launch new investigations which may enable stronger action in relation to procurement

than could be taken at the present time. The Government will continue to address all of the inquiry's recommendations and the issues the tragedy exposed.

[HCWS802]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Public Libraries: Usage in England

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for Gambling and Heritage and DCMS Lords Minister, Baroness Twycross:

This year will be the 175th anniversary of the very first Public Libraries Act—an Act which established the principle of free public libraries for the “instruction and recreation of the people”.

This principle has supported the creation and development of the public library network across England. Over 2,500 library branches make up the statutory library provision in this country—one of the most extensive networks of local community assets we have.

Libraries reach millions of people every year, providing inspiration, education and entertainment in free-to-use, safe, trusted and welcoming spaces. But use has declined over the last decade, and we want to better understand why that is the case and what, together, we can do to tackle this.

Last October we published the first phase of our research to consider this question. That work used in-depth focus groups to question what prevents people from using public libraries and what might support them to re-engage. We committed to commissioning further research to test these findings at scale; this work took place between December 2024 and March 2025.

Today's report provides a comprehensive picture of people who do not use public libraries in England, exploring who they are, what their perceptions of libraries are, the barriers that might be preventing them from using the library, and the services or approaches that might entice them back. For the first time we have a picture of the complex landscape of people who do not use libraries, noting five distinct groupings whose experiences and views of public libraries vary and who may require different interventions.

Barriers that were consistently noted included:

- Lack of personal relevance and availability of services elsewhere;
- Lack of awareness of the full range of library offerings and outdated perceptions;
- Accessibility challenges including opening hours and parking.

The work then drew on the involvement of library staff, at both senior leadership and branch management levels, to identify potential actions and interventions that could be explored to reach different target groups and turn the tide on the use of public libraries. Some of the potential interventions explored were:

- Widening the library reach by seeking to engage those who do not currently use libraries through social media channels;
- Bringing those who do not use libraries to the library space through hosting other services or working with partners to use library space—e.g. health, breakfast clubs, early years;

Encouraging people who do not use libraries to re-engage with the library by increasing their understanding of why using libraries is beneficial—e.g. sustainability, money saving—and targeting these messages to specific groups.

We know that implementing these or other potential actions will look different depending on place and that it will be important to tailor interventions to specific audiences and local context.

Since I became libraries Minister I have met with representatives of the public library sector to discuss the challenges in the sector, reflect on priority policy areas and consider how best we can support the sector, drawing on this research. I know the wider sector is already aware of this work and keen to see this final report so that library services can actively consider how they might use the results.

DCMS will continue to encourage and support local activity. We will also consider what action the Government might take to reinvigorate library use. With their extensive network of trusted spaces, used by all kinds of people, libraries are uniquely placed to reach into communities and to support us to deliver on our plan for change.

I will place a copy of the “What works to engage library non-users” report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS806]

DEFENCE

Service Police Complaints Commissioner: Annual Report 2024

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the Service Police Complaints Commissioner’s annual report for 2024 on the Service Police complaints system. The report is published by Margaret Obi and covers the operation of the service complaints system and the delivery of her functions in her second year as commissioner. I am grateful for her work and independent oversight of the Service Police complaints system. The findings of the report will now be considered fully by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the commissioner will follow once that work is complete.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-07-10/HCWS804/>

[HCWS804]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Electricity Market: Review

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): Today my Department is announcing the final decision of the review of the electricity market arrangements (REMA) programme.

The REMA programme was launched in 2022 to consider how to reform Great Britain’s electricity market to deliver a fair, affordable, secure, and efficient clean power system.

On taking office, we inherited a decision on whether to retain the current national system in which all areas in Britain pay the same wholesale price for energy or

undertake a major overhaul to split the country into different pricing zones depending on their proximity to where energy is generated.

The central challenge we face as a country is the urgent need to get off expensive, insecure fossil fuels and deliver an electricity system that meets double the level of today’s electricity demand by 2050. In doing so, we have to design the network in a way to ensure that generation and transmission is built in the right places, so that we can effectively provide power to where it is needed, minimise network constraints, and keep bills as low as possible.

This Government have shown already we are not content to accept the slow and unco-ordinated pace of planning and decision-making of the past. We know reform is needed.

Throughout the decision-making process I was guided by three key priorities: identifying which option would be the fairest outcome for families and businesses in the near and long term; which reform can deliver energy security, will best protect consumers and ensure bill savings as soon as possible, as part of accelerating to clean power by 2030; and, which is the approach that will do most to ensure the investment, jobs and growth we need right across the economy.

We have weighed the options carefully. The Government have decided to reform the system while retaining a single national wholesale price, which I have concluded is the best way to achieve a clean power system that is fair, affordable, secure, and efficient. This will see Government take on more responsibility in planning the system and determining where clean energy infrastructure is located, based on what is needed where in the long-term—rather than the fragmented, ad hoc approach that this Government inherited.

This will complement the fundamentally different approach to building the energy system and infrastructure that this country needs. After years of delay that has seen consumer costs and constraint payments rise, the Government are rapidly making possible the building of the network, reforming the planning system, and finally transforming the grid connections queue to get the projects we need for clean power and growth moving.

These changes will make it possible to bring down energy bills for good, by making the current system more efficient, ensuring low-cost investment into homegrown clean energy projects, and keeping down the costs of running the electricity network.

The key elements of reformed national pricing will include:

Effective planning of renewable energy infrastructure through the upcoming strategic spatial energy plan, to be consulted on and published next year;

National pricing reforms, such as making transmission network use of service (TNUoS) charges more effective and predictable, and taking relevant powers through Parliament to do so;

Improving the operation of flexibility and balancing markets through working with Ofgem and NESO, that will help to reduce the need for constraint payments, which are ultimately paid for by consumers.

Later this year we will publish a reformed national pricing delivery plan, focused on design and delivery and giving market participants and investors clarity on next steps for delivering these reforms. We will also publish the final REMA analysis later this year.

Reformed national pricing will ensure the benefits of clean power are felt by consumers in every part of the country, while giving businesses the stability and certainty they need to continue investing to upgrade our infrastructure to boost our national energy security, create tens of thousands of jobs and grow the economy.

[HCWS799]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Syria: Visit by Foreign Secretary

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): I am today updating the House following my visit to Syria, where I met President Al-Sharaa and renewed the bilateral diplomatic relationship. This was the first visit by a UK Minister in over 14 years and marks the beginning of a new chapter in our relationship with Syria.

Eight months on from the fall of Assad, who subjected the Syrian people to 14 years of brutal civil war, it is right that we engage with the new Government. A stable Syria is in the UK's interests: peace means fewer people being exploited by people smuggling gangs in Europe and making perilous journeys on small boats to Britain. By engaging with the Syrian Government, the UK is helping to ensure the protection of human rights, the safe destruction of Assad's chemical weapons programme, and progress towards combating terrorism and extremism, including from Daesh.

I had a productive meeting with President Al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Al-Shaibani, during which we discussed the full breadth of the UK-Syria relationship. We discussed the importance of stability, and a political transition that delivers for the Syrian people. I stressed the importance of tackling security threats to the UK, reducing the drivers of irregular migration and improving the conditions to enable Syrians in the UK and across the region to return home.

The pace of change in Syria has been encouraging. I welcome the commitment to hold free and fair elections and the representative appointments made to the Cabinet in March. It is important that the transition proceeds in a genuinely inclusive and representative way and respects the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnic or religious background.

The Syrian Government have committed to a brighter future. Immediate priorities should include the implementation of a deal with the Syrian Democratic Forces, a focus on social cohesion and an improved response to sectarian violence, and the protection of human rights.

There still remains much to do. We will continue to judge the new Government on the action they take to deliver on these commitments.

We welcome the commitment made by Foreign Minister Al-Shaibani to co-operate fully with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to ensure that Assad's chemical weapons programme is finally declared and destroyed. During my visit, I announced a further £2 million to support the OPCW in this vital work. This follows an earlier UK contribution of £837,000, part of which helped facilitate three OPCW deployments to Syria. The UK has also developed a further package of logistical and technical support for OPCW and Syria,

and continues to encourage partners to follow our lead in supporting this essential work. The MOD, with FCDO, will provide a further update on this activity in due course.

The UK has long stood by the people of Syria and will continue to do so. The scale of the challenge facing the Government and ordinary Syrians, as they emerge from almost 14 years of conflict, is immense: the economy is broken, 90% of the population are in poverty and over 16 million people require humanitarian assistance. While in Damascus, I announced a further £94.5 million to provide urgent humanitarian aid to Syrians, and to support Syria's longer-term recovery through education and livelihoods, and countries hosting Syrian refugees in the region.

The UK was one of the first to relieve sanctions—and lifted several sanctions on key sectors in April, and asset freezes in March on entities including the Central Bank of Syria. Our focus now is on supporting Syrians to rebuild their country and economy and to create the conditions to boost trade and investment. In my meeting with Foreign Minister Al-Shaibani, we agreed to work together on establishing a UK-Syria business council.

As I said on my visit, the UK is re-establishing diplomatic relations because it is in our interests to support the new Syrian Government to deliver their commitment to build a stable, more secure and prosperous future for all Syrians.

[HCWS801]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Murder of Jalal Uddin: Public Statutory Inquiry Report

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today the independent report of the inquiry into the death of Jalal Uddin was published by His Honour Thomas Teague KC.

Retired imam Jalal Uddin was brutally murdered in Rochdale on 18 February 2016, and in November 2023 the then Home Secretary asked HH Thomas Teague KC to investigate how and in what circumstances he came by his death.

The Government will review this report and consider how to respond in due course.

I would like to thank His Honour Thomas Teague KC for his work to understand what happened to Mr Uddin and to identify what we can learn from it that will help to prevent a recurrence of such an horrific event in future.

The report has been laid before the House and copies will be available from the Vote Office. It will also be available to view both on gov.uk and on the inquiry website at: <https://www.jalaluddin.public-inquiry.uk/>

[HCWS805]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Levy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): The Government are committed to securing the swift remediation of buildings with historical building safety defects. The building safety levy is a key part of the remediation funding package, which protects leaseholders from costs and ensures taxpayers are not further burdened.

We currently estimate the levy will need to raise £3.4 billion over 10 years or more. Today we took an important step towards implementing the levy and will lay the draft Building Safety Levy (England) Regulations in Parliament as we committed to do in the statement I made to the House on 24 March. The draft regulations are subject to the affirmative parliamentary procedure. Subject to parliamentary approval and the making of the regulations, the regulations provide for all aspects of the levy including how the levy will be calculated and administered, and provide that the levy will start being charged on certain applications and notices from 1 October 2026.

Alongside the regulations, to help stakeholders prepare, we have also published operational guidance explaining how the levy is intended to be charged, collected and passed back to central Government. The guidance is aimed at a broad range of users, including the housebuilding sector, local authorities, registered building control approvers and the Building Safety Regulator to help users understand their roles and obligations. Stakeholders involved in the building safety levy now have the information they need to prepare in earnest for its launch on 1 October 2026. My officials have a comprehensive engagement programme planned and will work with stakeholders to support them to be ready for levy launch next year. This includes regular meetings and webinars with local authorities, as well as targeted support for RBCAs and developers.

Local authorities with building control responsibilities will act as collecting agents for the levy. New burdens funding will be provided to local authorities for set-up costs. Collecting authority administrative costs will be recovered from levy revenues received, with the balance transferred to central Government.

Subject to parliamentary approval, and as previously announced, the levy will be charged on certain building control applications and notices. Applications and notices for the provision of new dwellings or student accommodation in England submitted on or after 1 October 2026 will be subject to the levy regime. Exemptions from the levy charge include affordable housing, supported housing and developments of fewer than 10 dwellings. Any housing built by non-profit providers of social housing will be exempt. The levy rates vary by local authority area to take account of differences in housing development economics across different local authority areas and across previously and non-previously developed land. These rates were published on 24 March this year and are set out in the regulations. A 50% discount rate will be charged for development on previously developed land, to reflect the often higher cost of such development. The levy will need to be paid before the earlier of first occupation and submission of the notice or application required at completion stage.

I will also publish an assessment of impact and rates methodology note for the levy. The assessment sets out the expected operational impacts on local authorities and house builders, among other things. The methodology note sets out the five-step approach taken to calculate the levy rates that are set out in the regulations.

[HCWS808]

Supported Housing Regulation Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): The Government recently consulted on their proposals

for implementing the measures in the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023. The Act aims to improve quality in supported housing. The consultation included detail on the proposed licensing regime, the national supported housing standards for the support provided, and housing benefit content.

While the consultation was open, officials held a number of stakeholder engagement sessions and consulted statutory consultees. There were just under 600 responses from local authorities, providers, residents and others with an interest in supported housing, demonstrating the interest from those involved in supported housing, who wanted to have their say on the changes we proposed.

It is clear from the consultation responses and engagement with the sector that elements of the licensing regime design will need to be refined before regulations can be laid and work is now under way to achieve this. As I recognised in my written ministerial statement of 5 November 2024, there continue to be cases of residents finding themselves at the hands of exploitative landlords. However, it is extremely important that we ensure that the licensing is effective, not overly burdensome, and that it ultimately achieves the right result: residents living in appropriate, good-quality supported housing with the right support provided to residents.

I would like to thank those who responded to the consultation for their constructive feedback.

We will aim to publish a full Government response after summer recess, in advance of consulting on the draft regulations in early 2026 and implementing the Act as soon as practicably possible.

[HCWS800]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committee: Iran Report

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament has today laid before Parliament a report entitled “Iran”, which examines the Iranian threat to the UK and the UK’s response.

The Committee’s inquiry began in 2021 and concluded taking evidence in August 2023.

The Government recognise and welcome the independent and important oversight provided by the Committee. I thank the Committee for the comprehensive and detailed nature of the report and the extensive work behind it.

The Government will consider the Committee’s recommendations carefully and respond in full, in due course.

[HCWS803]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Space: UK-France Collaboration

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): The Government will be joining Eutelsat Group’s capital increase today with a UK investment of €163 million.

Eutelsat announced the €1.35 billion capital increase, led by the French state and other existing shareholders, on 19 June 2025. The Government have announced their participation in the capital increase, taking it to a total of €1.5 billion, as part of the UK-France summit.

Satellite connectivity is strategically important to the UK. The investment in Eutelsat is a demonstration of our commitment to this important low Earth orbit technology, alongside commitments from the French Government and other existing shareholders.

The Government's objectives for this investment are threefold. First, there are strategic security and resilience benefits to a competitive low Earth orbit market for satellite communications. Secondly, there is an opportunity for a company, with key technology developed and delivered from the UK, to be successful in future and support the growth of the UK space sector. Since HM Government made their earlier investment in 2020, the global satellite communications market has evolved, and the importance of resilient space capabilities and

services has grown. Thirdly, this investment will establish a closer security and defence collaboration between the UK and France. Based on these objectives, the investment is value for money.

This investment means that the UK will retain its 10.89% shareholding in Eutelsat Group and it will support the company to extend its ambitious low Earth orbit services into the future. The UK retains its rights negotiated in 2023 as part of the merger between OneWeb and Eutelsat to form Eutelsat Group, and the company has made commitments to provide certain benefits to the UK including opportunities for university students, guaranteeing a number of jobs and providing Government with priority access to services in certain contracts.

The Government will continue working closely with Eutelsat Group, and the French Government, to ensure the company's commercial success as part of a strong UK space sector.

[HCWS807]

Written Correction

Thursday 10 July 2025

Other Correction

IAN SOLLUM

Music Education

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Music Education on 3 July 2025.

Ian Sollom:...The Cambourne sixth form has found itself unable to offer either music or music tech A-levels, despite there being more than enough enthusiasm, at least from teachers.

[*Official Report*, 3 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 195WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom):

Ian Sollom:...The Cambourne sixth form has found itself **able to run only music tech A-level, and not music A-level, in 2025-26**, despite there being more than enough enthusiasm, at least from teachers.

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