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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
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HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

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The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

Abbreviation	Party/Group
CB	Cross Bench
Con	Conservative
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GP	Green Party
Ind Lab	Independent Labour
Ind SD	Independent Social Democrat
Ind UU	Independent Ulster Unionist
Lab	Labour
Lab Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
Non-afl	Non-affiliated
PC	Plaid Cymru
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

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House of Lords

Thursday 16 May 2024

11 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Leeds.

Folic Acid Fortification Question

11.06 am

Asked by **Lord Rooker**

To ask His Majesty's Government what responses the European Commission and World Trade Organization have given after being notified of proposed changes to the Bread and Flour Regulations 1998 regarding folic acid fortification, on 8 and 9 February respectively.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My Lords, the Government remain firmly committed to mandatory fortification of non-wholemeal flour with folic acid. This policy is being delivered as part of the wider review of the Bread and Flour Regulations. In February, we notified the World Trade Organization and the European Commission, in accordance with international obligations, and there have been no official responses. The European Commission notification remains open. We plan to lay legislation in England in July.

Lord Rooker (Lab): That is good news. It will be to the Government's credit that those regulations are passed before the general election, because five years ago they changed their mind about the policy, and this is a benefit to the families concerned. I know that it will take time to implement, but we have still got 20 terminations a week and three babies being born every week with lifelong disabilities—we can cut those numbers substantially. This is a very important issue. The sooner these regs are passed by both Houses, the better it will be for those families concerned.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): I pay tribute to the noble Lord and his doughty campaigning on this subject over many years, not just in this House but as a constituency MP in the House of Commons. This policy is being taken forward as a UK-wide measure, which has required co-ordination across the four nations, including respecting their different election cycles. Following notification to the EU Commission, in respect to Northern Ireland, and the World Trade Organization, in accordance with international obligations, in England we plan to lay legislation in July. Noble Lords will wish to be reassured that effecting this policy decision remains a government priority and will not be subject to any further delay.

Lord Jackson of Peterborough (Con): My Lords, 19 years ago I led a Westminster Hall debate on the fortification of basic foodstuffs with folic acid. I was supported subsequently by the noble Lord, Lord Rooker, in his capacity as chairman of the Food Standards Agency. Hydrocephalus and spina bifida still affect many families, and the cumulative impact of expenditure

to treat those conditions is huge on the public purse, as well as the trauma and tragedy involved for parents. I reiterate the points raised and welcome this Government's imperative to get this done and fall into line with thousands of other politicians, and Governments across the world, who have taken this step.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My noble friend raises an important point and he is absolutely right. The sooner we get on with the implementation of folic acid, the better.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff (CB): My Lords, following on from the Question that has been asked, and the enormous welcome that there must be everywhere for the Government's decision to implement this, have the Government undertaken a formal costing of the amount that they will be able to divert from having to provide support and care when families are devastated into other aspects of care for children with all kinds of conditions, so that this saving will not only affect those families who have avoided a tragedy but support better care for other families dealing with other devastating conditions?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Baroness raises an important point. I do not have the details of the figures that she has asked for, but I will certainly write to her on that very good point.

Lord Allan of Hallam (LD): My Lords, it is good to hear that the legislation will be coming forward in July. I am sure that it will have a fair wind, given the cross-party and cross-nation support. One of the questions that the Government consulted on was the implementation period. Passing the regulations is one thing; getting the folic acid into the flour is another. Can the Minister give us any indication as to how long that implementation period will be once the regulations have passed?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Lord, as always, asks a very good question. The proposed transition period for industry to implement changes in the Bread and Flour Regulations review is 24 months. The provisions on folic acid fortification of flour will therefore become mandatory as of 1 October 2026, but there is nothing to stop earlier fortification, should industry wish to do so. I used to work in a bakery and I know that it is a very simple process to put the folic acid in. In my view, 24 months is a very reasonable time. There is nothing preventing the industry fortifying bread now.

Baroness Merron (Lab): My Lords, I too look forward to the progress that we will make and will welcome the legislation when it comes before us. Will the data be in place to monitor the impact on preventing neural birth defects through the addition of folic acid to non-wholemeal flour? What are the plans to review it to see if any further steps might be necessary in the years to come?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The estimated figures show a reduction of 20% in neural tube defects with the introduction of folic acid into flour, but clearly that needs to be monitored—and from day one it will

[LORD EVANS OF RAINOW]
be monitored. That data will be collected and updated; it is very important that, for this to be successful, we need to know that there is a 20% reduction. That amounts to about 200 babies per year. Systems are in place to monitor the success—I hope—of this process.

Lord Anderson of Swansea (Lab): My Lords, all credit is due to the Government and to my noble friend Lord Rooker for his magnificent campaign. Since the case is so overwhelming, why has it taken so long? Should there be a case study of the delays in government to reach this welcome decision?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Lord raises a good point, but we had to go through due diligence and consult. The Government have consulted industry-wide the people who supply the bread and the folic acid, and have done due diligence. As I said in my initial Answer, we have had to go through the World Trade Organization and the European Union. I agree that such things seem to take a lot of time, but we have to go through due process.

Lord Hannan of Kingsclere (Con): My Lords, the consultation has revealed a lot of support within the industry—UK Flour Millers and the Craft Bakers Association and all my noble friend the Minister's former colleagues in the baking industry have welcomed this. However, the Question from the noble Lord, Lord Rooker, was about the response of international agencies. What would happen if, in the context of the Windsor Framework, the European Commission objected?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My noble friend always asks very powerful questions. The European Union has not notified us that it objects to this process. If it does, we will act accordingly, but I do not see why it would object.

Lord Blunkett (Lab): My Lords, I have changed my mind on this issue, not least because of the campaign of my noble friend and many others. I commend the Government for what they are doing, but is there not an ethical issue that we should always have in the back of our minds about the nature and the appropriateness of mass medication?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): I agree with the noble Lord.

Lord Lexden (Con): Is it the Government's intention that these regulations will apply throughout our country, or will they be limited to England or to England and Wales?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): I can speak only for NHS England, but in this case, as I said in my original Answer, it is planned that all four nations of the United Kingdom will lay similar legislation to come into force on 1 October 2026, in line with common commencement dates. England and Wales plan to lay the legislation in July, as I have already said; Scotland will lay it in August; and Northern Ireland will do so in September.

Lord Sahota (Lab): My Lords, a great deal of the flour imported either from Canada or the Indian subcontinent is used by the Asian communities for chapatis, et cetera. Will the Government make sure that it has folic acid as well, as in the regulations for the UK?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Lord raises a very important question. I asked about this, and it is my understanding that the labelling of imported flours will make it clear that folic acid is present.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall (Lab): My Lords, will the Minister clarify a point raised by my noble friend Lord Blunkett? I agree with his views, of course, but I was slightly troubled by the use of the term “mass medication” in relation to this intervention. We already fortify flour with a number of things; this is in addition to that—or it will be if it goes forward. Is it right to classify it as medication? I rather suspect not.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The word “medication” was used in this case, but, as the noble Baroness says, it is a supplement that is going into flour, along with lots of other minerals and vitamins that go into flour and other products. I agree with the noble Baroness.

Electricity: Cost-competitiveness *Question*

11.16 am

Asked by Lord Frost

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the overall cost-competitiveness of electricity generated from recently commissioned offshore wind farms compared to electricity generated from recently commissioned gas-fired power stations at current gas prices.

Lord Frost (Con): My Lords, I beg leave to ask the Question standing in my name on the Order Paper, and I draw attention to my relevant unpaid interests in the register.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Lord Callanan) (Con): My Lords, offshore wind is one of the cheapest generating technologies in the UK and is comparable to or cheaper in cost than fossil-fuel based alternatives. It is a vital technology that will allow us to decarbonise the power sector by 2035 and enhance the UK's energy independence. The department publishes its cost estimates in the generation costs report.

Lord Frost (Con): My Lords, I thank the Minister for that response, but I gently suggest that perhaps he needs to look more carefully at the plausibility of the assessment he has just given. If renewables were as cheap as he asserts, it is hard to understand why bill payers and taxpayers are having to pay about £12 billion per year in subsidy, which is £600 for every family in the country. If offshore wind can be produced for £50 per megawatt hour, as his department asserts, it is hard to understand why the Government have had to offer twice that this year to get anyone to take up a

contract. Would the Minister agree that it is better to be honest and that pushing out these fantasy figures just makes it easier for the proponents of net zero and the party opposite to indulge in fantasy politics that the whole energy sector can be decarbonised in just six years?

Lord Callanan (Con): I certainly agree that the Opposition's policy is fantasy politics. However, I will give the noble Lord the costs in the latest published analysis, which show that electricity from offshore wind is 60% cheaper to build and operate than gas-fired power. The levelised costs are £44 per megawatt hour for offshore wind, versus £114 per megawatt hour for closed-cycle gas turbines. The other key point is energy security. As the noble Lord is well aware, the amount of gas coming from the North Sea is declining year on year, and therefore we have to import increasing amounts of gas. It makes no sense to make us dependent on imported gas for the years to come. We can see the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on gas prices. With the current turmoil in the Middle East, it makes even less sense.

Lord Watts (Lab): My Lords, is it not the case that the only way we will address this is by building new nuclear plants? The last Labour Government identified sites and were developing a planning system that would have pushed them through. Over nearly 14 years, what have the Government been doing to create opportunities for more nuclear power?

Lord Callanan (Con): The noble Lord is right and wrong at the same time. Of course, it makes absolute sense to build more nuclear power, and we are doing that. However, his reference to the last Labour Government gives me the opportunity to state that, when they came to power in 1997, they cancelled all our new nuclear generation.

Earl Russell (LD): My Lords, the UK green economy grew by 9% last year, delivering much needed green growth and green jobs for UK workers. Does the Minister agree that investment in our world-leading offshore wind capacity not only provides the UK with the long-term energy security we require but is also good for UK energy bill payers and our environmental futures? Will the Government consider increasing the funding for AR6 to secure the future energy capacity and security we require?

Lord Callanan (Con): We have allocated over £1 billion for AR6, and it is important to procure newer capacity. It is also worth saying that we cannot rely on offshore wind alone: we need to consider the whole system. That is why we need nuclear, storage and technologies such as tidal, which my noble friend is always asking me about. We need a range of technologies, including interconnectors with other parts of the world, because that is the best way to secure a levelised grid that is secure and provides our energy independence in the future.

Baroness Blake of Leeds (Lab): My Lords, the UK is well placed to become a global leader in offshore wind, as we have heard, but a lack of capacity at UK

ports is limiting our potential and, therefore, the economic growth, energy security and jobs that come with it. The chief executive of RenewableUK said that

“to maximise investment in offshore wind manufacturing and assembly facilities in the UK, the public and private sector are going to have to come together to invest in our ports”.

What steps are the Government taking to bring relevant parties together towards this end?

Lord Callanan (Con): My Lords, we are already a leader in the offshore wind sector: we had the largest amount of offshore wind production in the world, although we have now been overtaken by China. We have the first, second, third and fourth-largest wind farms in the world already operating in UK waters—but we have ambitions to go even further. That includes investing in ports, and we have the offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme and the floating offshore wind investment scheme, bringing together government and business to make sure that we develop these new technologies and, more importantly, locate the supply chains for them in the United Kingdom.

Lord Tyrie (Non-Aff): My Lords, the leading expert in the field is probably Professor Dieter Helm of the University of Oxford, who has been arguing for a long time that the true cost of wind power has been greatly understated in government publications, not least because they do not take full account of the intermittency of wind power and its effects on gas generation, which in turn has to be turned on and off at considerable extra cost. As he has identified, this is one of the major hidden costs of net zero. Can the Government now review their estimates of intermittency thoroughly and fundamentally, using some of Professor Helm's work, and come back to us with what they think are the most considered estimates?

Lord Callanan (Con): We already have considered estimates—work on this is going on all the time. It is a constantly evolving picture, and we take into account the views of all experts. It is undoubtedly true that renewables are intermittent: we had huge amounts of solar earlier this week, but, looking at the weather outside, I think we will not have quite so much today. That is why we need a diversified supply—nuclear, long-term storage and intermittent storage—to take account of the fact, which we know is true, that renewables are cheap, effective and quick to deploy, but they are intermittent, which is why we need a variety of technologies.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, following that last question, do the costs that the Minister gave include all the grid and system costs, as well as everything that has been referred to? Will the Minister agree that it is important to get these different costs right if we are going to gain public consent for the various incentives, taxes and charges that will be necessary to guide the system forward? As for gas, which is also mentioned in the Question, is it not the position that, in the long term, it will continue to have a substantial place, particularly in generating electricity? Is it the position that we need to ensure that its carbon emissions are handled by carbon capture and storage schemes, two

[LORD HOWELL OF GUILDFORD] of which are currently beginning? Should we not be giving a lot more attention to this area if we want a net-zero world?

Lord Callanan (Con): The costs that I quoted are what are called the levelised costs, which are an industry standard, and they take account of other system costs. But, as I said, we will of course need back-up and storage. What the noble Lord said is true: gas will play an increasingly marginal role, but it will play a role in ensuring that we have energy security going forward. The estimates are that we will have about 7% of gas generation by about 2035.

Baroness Fox of Buckley (Non-Afl): My Lords—

Lord Fox (LD): My Lords—

Baroness Williams of Trafford (Con): My Lords, shall we hear from the noble Lord, Lord Fox, and then the noble Baroness, Lady Fox?

Lord Fox (LD): My Lords, a battery plant is being built in Somerset and electric arc steel is being put into Wales. It would benefit the country if offshore wind were built on the west side of it as well as the east. So can the Government explain what is happening to encourage offshore wind in the Celtic Sea and its environs?

Lord Callanan (Con): There is already some wind generation, but of course the waters are deeper, which is one reason why we are developing floating offshore wind, which I referred to earlier.

Baroness Fox of Buckley (Non-Afl): On the hidden costs of harnessing wind power, which seems to be a theme, will the Minister acknowledge that, in any wind turbine, there is a huge amount of steel, fibreglass, resin, plastic, copper, aluminium, iron and cast iron? Therefore, does the Minister acknowledge that, for decades to come, these materials will be extracted and manufactured only with the help of fossil fuels? As is often the case, fossil fuels are invaluable, but that is never part of the public discussion.

Lord Callanan (Con): My Lords, I am happy to acknowledge the noble Baroness's point, but, if she is attempting to say that other forms of generation—gas-fired power plants, nuclear power plants or whatever—do not have many of those materials, she would be wrong.

Lord Hain (Lab): My Lords, the Minister mentioned China. Why are some of the offshore wind farm components, especially the huge structures and blades, being manufactured in China rather than in Britain?

Lord Callanan (Con): The noble Lord makes an important point. Actually, relatively few components are manufactured in China, although some are. Many of them are manufactured in other parts of Europe, and increasingly many are manufactured in the UK. If

the noble Lord had been in the Grand Committee earlier this week, he would have heard us debate a new regulation designed precisely to overcome that problem. This is to make sure that there are extra payments to some of the developers to make sure that we locate more of the supply chains in the UK, because we want to see the benefits spread throughout the country, particularly Wales and northern parts of the UK, which already have many of these supply chain companies. We need to become increasingly successful at that. The rest of the world is proceeding to copy us and develop offshore wind, so there are massive export opportunities if we can locate those supply chains in the UK.

Defence Funding

Question

11.27 am

Asked by **Baroness Goldie**

To ask His Majesty's Government whether they intend to replicate the approach of the Green Savings Bonds to provide incremental resource to fund the defence capability by issuing a defence bond.

The Parliamentary Secretary, HM Treasury (Baroness Vere of Norbiton) (Con): My Lords, the Prime Minister recently set out our pledge to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030. That increase starts today, will rise each year and will see defence spending rise to £87 billion a year by 2030-31. This is the biggest strengthening of our defence since the Cold War. The commitment will be fully funded, with no increases in borrowing or debt. Therefore, we have no plans to issue defence bonds.

Baroness Goldie (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend for that response. I of course welcome the Prime Minister's commitment, which is reassuring and provides a clarity that is much needed. My Question is designed to explore innovative ways of augmenting defence spending and thereby assist the Treasury. The Government vigorously promoted green gilts and green investment bonds to fund green expenditure. If that is an acceptable funding principle for the environment, why is it not for our national security?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): As I have outlined, the Government will use existing resources to fund this increase in defence spending, but my noble friend makes an important point: our superb defence industry needs investment. Although the Government are the main customer of the defence industry, as are exports, these are of course private companies and they do need investment. There are some reports that defence is being excluded on ESG grounds. The Government have confirmed and are absolutely committed to the fact that investment in good, high-quality, well-run defence companies is compatible with ESG considerations.

Lord Campbell-Savours (Lab) [V]: My Lords, with the green savings bonds success in mind, would not it be appropriate, while considering the benefits and viability of a defence bond, to complement its introduction with the issue of a peace bond: a bond that invests in NGOs that promote conflict resolution, peace initiatives,

international understanding, political exchange and sensitive and constructive media intervention overseas; a bond that funds a fostering of links and exchange with more problematic parts of the world; a bond that tempers the slide to conflict and war?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): My Lords, as I have already set out, the Government are not about to start a plethora of different bonds for different measures, but the noble Lord is right that the green bonds have been successful. The funds raised from those bonds have been invested in things such as cycling and walking, electric vehicle home-charging, plug-in grants for cars and vans, and the Nature for Climate Fund.

Lord Stirrup (CB): My Lords, in the Prime Minister's speech he highlighted perils that some of us have been warning about, to little avail, for more than a decade now. The Government's response seems to be to increase the defence budget in six years' time to a level that, allowing for accounting changes, will still be below where it stood in 2010. In light of the Prime Minister's speech and in line with the Question from the noble Baroness, Lady Goldie, is it not high time the Treasury addressed itself to the question of how we can, rather than why we cannot?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): I am grateful to the noble and gallant Lord for his intervention, but the Government have committed to increase NATO-qualifying defence spending to 2.5% of GDP. That will make us the biggest defence power in Europe, and second only to the US in NATO. If all other NATO members were to increase their spending to the same levels, that would mean an additional £140 billion to be spent by allied nations.

Baroness Kramer (LD): My Lords, the UK's green gilts have been justified as necessary to promote London as a global centre for green finance, and they have been successful, but defence bonds would bring no such advantage and surely should be funded from core taxation. What would be the impact of defence gilts on general gilts issuances, on the national debt, on our annual interest payments and on funds for other public services?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): Of course, I do not have the answer to those questions because the Government are not intending to issue defence bonds. However, the noble Baroness mentioned one of the rationales for issuing green gilts—ensuring that the City of London is a global financial centre—and she is absolutely right. Indeed, we are the No. 1 financial centre for green finance.

Lord Naseby (Con): Is my noble friend aware that investment in good defence companies is entirely compatible with ESG? Will she ensure that our fund managers in the City take a copy of what she has stated today?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): I am very happy to reiterate what I said about the Government's commitment to the defence industry, ensuring that it receives the amount of private sector investment it

needs. My noble friend may have seen that, to that end, there was a joint government/ Investment Association statement to fund managers that gave exactly the clarity he seeks.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, notwithstanding that the 2.5% by 2030 is welcome in comparison with where we have been, was not my noble and gallant friend right to remind the Minister and the House of that fact—not least in the context of the International Relations and Defence Committee report two years ago, which urged urgency in addressing the multiple threats from dictators in Russia, China, North Korea and Iran? Is not the noble Baroness, Lady Goldie, who has huge experience in this area, right to look at innovative and different ways of adding to what we can do in a more urgent manner? To that end, will the Minister consider a private round table discussion here in the House to explore that idea further, so that some of the figures that have just been mentioned might be laid before us?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): The noble Lord seems to imply that this is a timing issue. The Government have heard all the messages coming from various quarters about the urgency and the threats we face. We do understand them, but the funds we are now going to put into the system are timed such that they can be most effective. For example, we will be spending on firing up the UK industrial base, but that cannot happen overnight. Our defence companies need multiyear certainty, which, of course, we get from the £10 billion commitment to a new munitions strategy, for example. Again, that does not happen overnight. We are content that the timing is right. As I say, we do not intend to issue defence bonds.

Lord Houghton of Richmond (CB): My Lords, now that I have heard about the Minister's initiative, I am less personally concerned about the scale and esoteric source of the defence uplift. Like many, my prime emotion is relief, not jubilation. My concern is that the uplift is well spent. On behalf of government, can the Minister reassure the House that the priorities for the uplift will be keeping Ukraine in the fight this year and then re-establishing the credibility of conventional deterrence in Europe?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): I can absolutely give that reassurance. In addition to firing up the UK industrial base and the £10 billion on the new munitions strategy, the third key area that the additional funds will be spent on is guaranteeing for as long as it takes support for Ukraine. Obviously, that will build on the billions of pounds in military support we have already committed to Ukraine, as well as the extra £0.5 billion announced by the Prime Minister alongside the funding uplift.

Lord Livermore (Lab): My Lords, the Labour Party is fully committed to increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, a level that was last met 14 years ago, when Labour was in office, so we welcome the Government's recent commitment to this target. In her first Answer, the Minister stated that the commitment was fully funded. However, it was not included in the

[LORD LIVERMORE]

March Budget, and it is not clear how they intend to fund it within their fiscal rules. In the event that there is another fiscal review this autumn, can she guarantee that it will be included and submitted to the OBR to ensure that it is openly costed and independently validated?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): The Government have published figures in accordance with the OBR forecasting period, which sets out exactly how this uplift will be met. The OBR forecast goes out to 2028-29, and obviously the uplift goes out further than that. For example, in 2028-29 there will be an extra £4.5 billion, which will be met through an increase of £1.6 billion in R&D spending and £2.9 billion from reducing headcount in the Civil Service to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD): Can the Minister reassure us that it is the Treasury's view that an increase in defence expenditure to 2.5% of GDP is compatible with the promise of further tax cuts, without further cuts in other public spending areas?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Con): I can assure the noble Lord that this has no impact on our ambition to further cut taxes in future. We want to end the unfairness of double taxation of work—we have cut employees' national insurance contributions by a third—so we do not see that this is incompatible.

Whooping Cough Question

11.37 am

Asked by **Baroness Merron**

To ask His Majesty's Government what recent assessment they have made of the prevalence of whooping cough.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My Lords, data published by the UK Health Security Agency shows provisionally that whooping cough cases are continuing to rise, with 2,793 cases in England between January and March 2024. Tragically, there have also been five infant deaths in England in this period, and our deepest sympathies are with those families. We are urging pregnant women to protect their baby by getting vaccinated and encouraging parents to ensure that young infants receive their vaccinations at the correct time.

Baroness Merron (Lab): My Lords, it is indeed extremely worrying that infants are dying in the biggest whooping cough outbreak in decades, while the UK Health Security Agency also confirms that the lowest vaccination rates are in the 10% most deprived areas, which experts caution should not be dismissed as just vaccine hesitancy. Have the Government assessed the contribution of the cost of living, poor housing and the lack of GP access to disease outbreaks? Is it not time for the Government to show more flexibility and creativity in getting vaccines to those who experience greatest disadvantage?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My Lords, the low uptake of vaccines is typically driven by barriers pertaining to confidence, convenience and complacency. The NHS continues to collaborate with local and regional leaders to deliver tailored communication and flexible vaccination sites and to raise awareness of the benefits of vaccination. The Covid-19 vaccination programme showed that using facilities and services that have familiar and trusted staff, established transport links and convenient access can be highly effective and can inspire trust and confidence in the communities of which they are part. We are also learning lessons from the Covid vaccine programme about the power of real-time specific data to improve uptake, as well as looking at system changes for delivery to make getting vaccinated easier for all, particularly those 10% of the population to which the noble Baroness referred.

Baroness Wyld (Con): My Lords, I am sure my noble friend sees the urgency here, but he will share my alarm that the Joint Committee on Immunisation and Vaccination reports that vaccination levels in pregnant women are currently at less than 60%. What can he say, very precisely, to the House, please? Who is gripping this? What is the plan? How do pregnant women know that this vaccination is available and necessary? How do they know where to get it and who is in charge of delivering it?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): On 4 March 2024, the UK Health Security Agency launched a new multimedia marketing campaign across England to remind parents and carers of the risk of their children missing out on protection against serious diseases that are re-emerging in the country, with an urgent call for action to catch up on missed vaccinations. NHS England is implementing best practice, vaccinating pregnant women opportunistically during maternity appointments wherever possible and ensuring that advice on vaccination in pregnancy is being offered across antenatal and primary care settings. I can reassure the noble Baroness, and indeed the House, that NHS England is doing all it can to contact pregnant women to make sure they are vaccinated themselves, which will help the unborn child.

Lord Patel (CB): My Lords, the incidence of whooping cough is cyclical; that is well known. In some years, the incidence rises, as it is doing this year not only in the United Kingdom but in several other European countries—countries that have far better health systems that perform far better than our health service. The difference is that the measures they have taken to curtail this and reduce the prevalence are working far better than our own strategy, so we need to re-examine our strategy. So my question is: what other public health measures are we considering to effectively address the rising rate that is occurring in this country, which is now falling in other countries where it was rising?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Lord, as always, makes a very powerful point and he is exactly right. Whooping cough is cyclical. The last time this country experienced an outbreak was 2016 and we were due to have another outbreak in 2021. As noble Lords will know, we suffered from Covid lockdown

and because of the isolation, it went down. So we were due one in 2020-21, and the reason that this outbreak is more powerful is because of social distancing during Covid—and the outbreak is the most severe, as the noble Baroness said, in a long time. That is the explanation—it is cyclical, we had lockdown and we are now in the middle of the severe outbreak.

As for the noble Lord comparing our health service to others throughout Europe, he is exactly right. The UK has the most extensive immunisation programme in the world but, as he rightly points out, we have to communicate that to all the population. NHS England works with UKHSA and the regions to continuously review opportunities to improve uptake and coverage of all NHS routine immunisation programmes, sharing and spreading best practice in what has worked. But we can always learn from other countries to make the NHS even better.

Lord Allan of Hallam (LD): My Lords, Education Ministers have been very active recently telling parents to send their children to school with coughs and colds, yet the NHS tells us that the early signs of whooping cough are very similar to those of a cold, and we advise people with this condition to stay home and isolate. Does the Minister recognise the risk of confusion for parents in this messaging? Will he talk to his colleagues at the Department for Education, for example, to tweak that messaging, so it is different where children are unvaccinated or where there are local outbreaks?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Lord is exactly right: communication is critical and, as he well knows, if the message is confusing, it is very unhelpful. But the message is clear that parents and carers have an obligation to immunise their children, not just for whooping cough but for other childhood diseases. Particularly for pregnant mothers, the message is clear: get immunised.

Baroness Manzoor (Con): My Lords, my noble friend has already mentioned that the highest incidence was back in 2016 and there has been a steady decline in uptake of the vaccine by pregnant women and young children. Therefore, can my noble friend the Minister say exactly what is done to empower pregnant women, particularly in light of the fact that there are fewer midwives and fewer health visitors and, as a result of Covid-19, perhaps pregnant women and those in deprived communities have not had the appropriate access to their services?

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Baroness raises a very powerful question. The department is working with the NHS and the UK Health Security Agency, alongside those most at risk, working to ensure that advice on vaccination in pregnancy is being offered antenatally and that information materials are available across antenatal and primary care settings, so that pregnant mothers understand the risks of whooping cough and are encouraged to come forward for the vaccine. The NHS is implementing best practice, vaccinating pregnant women opportunistically during maternal appointments wherever possible, but it is so

important that those hard-to-reach communities, where English is not the first language, are communicated with appropriately. We are looking at those communities through GPs and, as my noble friend said, through midwives, so that the pregnant mums in those communities are encouraged to get vaccinated.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff (CB): My Lords, antimicrobial-resistant whooping cough has been found in China, North America, South America, Europe and the Middle East. In the epidemic we are now seeing, does the department have any idea how many cases of antimicrobial-resistant whooping cough there are in the UK? Because that makes treatment almost impossible and I am really concerned, as many are, that the public do not take seriously the problem of antimicrobial resistance.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): The noble Baroness asks a very detailed question. There is currently a conference going on specifically on that subject. I do not have the information in the pack, but that is ongoing. She is absolutely right. As I said earlier, we had 2,793 cases in England between January and March and it is rising. It is a severe outbreak and we are looking into it.

Lord Kakkar (CB): My Lords, I draw noble Lords' attention to my interests in the register. To pick up the point of my noble friend Lord Patel, there is a difference in the trajectory with regard to the outcome of disease between the United Kingdom and other European countries. Might that be a manifestation of the fact that there have been changes in the way we address public health measures in our country? Beyond the question of vaccination, we need to look once again at the delivery of public health services in our country.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): I am grateful to the noble Lord for that question. He raises a very important point. I have said before at this Dispatch Box, and indeed within the department, that we should always look at other nations' health services. The NHS is an outstanding institution but it does not have the answer to everything, so we should look at our European neighbours to see what lessons can be learned there.

Ukraine and Georgia

Commons Urgent Question

The following Answer to an Urgent Question was given in the House of Commons on Wednesday 15 May.

“We are on day 811 of Putin’s so-called special military operation—an operation that was supposed to last for three days—and he has failed in all of his objectives. The conflict is, of course, evolving and challenging. Russia’s newly formed northern grouping of forces has attacked Ukraine’s Kharkiv region, taking control of several villages. By opening up an additional axis of attack, Russia is almost certainly attempting to divert Ukrainian resources away from other parts of the front line and to threaten Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine.

We will not be diverted from our commitment to providing Ukraine with the support that it needs to prevail—because Ukraine will prevail. In April, the Prime Minister announced our largest ever and most comprehensive package of equipment from the United Kingdom, including equipment relating to long-range strike, air defence, artillery, reconnaissance, protected mobility, development of Ukraine's navy, airfield enablement, and munitions to support the introduction of the F-16.

The Prime Minister has also announced £500 million of additional funding, which takes us to £3 billion of military aid to Ukraine this financial year. We continue to work with international allies and partners to ensure coherence, and to co-ordinate our support to Ukraine, including through the international capability coalitions; we co-lead the maritime and drone coalitions. We recently announced a complete package of £325 million for cutting-edge drones. That will deliver more than 10,000 drones for the Ukrainian armed forces.

In March, we were pleased to congratulate the first 10 Ukrainian pilots who completed their basic flying training in the United Kingdom. Those trainees join more than 65,000 Ukrainians who have received training in the UK since 2014, including more than 39,000 recruits trained since 2022 through Operation Interflex.

Turning to Georgia, we continue to observe with concern the events in Tbilisi, including yesterday's violent clashes in and around the Georgian Parliament and the intimidation of peaceful protesters. The United Kingdom, along with our partners, is committed to the right of peaceful protest, and we are concerned about the introduction of the law on transparency of foreign influence. The UK is a close friend of Georgia, and as such, we call for calm and restraint on all sides. We hope to continue to work with Georgia, with which we have a deep and long-standing partnership, and to support the legitimate aspirations of the Georgian people, as they pursue a free, sovereign and democratic future."

11.49 am

Lord Coaker (Lab): My Lords, I begin with the important repetition of our ongoing support for the Government regarding Ukraine and our shared deep concern with respect to events in Georgia, which represent an attack on the freedoms of civil society and an intimidation of protesters. Can the noble Earl assure us that we will continue to pressure the Georgian Government and make representations to their ambassador here? On Ukraine, the crucial question is how we are going to accelerate the provision of air defences, artillery shells and other equipment to the front line in the face of the Russian assault. Ukraine must be able to defend itself, including in Kharkiv, as we have all said. Its fight is our fight, but it needs more support quickly.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (The Earl of Minto) (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord for his support in all that we are doing in Ukraine. The Government and, indeed, the whole House continue strongly to condemn the appalling, illegal and unprovoked attack that President Putin has launched on the people of Ukraine. We continue to

monitor developments on the ground very closely, but our steadfast support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering. That is why the Prime Minister has announced £500 million in additional funding, which takes us to £3 billion of military aid this year. This level of funding will last until the end of the decade and for as long as it is required. While Georgia and Ukraine are separate geopolitical issues, the Georgian people know all too well the proven aggression of Putin—in fact, they have only to look back to 2008. That is why we must support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, this is a critical year for the Georgian population. In December last year, the EU announced accession candidate status for its admission to the European Union, and elections are due this October. This is an important time for the young people of Georgia, who have shown their resilience against this measure to restrict civil society freedoms. How will the United Kingdom ramp up support for young people in Georgia, who are very clear that they do not wish for there to be an autocracy? They want open civil democracy.

The Earl of Minto (Con): The noble Lord makes a very good point. The UK is a firm friend of the Georgian people and we have a long-standing defence partnership. We support their pursuit of the legitimate desire for a sovereign, free and democratic future, and particularly their lean towards a Euro-Atlantic trajectory. There is a very high level of diplomatic pressure both here and in Tbilisi to make certain that our commitment is got over and the clarity of our intent is made absolutely clear.

Lord Grocott (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the repulsion of the recent Russian advances in Ukraine has been affected by problems of ammunition supply, not of sophisticated weapons? Can he reassure the House of our efforts, and those of other NATO countries, to provide the required ammunition? Not providing it creates huge problems for the Ukrainians' gallant efforts.

The Earl of Minto (Con): The noble Lord makes a very good point. The recent attacks by the Russians are driven by numbers of people as much as by ammunition. NATO, its allies and other interested parties are co-ordinating a massive effort to get as much ammunition and required military support into Ukraine as possible, at the request of the Ukrainian armed forces, to ensure that they can hold and repel any additional Russian pressure. I will quote the Answer to the Urgent Question:

"Russia's newly formed northern grouping of forces has attacked Ukraine's Kharkiv region, taking control of several villages".

The border town of Vovchansk is almost certainly an immediate Russian objective and is currently contested between Russian and Ukrainian forces. It goes on:

"By opening up an additional axis of attack, Russia is almost certainly attempting to divert Ukrainian resources away from other parts of the frontline and to threaten Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine".

It would take very substantial forces to overwhelm, and we do not believe they have them.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, the Russians clearly now have their eye on Kharkiv. The priority—that is, munitions—must be unwavering, despite the enormous amount we have already done and announced. There must be more air power, as the noble Lord opposite has already observed. Can the Minister look beyond the deep troubles of the past that have brought us to where we are to the causes in the future which will perpetuate this situation for decades unless we are very careful? Are there other means to which we are giving thought, and developing back-channels on the future of Russia? We cannot cancel Russia—no one sensible would suggest that—but can we begin to establish that we do not want instability for years ahead? There must be a deal or agreement on how far NATO goes, the borders of the expanded NATO of today and the desires of Russia to have a different system in future. These are the areas where thinking is required. If we do not think now, we and our children will still be in this mess, or an even worse one, in 20, 30 or 50 years' time.

The Earl of Minto (Con): The most immediate and pressing issue for NATO and the rest of the West is to repel Russia from Ukraine. The noble Lord is absolutely right that there is a future post success, but, as the Secretary-General of NATO said the other day, it is very important that we take this stand now and assure all malign influences that NATO will stand firm against any aggression towards its pact. That is the primary purpose.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: My Lords, given Georgia's recent history and its rather precarious geographical position, the importance of the upcoming elections in October cannot be overstated. To push a bit further the question asked by the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, can the Minister explain what active steps the Government are taking to ensure that those elections are free and fair?

The Earl of Minto (Con): The right reverend Prelate makes a very good point. The whole issue of the "foreign agents" law is that it is very similar to a law that is operating in Russia, although it has not yet gone through the entire democratic parliamentary process. We all saw the riots inside and outside the Parliament of Georgia earlier this week. They are a strong signal that the concept that the foreign funding of external NGOs and agencies beyond the level of 20% creates an external threat needs to be vigorously resisted. We believe in free and democratic relationships and will do all we can with our friends in Georgia to ensure that that is maintained.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick (CB): On Georgia, does the Minister recognise that the effectiveness of external action will be crucially determined by its unity—that is, that the US, the UK and the EU are all taking the same line? Does he recognise that a number of member states of the European Union may say categorically that, if this Bill comes into force, it will not be compatible with Georgia's membership of the European Union? That does not require unanimity in the European Union. It requires only one member state to say so, and that will stop it.

The Earl of Minto (Con): I entirely agree with the first part of the noble Lord's question. As for the second part, the Euro-Atlantic organisations have certain standards and rules. We want Georgia to match those rather than to deviate from them, so that its continuing Euro-Atlantic trajectory can be maintained. We will use every effort to ensure that that is the case.

Conflict in Sudan: El Fasher *Commons Urgent Question*

Noon

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I shall now repeat in the form of a Statement the Answer given in the other place by my right honourable friend the Minister for the Indo-Pacific on the situation in Sudan. The Statement is as follows:

"Yesterday, we published a Written Ministerial Statement outlining our grave concern at reports of devastating violence in and around El Fasher, with civilians caught in the crossfire. In April, the United Kingdom led negotiations at the UN Security Council, alongside Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Algeria, to deliver a press statement, urging the warring parties to de-escalate in El Fasher and comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. We also called for a closed UN Security Council consultation on the situation.

On 15 May, Minister Mitchell publicly called upon the RSF and the SAF

"to protect civilians and spare Sudan from their wilful destruction and carnage".—[*Official Report*, Commons, 15/5/24; col. 18WS.]

We continue to pursue all diplomatic avenues to achieve a permanent ceasefire, and we welcome plans to restart the talks in Jeddah. We urge the region to refrain from actions that prolong the conflict and to engage positively with peace talks. We have used exchanges with the warring parties to condemn strongly atrocities that have been perpetrated, and to demand that their leadership make every effort to prevent further atrocities in territories they have captured or threatened to capture, as well as to press for the need for improved humanitarian access.

On 15 April, the Deputy Foreign Secretary announced a package of sanctions designations, freezing the assets of three commercial entities linked to the warring parties. We will continue to explore other levers to disrupt and constrain the sources of funding that both warring parties are using to sustain themselves. We continue to support the Centre for Information Resilience, which documents, preserves and shares evidence of reported atrocities so that their perpetrators can be brought to justice. There shall be no impunity for human rights abusers.

Finally, we will keep working to ensure that the voices of Sudanese civilians are heard, whether they be survivors and witnesses of human rights abuses, Sudanese NGOs, women's rights organisations, activists helping their communities, or those trying to develop a political vision for Sudan's future. UK technical and diplomatic support has been instrumental in the establishment of the anti-war pro-democracy Taqaddum

[LORD AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON]
coalition led by former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and we will continue to support the Taqaddum's development".

12.02 pm

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, I welcome all the actions outlined in today's response and in Andrew Mitchell's Written Statement yesterday. This morning, Anne-Marie Trevelyan did not respond to my honourable friend Lyn Brown's question on how the UK will back up the US red line promising direct and immediate consequences for those responsible for the offensive on El Fasher. Will the Minister do so now?

This morning, Anne-Marie Trevelyan also accepted the risk to millions of Sudanese if Elon Musk shut down his vital Starlink satellite internet service there. She undertook to raise it with the Deputy Foreign Secretary. Can the Minister reassure the House that Ministers will take urgent steps, with allies, to ensure the continuation of this service during this desperate time for the Sudanese people?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, I agree with the noble Lord's second point. As I said in the original response, I assure him that we are taking all necessary steps, working with multilateral agencies and all key partners to ensure that vital services are sustained. The point he makes about the satellite link communication is key, as we know from conflicts around the world. It is a very valid issue to raise.

On ensuring that there are consequences and penalties for those warring parties, we have made this very clear through the sanctions process. I am aware that the US took further actions yesterday, I believe, in issuing further sanctions. The noble Lord will know that I cannot speculate on future issues, but I assure him that we keep this very much at the forefront of the levers that we currently have. We are also engaging extensively in the diplomatic efforts with those who have influence over both sides.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, I restate my registered interests on this topic. There are 800,000 civilians who are, in effect, now trapped in El Fasher. I agree with all of what the Minister stated and what the Government are doing. My understanding is that, over the last five months, only 34 trucks' worth of humanitarian assistance has been able to get to a community of 800,000. My understanding today is that there is no child healthcare provision in the entire state of Darfur. There is also starvation and the routine burning of homes.

Will the Minister reassure me that there will be no immunity from prosecution for those who are perpetrating these breaches of international humanitarian law and war crimes? Given that there are now 4 million people in Sudan facing famine, with the rains approaching, what assurance can the Minister give that the international community will be getting more humanitarian support through to the civilian population?

Finally, will the Minister agree with me that there is now a very considerable concern over the break-up, in effect, of Sudan? The only way that there will be one

Sudan is with extra support for the civilian and democratic groups, especially for women and young women, who have been so resilient and brave through the previous Bashir regime, then through the coup, and now with conflict. What support are the UK Government giving to ensure that there will be one Sudan, governed in a democratic and civilian way?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, on the noble Lord's last point, of course I agree with him. That is why only yesterday the noble Lord and I were outside your Lordships' Chamber discussing the situation and the importance of supporting the Taqaddum coalition and the efforts of former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, whom both the noble Lord and I know well.

On El Fasher specifically, the noble Lord is right. If El Fasher was to fall, Sudan would split in two. We need to have the unity of Sudan, and that is a primary purpose of the United Kingdom's efforts. We are very much focused on that. There are key countries. That is why we want the Jeddah talks to be resumed as soon as possible. Coming into the Chamber, I still had not received a date. I had a very productive call with the UN special envoy, whom I know extremely well from his former position as the Foreign Minister of Algeria. He has been engaging with both sides.

On the noble Lord's point about humanitarian support, only yesterday, Minister Mitchell met the new head of the WFP, which is one of the many agencies we are working with. He will be aware of the donor conference that was held in April, where the United Kingdom pledged another £89 million to Sudan, with most of this going towards humanitarian aid.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: My Lords, I note that I will be in Port Sudan in a couple of weeks' time. Yesterday, I was at a round table on Sudan with NGOs and expatriates. The Raoul Wallenberg Centre made it clear in its research that there is genocidal intent behind much of what is going on in Darfur. The plea there was: how do we get international protection? We cannot say that we do not know this is coming. There is the perfect storm of famine as well as the massive artillery bombardment around El Fasher going on at the moment.

What can the Government do to protect civilians by any international intervention—as happened in the Balkans fairly recently—and to ensure that not just humanitarian aid but fertilisers get through, which are not getting through at the moment? Even in places where people want to grow their own food to avert a famine, they cannot; it is a double hit. I wonder how the Minister might respond.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): First, of course I appreciate the role of the right reverend Prelate with regard to the situation in Sudan. If I may say also, the noble Lord, Lord Collins, often raises this, and I know the right reverend Prelate is focused on this. We need to ensure that civil society and particularly the religious communities of Sudan also play a very active role in that regard. I look forward to hearing back from the right reverend Prelate if he does travel, with all the necessary caveats because of the situation in Sudan.

On security and the international force, the right reverend Prelate will be aware that the Government of Sudan previously ended the mandate of the Security Council on the UN mission. The current challenges within the Security Council are pretty polarised positions on a range of different conflicts. However, there is an active discussion taking place at the UN, and I believe there is another meeting taking place tomorrow. A return to the negotiating table with both the SAF and the RSF is required. That is what we are pressing for, and those who have influence, including the new special envoy, are focused on that. As I said earlier to the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, we are focused on getting the Jeddah talks resumed.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD): My Lords, what conversations are the Minister and the Government having with external actors, particularly the UAE, which are supporting the different sides? There are reports that a large amount of gold from the region is now being sold in Dubai and that the UAE is providing active support for the RSF. Are we making it very clear to the UAE that this does not help the situation and that it instead fuels conflict and potential genocide, as the right reverend Prelate suggested?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, as I already alluded to, we need all regional partners and those with influence over the two warring parties to focus on the importance of ending the conflict with immediate effect. The humanitarian consequences are dire. We have already heard references to Sudan being at the brink of famine. I previously went to Darfur in my capacity as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict and was taken by the very dire situation then—and yet they were better times than what we currently confront.

On the influence of other partners, the UAE and a number of other countries have played a valid and vital role in the humanitarian effort, and the pledging conference was testament to that. Those who have influence over both sides need to ensure—as I said before; I cannot reiterate this enough—the importance of diplomacy. For any conflict around the world, the key element is to get the fighting to stop, the conflict to end and the political discussions under way.

Baroness Hayman (CB): My Lords, I apologise to the House that I was not here at the beginning, but I have come straight from a plane from Addis Ababa, where I heard about the effects of conflict on undermining and turning back the achievements made in health. That is nothing compared with what is going on in Sudan. I also met refugees from Sudan there, who are unable to do the work that they want to do to support their communities. There is a sense of despair in the region over the situation there. Does the Minister acknowledge that some of that despair comes from the international community simply not having the bandwidth at the moment to give this the attention that it deserves? I want to make clear the sense of urgency and desperation on the ground.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, first, I sympathise with the noble Baroness about having to get off a plane and come straight to the House. I know

how that feels; I have had to go through that recently. Secondly, I totally agree with her on the conflict itself. After the imposition of sanctions, my noble friend the Foreign Secretary said that this is a conflict that we cannot forget. We need to ensure that it is on the front burner and that it continues to be discussed. The UN plays an important part in hosting those discussions, and we take our responsibilities as penholder very seriously; I assure her that we are focused on that. The pledging conference in Paris on 15 April underlined that the humanitarian elements are very much regarded as priorities, not just by the United Kingdom but by key partners in Europe, the US and the region.

People with Disabilities: Access to Services *Motion to Take Note*

12.13 pm

Moved by **Baroness Hughes of Stretford**

That this House takes note of the challenges faced by those with disabilities including access to benefits, work, education, housing and healthcare.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford (Lab): My Lords, according to the *Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2022 to 2023*, published recently by the Department for Work and Pensions—the primary measure of disability prevalence in the UK—the number of disabled people has been rising steadily over the last 15 years or so. It now stands at an estimated 16.1 million people—24%, or almost one in four, of our total population—a figure that excludes people in nursing and retirement homes. Is that not a very significant minority of our population, such that we would expect their needs to be a high priority for any Government? When we consider that each of these disabled people is likely to have some family members or carers, the number of people affected by the challenges of disability will run into many millions more.

In two reports this year by the Institute of Health Equity, Sir Michael Marmot and his colleagues found reduced life expectancy, deterioration in health and widening health inequalities in all but the 10% most affluent areas of our country. The report showed that these were the result of cumulative government cuts since 2010 to the essential public services, particularly local government services, that are the key determinants of population health. Another important factor is the failure to tackle serious public health problems, especially obesity. The steady rise in disability rates must be seen in the context of the general deterioration in health and socioeconomic circumstances. Does the Minister agree with Sir Michael that the rise in ill health and disability is real and not the result of a “sick note culture”?

Some 11% of children are disabled, a doubling over the last 10 years, as are 23% of working-age people, which is a 7% increase. Over the last decade, the proportion of disabled people of state pension age has been fairly constant, between 42% and 46%. Apart from among children under 15, where there are twice as many boys as girls, there are more disabled women than men, both absolutely and relative to their respective

[BARONESS HUGHES OF STRETFORD]

populations. The Annual Population Survey by the ONS estimated that 9% of people aged 16 and over from a minority-ethnic group are disabled. There is also variation in disability prevalence by nation and English region, with Scotland, the north-east, the north-west and the east Midlands having the highest rates, and London and the south-east the lowest.

Disability prevalence in an area is affected by age distribution and reflects socioeconomic factors: income levels, poverty and health, all of which are of course interrelated. The type of disability reported varies by age group. Mobility is reported most frequently overall, followed by breathing and then mental health. The latter is reported by 44% of the working-age group. The most frequently reported disabilities for children are social and behavioural, at 50%, followed by mental health and learning disabilities.

It is important to say that, although we can summarise the demographic and social characteristics of disabled people, it would be wrong to imply that this population is homogeneous or that disabled people are defined primarily by their disability; they are no more homogenous than the rest of the population. Rather, they have a commonality in experiencing a disability that makes the following more difficult: first, to navigate the activities of daily living essential to us all; secondly, over a longer period, to acquire the assets and resources—for example, in education and employment—which enable them to reach their potential and have a good quality of life; and, thirdly and mostly importantly, to participate actively in social, community and political life. It is the challenges that disabled people have in achieving those ends that we are bringing to the fore in today's debate.

I am sorry to say that, on every dimension important for a good quality of life, disabled people fare worse, and sometimes far worse, than non-disabled people. I do not want to present the House with a battery of statistics, because that would eclipse the overall picture. The numerical data from which this picture is drawn are available to us all in the excellent briefing from the Library and the references that it cites.

Disability benefit is notoriously complex. We have heard much from the Government recently about the personal independence payment—PIP—and their intention to exclude many current claimants from eligibility, particularly those with mental health problems. The contention is that PIP is too easy to get and that GPs “over-medicalise everyday challenges” and have fuelled a “sick note culture”. It may surprise noble Lords to know that applying for PIP requires the completion of a 36-page form and, often, a considerable wait for assessment, usually undertaken on the phone by a non-medical person. Half of the claims are rejected at that point. However, almost 75% of appeals to a tribunal convened under a judge, and a medical or disability expert, succeed. Perhaps the Minister will comment when he sums up, but this would not seem to support the view that this benefit is too freely given to people who are not in “genuine need”.

It also ignores the impact of long waiting lists for NHS treatment for physical and mental health disorders, and the interplay between the two. I saw one case reported recently of a man who injured his shoulder, causing extreme pain and immobility; he needed intensive

physiotherapy. He was on the waiting list for treatment for three years, during which time he could not work, and, understandably, developed anxiety and depression, making his situation much worse. This is not an isolated case. The waiting lists for mental health support particularly, including for children, are in crisis. If people with mental health problems are to be helped into work effectively and humanely as an alternative to PIP, can the Minister say in his response where the treatment and support services will come from?

Of equal concern to me is the language being used by Ministers about disabled people. It is reminiscent of the rhetoric about migrants, fostering division, with a narrative about disabled people playing the system. I am concerned that the real intention of the Government here is to use disabled people to open up another divisive front for the forthcoming election.

Across a wide range of socioeconomic variables, the outcomes for disabled people are consistently poorer. They are much less likely to be in employment, and those with severe learning difficulties, autism or mental illness have the lowest employment rates. This in part reflects lower educational attainment: they are less likely to have a degree and more likely to have no qualifications at all.

Children with disabilities, including serious illnesses and learning difficulties, find it extremely difficult to access support in schools. We know that only 49% of education, health and care plans are completed within the statutory 20 weeks, with consequent delays for months on end in putting in place the support that is needed.

The disadvantages in education and employment, as well as caring responsibilities by other family members, mean that families with a disabled member have significantly lower median incomes. Poverty rates are higher, at 27% compared to 19%.

There are also disparities in housing, with families with a disabled member much less likely to be owner-occupiers and much more likely to be renting in the private or social housing sectors. Disability Rights UK has said:

“The housing sector is a dangerous mess for Disabled people”, who contend with inaccessible homes and poor conditions.

There are also barriers for disabled people accessing healthcare because of transport difficulties, costs—including for prescriptions—and, again, long waiting lists. Research by Healthwatch shows that disabled people wait even longer than non-disabled people for treatment, and that proportionately more report problems with communication from the NHS. This particularly affects people who have sensory or learning difficulties.

Transport is another major challenge writ large for disabled people. Most public transport—shockingly, even new schemes—is not fully accessible; it lacks step access, and stations are difficult to navigate.

There are other areas of life where disabled people are disadvantaged. They are more like to experience crime, and this is particularly true for disabled children; those aged 10 to 15 are twice as likely to be a victim of crime. Disabled people report lower levels of confidence in policing and feel less safe. Disabled people are more likely to experience domestic abuse, with disabled women being twice as likely as non-disabled women to experience

this. Finally, and not surprisingly, disabled people report lower levels of well-being and higher levels of loneliness.

This is a bleak picture, and although it does not mean that every disabled person has a bleak existence, it means that they have to grapple with many more challenges than those who are not disabled. Despite this, a government consultation last year shows that disabled people have high aspirations that public policy on inclusion should go far beyond the fundamentals of employment, education and the like, important though these are. The majority agree that they also want improved access to elected office; inclusion in emergency planning, resilience and climate change work; and access to assistive technology. They want better opportunities for disabled parents, as well as disabled children, including inclusive playgrounds. However, given the opportunity, they also restated the fundamental importance of better funding, accountability, accessibility and awareness in the workplace, better health and social care, and more financial support to help with the additional costs of living with a disability.

Before I turn finally to what the Government have been doing, I want to acknowledge the vital role of the many excellent voluntary and community organisations in supporting and championing disabled people. Noble Lords will know that many have contacted us, and their briefings testify to the invaluable, indeed essential, work that they do.

The multiplicity of complex challenges for disabled people across most areas of life demands from government a long-term national strategy that is multifaceted, robustly led at the political and executive levels, and translated into action plans with timescales, regular monitoring and reporting, holding departments publicly to account, and, most importantly, with the active participation of disabled people themselves. This is what the Government promised with their *National Disability Strategy*, published in July 2021, when Prime Minister Johnson described the scale of disadvantage experienced by disabled people as “a scandal” and committed to “bridge the gaping chasm” of inequality through regular progress reports. Unfortunately, the strategy hit major problems when, in 2022, it was challenged in the courts by disabled people’s organisations, which claimed that they had had no meaningful input into its development.

The report of the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee published last December criticised the lack of strategic approach, poor engagement with disabled people, the poor evidence base and a failure to update disabled people on implementation. It called for Ministers to update Parliament and disability stakeholders on specific timescales for delivery of all outstanding actions in the national disability strategy. Can the Minister inform the House what progress has been made on implementing the national disability strategy?

In February this year, partly in response to the House of Commons Select Committee report, the Government published yet another plan, the new *Disability Action Plan*, promising to involve disabled people centrally in the implementation and review of progress. Can the Minister explain how the new disability action

plan will sit alongside the national disability strategy, and how progress on both will be reported to disabled people and to Parliament? Will the Government publish an implementation schedule, with clear dates for delivery and reporting, so that they can be held to account?

Improving the well-being and inclusion of disabled people is a moral imperative for all of us in this House, but it is also vital for our society that we harness the talents of all our citizens, whatever their level of disability or ability, and enable them to participate fully and on equal terms. I argue that, to do so, we need an approach that sees disabled people built into policy development and planning right from the outset, not bolted on as an afterthought, as has so often been the case. I beg to move.

12.28 pm

Baroness Browning (Con): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes of Stretford, on bringing this important debate to the Floor of the House today. I declare my interests, both in the register and as having close relatives who are in receipt of disability benefits and for whom I have some responsibility.

Today, I will focus on disability benefits. I am of course aware of the current consultation on PIP, which I will respond to in writing, in respect of those on the autism spectrum with learning disabilities and with mental health issues. However, I want to put on the record my ongoing concerns about the process of claiming disability benefits, the ethos surrounding the system, and the impact this can have on people, many of them already vulnerable.

These are some of the problems they face. There are lengthy forms, exceeding 20 or 30 pages, which put many people off applying in the first place. Many need help to fill them in, and there are often time limits, so finding that help becomes a pressure. Then there is the ability of the DWP to have applications assessed by qualified people with a working knowledge of the medical conditions they are assessing. It is dire. Do not take my word for it: as we have heard, the appeal rate for PIP is 70%—that is 70% granted on appeal. Only last year, a form that I assisted with was rejected. We asked for reconsideration, and when it came back, having been reconsidered, it had been awarded at an enhanced rate. What the person who looked at it in the first place was thinking about, I really do not know.

The questions are geared mainly to narrowly defined physical conditions, with each question scoring points, leaving out the complexities of autism, mental health and learning disabilities and giving few opportunities for people to explain in any detail how their lives are affected. They lose on points. This arbitrary points system is not flexible to take account of fluctuating conditions, good days and bad days, or degeneration. Complex conditions involving more than one disability do not stand a chance.

Despite paper forms, there is a presumption that applicants will then communicate via the internet or phone. Some will, but not everybody. I know several people on the autism spectrum for whom making a phone call to a stranger, or receiving one, is quite traumatic. There are long waiting periods, often without any money at all, and there is a problem with

[BARONESS BROWNING]

answering letters, even signed-for ones. We have heard that even children and young people starting cancer treatment can wait in excess of 20 weeks without any money at all.

All this builds anxiety and stress. It should be remembered that this is disability, not capability for work. PIP, for example, is a benefit that applies to people who are in work as well as those who are not. We are talking about disability, but somehow the debate seems to have moved to whether people are capable for work. I do not know quite where that has come from.

It is a given that many unemployed disabled people would like to work, and I support any initiative that supports that, but disability brings with it myriad extra costs, even for people who are working, and this whole process brings such a level of anxiety and distress. It is time the whole process was reformed. In doing so, the DWP should be as concerned about safeguarding the health—particularly the mental health—of claimants as it is about assessing them. I say that because even the very process of engaging in the benefits system can result in extreme outcomes.

I pay tribute to a former colleague of ours in this House, Lord Newton, Tony Newton, who was also a colleague in mine in another place. He got up out of his hospital bed to come here and speak on this subject. I also pay tribute to the much-missed late Lord Field, Frank Field, whom again I served with in both Houses. He was a champion in this area. On 25 September 2019, he tabled this Written Question in the House of Commons:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, how many inquests relating to benefits claimants who have ended their life by suicide her Department has submitted evidence to since 2013; and in how many inquests it was ruled that the policies of her Department were partly responsible for the deceased person’s state of mind”.

Noble Lords will be familiar with the reply from the Department for Work and Pensions:

“Unfortunately, the information requested is not held centrally and is therefore unavailable without incurring a disproportionate cost”.

Frank—being Frank—then approached the National Audit Office and asked it to investigate what was going on with the suicide rate among benefit claimants.

As a result of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor-General, some progress was made at the DWP. I reassure my noble friend that I am aware that it has made progress, but the point is this: in what other area of disability would anybody or any department—least of all a government department—have to collate information about suicide rates that resulted from their own activities? That surely is unacceptable and I say to my noble friend: I know that the Government want to modernise the benefits system for disability, but it requires absolute root and branch reform.

12.34 pm

Baroness Donaghy (Lab): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Browning, whose knowledge of this area is both impressive and moving. I thank my noble friend Lady Hughes of Stretford for initiating this debate and for her introduction.

We are privileged in this House to receive briefings from so many organisations when we put our names down for a debate. The brief from our own Library for this debate is absolutely outstanding. I do not know about anybody else, but I have felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of briefings from so many charities and organisations that reveal a mixture of inspiration, human misery and struggle for basic rights. I thank all the organisations for their work and hope they understand that it is not possible to cover in this debate all aspects of disability in our society. I shall concentrate on two issues: support for independent living, and the work of the Open University, which I will deal with first.

I was always inspired by Jennie Lee’s work to establish the Open University and was delighted to receive an honorary degree from it 21 years ago. It is the largest provider of higher education for students with a disability, with more than 37,000, and an increasing number citing mental health disabilities. The OU has suffered inadequate funding levels for far too long, yet in 2023, the teaching excellence framework mentioned the OU’s

“significant effort to ensure that the curriculum is accessible to students with a disability”

as an outstanding feature of its provision. It was awarded gold for its overall provision for all students. I know that the Government set great store by these clunky assessments.

The Open University has launched some amazing initiatives, including the disabled veterans’ scholarship fund. Some 312 scholarships have been awarded so far and applications are open for 50 more disabled veterans in the next academic year. The university also supplies digital, accessible information system books, known as DAISY books, in a worldwide-standard digital-reading format that combines audio, text and graphical information in one production, making them accessible to a wide range of people with visual and print disabilities. Around 6,500 students are using DAISY books. To continue this outstanding—“gold”—work, the university needs adequate funding and the students need financial support.

The Office for Students provides grant funding to universities via the disabled student premium and the part-time student premium, which are crucial to the OU. The recent call for evidence by the OfS on public grant funding must strike terror in most universities. Disabled students need appropriate levels of funding to ensure access and participation. Without the disabled students’ allowance—DSA—many students would not be able to study. However, the timing of the award is unhelpful. Adjustments, such as assisted technology and non-medical help, cannot be put in place until a student is already studying. The lead time for receiving this help can be several months, which disadvantages those disabled students. Will the Minister say what steps are being taken to improve its implementation?

In preparation for this debate, I took another look at the Government’s announcement of the review of the personal independence payment—PIP—on 29 April this year. It starts with the Government saying that their priority is to

“make sure our welfare system is fair and compassionate”.

That is all well and good. Then we come to the verbal gymnastics. In referring to the decade since the PIP was introduced, the Government state that

“the appearance of disability and ill health in Britain has changed profoundly, and the clinical case mix has evolved in line with broader societal changes”.

They then rush their fences with,

“including many more people applying for disability benefits with mental health and neurodivergent conditions”.

It is clear that the review is all about cost. The number of those receiving the highest rates of PIP has increased from 25% to 36%. The Government call for a “new conversation” about the benefit system as almost a quarter of the adult population is now reporting a disability. It is hoped that that conversation, as my noble friend said in her introduction, will include the pressure on our health service, longer waiting lists and the complete failure to deal with social care. The Disability Benefits Consortium reacted strongly to the Government’s announcement, calling it

“a cynical, political point-scoring exercise – which cruelly and unjustly targets disabled people”.

The Office for National Statistics has said that the pay gap between disabled and non-disabled employees has widened to 13.8% in 2021. The largest gap is 33.5% for those with autism. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in its report *UK Poverty 2022*, talks of

“a gap of around 12 percentage points in poverty rates between disabled and non-disabled people”—

you get paid less and your cost of living is higher. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation also states that, once again,

“the community will be punishing disability as if it were an indulgence – which will rather call into question whether it is a community at all”.

Arrears on bills are four times as likely between the disabled and non-disabled poor; 19% go hungry and 18% are unable to keep their homes warm.

The Government’s approach to work and benefits has been criticised by the Disability Rights UK and by Scope, which said:

“It’s hard to have any faith that this consultation is about anything other than cutting the benefits bill, no matter the impact on people’s lives”.

The British Medical Association’s mental health lead said that the Government should not

“blame individuals and strip away the support they need. This approach is as cruel as it is ineffective”.

What message will the Minister give to those who live in fear and uncertainty facing increasing living costs?

12.42 pm

Lord Palmer of Childs Hill (LD): My Lords, I will concentrate on access to benefits, education to some degree and work for those with disabilities. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes, for tabling this debate and noble Lords for the wealth of knowledge that has been spoken in this Chamber in just the opening speeches.

The Government announced a series of reforms in April. They are looking at reforming the fit note processes—used for people to get signed off work on sick pay as well as being evidence for PIP—and to narrow the eligibility for PIP. Regarding the fit note reforms, we oppose the changes. The person best

placed to determine someone’s ability to work on the grounds of their health is a medical professional, not some partly trained amateur, a point that was made by the noble Baroness, Lady Browning. It is not the fault of people who are ill or disabled that the Government have massive NHS backlogs; that is what must be tackled. A problem of “pass the buck” exists, with local authorities desperately trying to reduce the cost of social care. We are deeply concerned that the PIP proposals will simply make life harder and push more disabled people into poverty.

There needs to be a fair and independent process and for PIP descriptors to be reassessed in line with decisions made by tribunal judges. There needs to be an awareness of hidden disabilities. We must move on from not recognising mental health matters. I hope that my noble friend Lord Addington will expand on all this. We need to reinstate a form of the Independent Living Fund to help people who need it to live independently in their community and increase the role of local authorities in administering the support to ensure that it is properly responsive to local needs.

Every child, no matter their background, can achieve great things. Urgent action is needed to ensure that all children can access the tailored learning and support that they need. The template for the new EHCP—it is all initials nowadays; the education, health and care plan—will not be rolled out until 2025. The Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care steering group will not complete its work until 2025, and no primary legislation is planned until at least 2025. We are concerned that other proposals in the plan intended to standardise the support available under EHCPs, such as tailored lists of SEND settings in each council area, will detract from the principle that the support that a child receives under an EHCP should be personalised to their needs, not a one-size-fits-all approach in order to cut costs, as the noble Baroness, Lady Browning, said.

Claimants for universal credit are required to undertake either activities relating to preparing for work or job searching to receive universal credit. Disabled people and those with long-term illnesses can apply for an exemption, but, to qualify, a claimant has to go through a work capability assessment. Claimants who are found unable to work are either categorised as belonging to the limited capability for work group—who are deemed able to undertake some work preparing requirements for future work—or the limited capability for work and work-related activity group if they are not thought capable of preparing for work at all.

By being placed in the LCW group, claimants and their partners have lower requirements in relation to preparing for work and they and their partners have a work allowance, which means that they can earn more before their UC payments taper off. By being placed in the LCWRA category—I am sorry for all the initials—claimants are not expected to take part in any work-related activities, have the work allowance and get an additional payment of £390 per month. The test is based on assessing various elements such as cognitive function, mobility et cetera. There is a further backstop test, where someone who fails the test can be exempt if it is considered that doing work-related activity would cause them serious harm.

[LORD PALMER OF CHILDS HILL]

There have been long-standing complaints that the assessors of the WCA do not fully understand disabled people and their needs and get decisions wrong. Government reforms apparently include short-term proposals to tighten the work capability assessment criteria on the basis that digital technology means more people can access work from home. The intention is to remove the mobility criteria from the WCA. They also intend to severely restrict the serious harm test. I hope that the Minister can address this when he replies.

We do not agree with the proposed changes to the WCA, short-term or long-term. This is not a serious solution to get disabled people into work but clearly just a way of taking vital funds away from people who already have additional costs which they struggle to meet. It is also vastly insulting to disabled people to suggest that they need to be forced to want to work. Most of them want to work.

Many disabled people rely on social care in order to live independently. It is therefore vital that we fix the broken social care system. All the research shows that it is more expensive to be disabled. Personal independence payments are meant to help pay for some of those extra costs. The PIP form is lengthy and complicated to complete. Disabled people say that it is confusing and stressful and can cause health conditions to decline.

There is an incredibly low level of trust between disabled people and DWP assessors. Assessments are often outsourced to people who are not really qualified to deal with them, and lots of mistakes are made. The assessment criteria do not work well for everybody. For example, they do not account for people with relapsing/remitting conditions such as MS or long Covid.

Much needs to be done. We need some reassurance from the Minister—and from the Labour Front Bench, one of whom who might be in his position in a few months—on what the Government are going to do, without kicking this into the long grass. The long grass certainly needs cutting, so that we can help people now, not at some time in the distant future.

12.50 pm

Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB): My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes of Stretford, for tabling this debate and for giving your Lordships' Chamber the opportunity to discuss a wide range of interconnected issues. The barriers that disabled people face do not sit easily within one government department.

I draw noble Lords' attention to my register of interests. I am president of the LGA, chair of the Wheelchair Alliance and I receive a PIP.

I thank the huge number of disabled people who contacted me. Bearing in mind what the noble Baroness, Lady Donaghy, said about the wide range of issues, I am going to give it a go and cover as many as possible. I will take a deep breath and see how many I can get through. Everything included in this speech is from my personal experience or is what disabled people have told me directly.

I am treated in one of three ways: as a Paralympian, very nice; as a politician, quite mixed; but as a disabled woman I experience most discrimination. I have been

told that people like me should not be allowed to get married, have a job or have children, but one of the biggest barriers that many disabled people face is that non-disabled people often do not understand those barriers and make wild assumptions. They think that, because they once sat in a wheelchair or pushed their grandmother somewhere in a wheelchair, they know everything about it. I am horrified to see companies still offering these experiences as a way to help non-disabled people understand the barriers we face. It is appalling and outdated; it is what we in the disability community call "cripping up".

It is a long time since the DDA was implemented and I sat on the National Disability Council with the noble Lord, Lord Shinkwin, but what has really changed? The Paralympics in 2012 were great, but the people who tell me that they changed the world are non-disabled people. We are portrayed as Paralympians or as benefit scroungers, with a healthy dose of inspiration porn thrown in. The reality is that the least privileged disabled people are mostly invisible in society. Representation in the media is far from equal.

I accept that we work in an old building, and it is not the most accessible. It is much easier if you are a pass-holder. I am very grateful to the team who have been talking about accessibility, but using the new carpet that has been put around the Chamber is like pushing through sludge. I very much enjoy sitting next to the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, but the fact that we are both wheelchair users means that we cannot actually sit with our groups.

I was contacted by a teacher, who told me that children sitting GCSE English who need a scribe will not be able to access the 20 marks available for spelling, punctuation and grammar, so they have already been put at a disadvantage.

Employers do not really understand the Equality Act or the legal obligation for a reasonable adjustment. It is a get-out clause. Disability Confident is simply a reimagining of a previous scheme; I question how many people's lives it has actually changed. We are far from sorting out working from home for disabled people, and mandatory requirements for companies to provide it for a certain percentage of jobs are not helping disabled people to get into work. Access to Work is out of date and has a huge backlog. It is awful for the creative industries or contract work.

Expanding the definition of disability may be helpful for some people, but just lets companies get away with not employing more disabled people. One company told me that, as only 50% of disabled people who can work are in work, its target for employing disabled people needed to be only 10%—I think not. There are good practices out there, but not nearly enough.

I will mention PIPs briefly, because many other noble Lords will mention them, but we need a wholesale reform of the system. I know from when I filled in the forms that I was pages in before they asked who the best medical professionals are to explain my impairment. There are none, because I am not sick.

Disabled facilities grants for housing are out of date. The National Planning Policy Framework does not mention equality or duties for local authorities or homebuilders to consider the Equality Act. It is notable

that recent consultations on proposed changes to the NPPF have not been accompanied by a government equalities impact assessment. Why not?

On the built environment, disabled people are rarely consulted at the point when changes are being made. A-boards, pavement parking, abandoned rental bikes and countryside paths that have barriers to prevent cycles all stop wheelchair users. A Sustrans report into the cycling network identified 16,000 barriers. There was a removal programme but funding for it has been cut.

There are inaccessible restaurants and toilets, and a lack of changing places—not least in this building. Floating bus stops are not always near zebra crossings, or the island may be too narrow for wheelchair users.

In hotels, there is a lack of definition of what their accessibility actually is. It should not be just putting in a grab rail. Their walk-in showers may not have a seat.

If you want to go out to the cinema or a restaurant, you can have only one friend, because that is the way they are set up. When I took my daughter to see “Winnie the Pooh” when she was three, I was told that, because she was not my carer, she was not allowed to sit with me and had to sit 20 rows away.

There are issues with access to sport, and to buses. There is only one wheelchair space per bus. On flying, I am only going to mention Frank Gardner.

I will briefly mention trains, which were meant to be step-free by 1 January 2020. By the Government’s own data, it will take 100 years to make that change. Transport for the North launched an accessibility survey and found that only 48% of its stations had step-free access. Greater Anglia trains are fantastic for level boarding but, when I asked about accessibility, I was told not to worry because I would be in sight of the café-bar. All my dreams for inclusion became as one when I realised that I could see the café-bar, but could not actually buy anything from it.

London Bridge has no contingency plan for a single lift failure, yet billions were spent on its refurbishment. Crossrail has level boarding only at its core. The lifts have been out at St Pancras for months. I can access only one-third of Tube stations. The Network Rail map has inaccurate information: it tells me that the lifts are working at my local station—fantastic—but my local station has no lifts.

Our legal right to turn up and go is being eroded, because we are being forced to book through an app that has no in-app contacts. You cannot buy tickets and it does not show lift status. Every trip is a magical mystery tour. It goes on. Shockingly, John Pring from the Disability News Service reported that market-testing companies are using non-disabled people to pretend to be disabled to test the access app. I am very interested in understanding what the noble Viscount thinks of that. I have deep admiration for Doug Paulley, who continues to fight for change through legal means.

Lack of ATP enforcement means that luggage is put in wheelchair spaces. There are no primary or secondary timescales in the draft rail reform Bill. Accessibility is seen as an add-on or a nice-to-have. Disabled people cannot buy concessionary tickets through ticket vending machines, except for on Northern. You

have to buy them through ticket offices—and we saw what happened with them last year. ScotRail has not changed its ATP, so mobility scooter users are not allowed to travel on Scottish trains. They can get there by Avanti or LNER, but they might not be able to get home.

Today, Southeastern announced that it is moving towards level boarding and Steve White, the CEO, said that anyone bidding for contracts has to show level boarding, but there is no guarantee that it will ever happen.

Tony Jennings wrote to me saying that he cannot turn up and go at his nearest station outside staffed hours, because there is a barrow crossing.

I could go on: lack of EV charging; inaccessible dental chairs; not buying the right wheelchairs for the right people at the right time; disability hate crime; Covid; elective office—I have run out of time.

I understand that the noble Viscount is not able to answer these questions, but I would welcome any of the departments writing to me to continue this conversation.

12.59 pm

Lord Addington (LD): My Lords, follow that! The noble Baroness, Lady Hughes, has set us a challenge by going across the entire panoply. That probably should be done, but we may need a debate about three times as long, or three different goes at it. Let us use this as our opening shot.

We have passed a law that we do not enact. Most people in this Chamber are veterans of various phases of this and its precursors. A good few years ago, I realised how long I had been here when it had been 20 years since we passed the initial DDA. I was one of the youngest people in the House then, so it was a great reminder of just how mortal I am. One theme has recurred again and again: we talk the talk without walking the walk.

The Government have reassured a certain group that they will have continued employment—those who make appeals to idiotic decisions by government, in this case for disability benefits, because there will be appeals to this. The Department of Health said that it would take care of mental health and that it would become as apparent as physical health, but has just said, “Oh no, there is far too much of it”. I cannot think of anything that would generate appeals and conflict more quickly. Congratulations—effectively, we have two departments at each other’s throats. All Governments have done this to an extent, and I hope that any new Government will be aware of this.

We also do not seem to have taken on board that many fixes can be made quite easily, because we are bound by convention. I must once again remind the House of my declared interests: I am dyslexic and president of the British Dyslexia Association, and I am chairman of Microlink, a disability access company. When chatting through what could be done, I felt one of the easiest things would be to look at communication. The noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, has just given us a good example of physical communication for one priority group. There is no consistent approach.

[LORD ADDINGTON]

For communication of ideas, the dyslexic will always go to English. We have reached a point where we are worrying about passing an English exam. This is ridiculous. For over two decades, I have used voice-operated technology. It used to be an add-on to a decent computer—it had to be decent to handle it—and it is now standard on our operating systems. Most people do not know it is there, but it is: all you have to do is press a couple of buttons, or voice call them into action, and have it read back. But we still have a system where people repeatedly say that you have to pass a written English exam to get into certain places.

I have been looking around this Chamber, and most of us are using an old, established assistive technology—a pair of glasses. You have taken a manufactured substance, changed the lens and stuck it on the end of your nose. That is okay, but using a computer is not. There is a certain degree of absurdity built into the responses here. We and government agencies are still saying, “You’ve got to pass certain tests in a certain way”, and not, “Can you communicate information? Can you pass it on so that somebody knows what you are saying?” No, you have to write it down. We all know how absurd that is.

Let us face it: in the modern world, nobody writes anything much with a pen, other than a couple of lines, after you have left school. You do it all on a computer. I have asked this many times and have not heard a reply against it. Does anybody care if you have word-processed by talking or tapping a keyboard? There might be some weirdos somewhere who think that this is the essence of life, but I hope they are not in this Chamber today. Will we start addressing the practical problems and say that it does not matter as long as you can communicate? We could do this very easily if the Government were to lead on it.

The implications might be biggest for those with dyslexia. We have already heard about autism, and I shudder to think what the noble Lord, Lord Holmes, who will follow me in this debate, would say about this, because the technology for those who have a visual impairment has been very well established for even longer than for those with dyslexia. Why do we not just ask: “Can you communicate properly?” Other groups would benefit from this as well, and this idiotic barrier to accessing training and information throughout the system would be removed. The Government have the capacity to say: “Yes, we will do this, and we will do it in the school system”. We can now say very easily, “You can learn through these methods”.

This is only in pockets: at university, it is perfectly accepted. If you suffered English GCSE and got through it at the fourth attempt, you are allowed to carry on. Even if you are very bad and do not stand any chance of getting through, you can get through. Only certain groups are affected. Are we going to start to remove this communication barrier for things such as training, accessing other types of activity, et cetera? Are we going to do this in a cohesive manner? Are we going to take a lead? This debate does not speak to one department: it speaks across government.

I hope that the Government will be in a position to give us a better steer. At the moment, we are creating artificial barriers that we can resolve easily. This is just

one of them. Will the Government please give us some indication that they will do it? They have precedents and legal requirements saying that they should; they should say to people and employers that this communication problem does not matter. It is easily solved: all you have to do is press the button that is already on your computer and you will be able to work, with a bit of guidance about how it works. I am probably damaging Microlink’s client base here, but it is not rocket science. Making sure you do not get noise on the microphone is probably the first step, and then you have done it. It is as simple as making sure that you have a chair that does not give you backache—although people do not do that either.

Can the Minister say when the Government will start to intervene to tell people what is possible and that these things are easily solvable? If they do, they will remove a great deal of stress and some of the queues for benefits. That sort of positive action is long overdue. I hope that we will have a coherent attitude that gets through to people—not to those who dig around and wait in long queues for it, which is aggressively done.

1.07 pm

Lord Holmes of Richmond (Con): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes, on securing such an important debate. I agree with all previous speakers that we need much longer to discuss these issues, in more detail and more often, both in your Lordships’ House and in the other place. If my noble friend the Minister was unaware of the lived experience of disabled people in the UK today at the beginning of this debate, he will not be now, so I will cut to the chase on employment and education.

If you are a disabled person in the UK, you are far less likely to have a good experience in education, to gain employment, to keep that employment if gained and, if kept, to receive a comparable level of pay to your non-disabled colleagues. Can my noble friend say what the current education gap is for disabled people at key stage 2, GCSE and A-level? What is the current employment gap for disabled people? What is the current disability pay gap? This thread runs through all elements of a disabled person’s lived experience, writ large through employment and education. If there is not that opportunity, as there is for every single person in society, to get it right the first time in education, life is made so avoidably difficult from that point onwards.

When will the EHCP system become equitable, accessible and resolvable in reasonable time and not just a matter of lottery or ability to pay for professionals to help you through a process that should be open to all those who need it?

We have heard about the difficulties with employment and education, but what about if you are not even able to get to your job, or if you are so stressed and done in by the journey to get to work that it feels like you have done your day’s work before you have even arrived? We come to the question of transport, and the lived experience of disabled people of what passes for public transport in the UK today.

Will my noble friend the Minister commit from the Dispatch Box today—why not?—to having a moratorium on floating bus stops? For noble Lords who may be

unaware, these are bus stops that are essentially stuck in the middle of the road, with a cycle lane between the bus stop and the pavement. How can a disabled person—any person—effectively, efficiently and, crucially, safely access the bus? It is a planning folly: a planning disaster. Can we commit today that buses can only pick up and drop off from the kerbside? This needs to be urgently resolved.

I turn to taxis, another critical part of our public transport infrastructure, though seldom treated by the department in policy terms as that critical part of public transport, not least for disabled people. This very morning, the planning committee in the City of London is deciding whether to recommend that Bank junction should be reopened to black cabs. Its proposal is that the ban on black cabs at Bank junction continues. Why? There is no safety reason; black cabs have never been involved in a collision at Bank junction. It is planning folly and not evidence-based. Will my noble friend write to the City Corporation, reminding it of its equality duties, not least under the public sector equality duty, and urge it to reconsider reopening Bank to black cabs—yes, on a trial basis, to assess how it will go? The Court of Common Council will decide this on 20 June, and it is in everybody's interests, not least those of disabled people, that we have black cabs being allowed to go back through Bank junction, because the message it sends right across the country is that cabs matter as a part of public transport. Ditto for Tottenham Court Road; if my noble friend could write to Camden council, that would be appreciated as well, while he has his pen out—or indeed his laptop, or whatever means of communication he chooses.

We do not have public transport in this country; we have transport that is accessible to certain sections of the public—partial public transport, if you will. For disabled people, be it buses, rail or indeed the absolute nonsense of so-called “shared space”, transport is at best patchy. I ask my noble friend the Minister: when will it be in this country that disabled people can experience accessible transport—whichever mode, at whatever time and whenever they choose, like everybody else, to turn up and seek to use it? Can my noble friend report on the so-called “shared space” experiments; we have managed to achieve a moratorium on future shared space, but how are the existing schemes going? They effectively plan out disabled people from their local communities.

Floating bus stops, taxis and shared space—all are problematic for disabled people, and all are resolvable. Then there is education, particularly the potential for personalised education. On employment, it is entirely resolvable to have similar rates of educational attainment and employment for disabled people. These issues are all entirely resolvable if we just start from the key principle: inclusive by design, accessible by all. I ask my noble friend the Minister: when will all government policies be able to pass those tests—inclusive by design, accessible by all? Fundamentally, all we are talking about here is talent: all of that phenomenal talent in all disabled people, up and down and across the UK. We still suffer from this tragic truth—talent is everywhere; opportunity, currently, is not.

1.15 pm

Lord Touhig (Lab): My Lords, I join others in the Chamber in thanking my noble friend Lady Hughes for securing this debate, which has given us an opportunity to raise a whole range of matters that affect people with disabilities. No one took greater advantage of that than the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson; so many of the things she talked about, which many of us in the Chamber take as quite normal and natural to use, present challenges to people with disabilities. We are grateful to her for that hugely important contribution.

In Britain today, fewer than three in 10 people of working age with learning disabilities are in employment. That means that seven in 10 are denied the opportunity of an independent life and the sense of life-fulfilling achievement that work can bring. Businesses across Britain are denied the benefit, enthusiasm, skills and commitment of this group of our fellow citizens. And it is not as if we are not aware of this injustice. It has been on our agenda for decades; Governments, including the present Government, have genuinely committed to reducing the disability employment gap. In 2017, the Government set the goal of helping 1 million disabled people into work by 2027 and, to be fair, there has been progress as a result—but it is simply not enough.

A year earlier, in 2016, the National Autistic Society, of which I am a vice-president, an honour I share with my noble friend Lady Browning, produced a report on the autism employment gap. The image on the front cover bears the words:

“I’m not unemployable, I’m autistic”.

This image makes me despair because, despite the Government's good intentions, millions of people with learning disabilities and autism are still without a job. No matter our ambition to make a seismic change to help disabled people into employment, people with learning difficulties and autism still find it hugely challenging. I passionately believe that the right to a life with a job—an opportunity to be independent and self-supporting—is a basic human right. Those who are denied that are being denied their human rights.

In February, the chair of the Autism All-Party Group, Sir Robert Buckland, published a most detailed review of the employment of people with autism. Robert was my Conservative opponent when I was elected to the other place in a by-election in February 1995, and I have nothing but admiration for his commitment to supporting people with autism. For me, the recommendations in the report can be summed up in one sentence that Robert wrote:

“These recommendations are mostly aimed at changing employer behaviour”.

For me, that is the essence of the challenge we face—changing employer behaviour. If we want to reduce the level of unemployment among people with learning disabilities and autism, we must change employer behaviour.

I have spoken to many businesspeople about this and in almost every case there is a willingness to help, but also a reluctance. “How will my staff cope with working with a person with a learning disability?” I am asked. “What if they don't fit in?” “What support do I have to provide for them?” “Is there any financial

[LORD TOUHIG]

support for me to help employ a person with a learning disability?" "Are there any examples of where employing a person with a learning disability has worked out?" These are perfectly reasonable questions—and, in answer to the last question, yes, there are good examples of employers who have employed people with learning disabilities. I will mention two.

The Fair Shot Cafe in Covent Garden is well worth a visit. It is a social enterprise charity that aims to change the lives of young adults with learning disabilities and autism. It offers a year-long hospitality programme, training skilled baristas and cafe assistants. The cafe is an accredited London living wage employer. At the end of the year, it finds paid employment for its graduates and continues to support those graduates and the employer for a further six months. Since it was set up in December 2021, 36 young adults have been trained and are now in employment. More than 10,000 hours of training are completed each year, and the Fair Shot Cafe has 15 employment partners dedicated to creating inclusive opportunities for people with learning difficulties and autism. Its 2023 impact report estimates that the employment programme it is offering has saved the taxpayer £210,000 in benefits; 80% of their employment partners state that they would now employ another neurodivergent person; 100% of the graduates report increased confidence and improved mental health; and, moreover, the Fair Shot Cafe has a 4.8-star rating on Google. To learn more, look at its website or, better still, go there, have a cup of coffee and find out for yourself.

The phs Group is the leading hygiene services and commercial cleaning services provider in the UK. I visited its headquarters in Caerphilly a while ago. With help from Hft, an amazing learning disability charity, it operates the Project Search scheme. It recruits interns with learning disabilities and autism and offers training, with a view to them gaining full-time employment in a job at the end. The company says it has been a most valuable experience. For the students, what is on offer is life-changing. The phs Group first became involved in the programme as an initiative to give back something to the local community. The company told me that, as the interns learn from phs staff, they in turn provide just as many opportunities for phs staff to learn, develop and understand the problems that people with learning disabilities and autism face. By becoming mentors, phs staff are learning new skills every day, as well as learning about disability in the workplace. They learn how to make reasonable adjustments and remove any barriers faced by the interns. The phs Group says that the scheme brings diversity of individuals and thought, and, as evidenced by how many interns it offers permanent roles afterwards, a fantastic team of people to its staff. The phs Group says it is a better business because of this project, and would recommend that all businesses look into providing more opportunities to students like those it employs.

We need more companies like these two to operate similar work chance schemes, and we need companies such as these to act as mentors to encourage other companies. I believe we need a nationwide scheme to make real progress, and a national strategy with a

clear and achievable objective. That objective can be summed up in a sentence: it is to change employer behaviour.

1.22 pm

Baroness Thomas of Winchester (LD) [V]: My Lords, I welcome this debate and declare that I receive DLA.

The Government have made no secret about wanting to cut the benefit PIP—personal independence payment—which is paid to disabled people of working age, in work or out of work, who qualify, saying that it is now unsustainable. Last month, they published a Green Paper, with a consultation period of three months, but said that any change could not be attempted before a general election.

I have always been concerned that the PIP assessment does not officially involve any healthcare professionals because it has been characterised as a functionality test only, not a medical test. The assessment process has been outsourced, and claimants are often turned down initially for eligibility for PIP, even if they have a condition such as muscular dystrophy. The next stage is for the claimant to ask for mandatory reconsideration, but all too often the original decision is rubber-stamped. Finally, a claimant can ask for a tribunal to examine their claim. Tribunals very often overturn the initial decision, probably because the tribunal consists of a lawyer, a doctor and a disability specialist. The whole appeals process in itself is long-winded and stressful for a disabled person to go through, let alone being very expensive for the Government.

I think the time has come for a report from a healthcare professional to be mandatory, perhaps at the very latest at the first appeal stage, which is reconsideration by the DWP. I am told that problems with PIP assessments are the number one issue on MDUK's helpline, particularly the change in the walking test from 50 metres to 20 metres. In general, more PIP claimants than ever have psychiatric disorders, so having a report from a healthcare professional would surely be welcome. Even better, of course, would be faster treatment for mental health problems.

1.25 pm

Baroness Andrews (Lab): My Lords, it is a great pleasure and privilege to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Thomas of Winchester. She has fought her corner on disability issues for so many years, and it is no surprise to hear her focusing on PIP and the need for medical assessment. I am very grateful to my noble friend for introducing the debate in the way that she did, which was comprehensive, passionate and measured at the same time.

This has been an excellent debate, and I have learned a huge amount. I am not going to repeat some of the things I intended to say. The Government strike me as being very hyperactive suddenly about disability. The problem is that anything with the term "modernisation" in the title strikes the fear of God into me, because, basically, we know that modernisation means greater cuts, more difficult assessments and a narrower gate to go through. We have to be extremely careful in our response, because clearly there is so much that needs changing—goodness knows that we

have heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, about the enormous scope of the things that need to be done.

One of the things that has struck me this morning, and in reading the White Paper and Green Paper, is the gap between what is being proposed and the reality of people's lives on a day-to-day basis, when every encounter is a struggle. We are not even taking account of the impact of cost of living increases on the ability to live a decent life if you are disabled. The Trussell Trust has been measuring the increasing dependence of disabled people on food banks, for example. We know how difficult it is to find and keep a personal assistant; not only are they scarce but the effort that goes into having to employ them is enormous. These are things that can be simplified. It seems to me that the Government have taken a stiff broom to the wrong end of the problem. What we should be doing is just the sort of thing that the noble Lord, Lord Touhig, talked about—that is, making employer contracts more robust and requiring much more changes by way of specialist support being available for people looking for work and so on.

I have a question for the Minister. Why did the Government not involve experts by experience in the design of the White Paper? They are the people who know what it takes to change things effectively, and cost-effectively as well. It is pretty outrageous that they have had to go to law to make their case about not being included. It did not improve the situation as the other White Papers came forward.

I want to raise two specific challenges which are having an effect on the ability of people to seek and keep work. They are about the people who look after disabled people. Obviously, one of the outstanding issues in recent years has been the collapse of mental health services for young people and children, but compounding that is another disaster, which is less visible but really bears down on educational opportunity.

I know that school transport for disabled children is not, strictly speaking, within the Minister's brief, but he has a colleague who is responsible for it, and I would be very grateful if he could act as a messenger in this respect. It is no secret that transport for disabled children to go to school is reaching breaking point in many local authorities. There has been an increase in the number of children who are eligible, I believe, but there have also been huge cuts in local authority budgets. Appeals are mounting up, increasing numbers are frustrated, parents are scared and children are bewildered.

I want to give the Minister one example, and I declare an interest because the parents are known to me. Their child is 16, and she has been moved to an FE college appropriate for her age and condition. It takes her working parents three to four hours a day, driving back and forth twice a day. Previously they were able to access a taxi, which was free, with a carer. That has been withdrawn. Two appeals have failed. The child has, among other chronic conditions, epilepsy, and so she cannot travel alone.

The parents, in this case, are self-employed. They are distinguished artists who work to commission, so they cannot make up the time lost during the day

because they have to care for the child, who requires intensive care when she is at home. She has become increasingly frustrated and violent towards them because she cannot go to school, which she loves and where she thrives.

What is going to happen to those parents and the child? They have no other family to support them. They are both at risk of losing not only their income but their health. How will the child be able to remain in school at all? What will be her future? This is not an isolated case; I am sure many other noble Lords will know of such cases. I have one question here. There seems to be a tendency towards discriminating against self-employed parents because their work is seen as less predictable and less guaranteed. Will the Minister ask his colleague to look at that point?

My final topic is the problem of carers who are in receipt of carer's allowance but are finding that, mostly inadvertently, they have worked too many hours and are therefore having to pay back some of that allowance. In our Select Committee report, *A Gloriously Normal Life*, we showed how interdependent carers were with the people they cared for—if you harm one then you harm the other. We catalogued the many different ways in which unpaid carers were suffering from invisibility. We asked the Government to look again at the carer's allowance—at a princely £81.90 a week, it is the lowest benefit available—and at the hours and conditions of employment.

The Government rejected those recommendations, and things have got worse. All the evidence suggests that the health of unpaid carers is getting worse, and they have little access to information. That bears down on the point I want to make. Carers who have managed to hang on to a part-time job are desperate to maintain their links with work and with normality. They are allowed to earn up to £151 a week—13 hours at the minimum wage. To add insult to injury, thousands of carers are now being pursued by the DWP for breaching the income threshold and are being criminalised. Let me explain why that is so unfair.

The DWP has an IT system that flags up when a carer's income breaches a threshold but fails to trigger action, so that they know and can pay back their debt as soon as possible. Debts pile up. In 2022-23, 26,000 carers were asked to repay sums relating to earning breaches. Some of the sums were tiny, at £1.50, while 800 people owed between £5,000 and £20,000 and 36 people owed over £20,000. Carers have told me they cannot understand why the DWP has not been notifying carers of overpayments in a timely manner. It is very difficult to get hold of the DWP about the carer's allowance, so they have to sort out these mistakes themselves. The impact is devastating. Many carers are now thinking of giving up their carer's allowance because it is too risky. It is a very serious situation.

One carer says:

“This is an additional stress you choose to go without on an already stressful life. We are neither heroes or scroungers but people who care and who are doing a complex job we have no training or experience of and very little support for”.

I ask the Minister to consider with his colleagues whether the whole system should be paused so it can be reviewed at this point.

1.33 pm

Lord Shinkwin (Con): My Lords, I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes of Stretford, for this important opportunity to reflect holistically on the significant challenges that disabled people continue to encounter in so many aspects of their lives, as my friend, the noble Baroness, Lady Baroness Grey-Thompson, made clear. Like the noble Lord, Lord Touhig, I shall focus on employment, in my case as a former chair of a CSJ disability commission and the current chair of the IoD commission on the future of business: harnessing diverse talent for success. I refer Members to my register of interests in that regard.

I ask myself, from a disabled person's perspective, what success in addressing the challenges we face in employment might look like. What are the key performance indicators I would expect to see? Take the KPI of closing the disability employment gap, which my noble friend Lord Holmes of Richmond has mentioned. What progress has been made there? Not that much, it seems; it hovers stubbornly at around 30%, partly because disability prevalence at work has increased from 16.5% in 2013 to 24.6% in 2024. I would be grateful if my noble friend could tell me to what extent the DWP takes disability prevalence into account when calculating the disability employment gap.

I turn to Disability Confident, the Government's flagship employment scheme for disabled people. How effective has that been? The DWP claims that 11 million people are now employed by Disability Confident firms, so surely there is clear evidence of a corresponding step-change improvement in both the disability employment gap and the disability pay gap. We know the answer on the disability employment gap. On the disability pay gap, the IoD commission that I chair recommended mandatory workforce reporting for big business, which would allow for its calculation. The director-general and I wrote to the Prime Minister 18 months ago, but to the best of my knowledge we have not received even an acknowledgment. That may not be a KPI, but it is certainly a revealing indicator of the Government's disdain, which, unfortunately, was also on display in their car crash of an announcement last December about the role of the Minister for Disabled People.

What is the evidence that the Government's flagship Disability Confident scheme actually improves disability employment outcomes? According to Professor Kim Hoque, from King's College London, and Professor Nick Bacon—both of whom are from Disability@Work—the percentage of the workforce that is disabled is no higher in Disability Confident level 1 or level 3 organisations, and only marginally higher in private sector level 2 organisations, than in non-Disability Confident organisations. Also, the percentage of the workforce that is disabled is no higher, and disabled employees' experiences of work no better, in organisations in the Disability Confident business leaders' group than in non-Disability Confident organisations. Can my noble friend tell me how these findings are meant to inspire confidence among the primary stakeholders of the scheme—that is, disabled people?

Is my noble friend aware that, of the 129,000 jobs listed on the DWP's Find a Job service, only 0.51% are fully remote and just 2.75% are listed as being hybrid

remote? As Professor Hoque said when he gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Select Committee in the other place earlier this month:

“The idea that there are all of these working from home opportunities out there for disabled people ... is just a complete myth”,

not least because competition for those jobs, scarce as they are, is going to be even higher.

Unjustified disability discrimination may have been outlawed on paper by the DDA 30 years ago, as already mentioned, but, far from being eradicated, it has in my experience as a disabled person instead become normalised because of a lack of enforcement, which has been informed not by malice but by a deficit of lived experience. Subsumed within the EHRC since the abolition of the Disability Rights Commission, the unique nature of disability and, thus, the need for reasonable adjustments has meant that disability is the heaviest stone, which inevitably falls to the bottom of the equality policy pond—and there it stays.

I want to look beyond where we are now to the next Parliament. I hope that the next UK Government recognise in policy design and implementation that our lived experience as disabled people is not only valid but valuable, and that harnessing it adds value and reduces costs over the medium term. I hope that the next UK Government carry out a review, led by a disabled person, of what is needed to ensure that the legislative framework is actually delivering in the way it was intended to for disabled people; and that, at the very least, that Government abide by the recommendations of the House of Lords ad hoc Select Committee, so ably led by the noble Baroness, Lady Deech, which found almost 10 years ago that the Equality Act 2010 was not working for disabled people.

In conclusion, unless and until disabled people are brought into the decision-making process on merit, including as Members of your Lordships' House, the challenges we are discussing will remain and we will be having exactly the same debate in 10 years' time as we are today.

1.42 pm

Lord Davies of Brixton (Lab): It has truly been a privilege to sit and listen to this debate. Thanks are due to my noble friend Lady Hughes of Stretford for introducing it but all the other speakers have contributed so much. I have just two thoughts to advance: first, this is as much about mental as about physical disablement; secondly, I am going to say something about the challenge faced by disabled people in securing an adequate pension.

It is totally appropriate that we consider the mental health aspects. The noble Viscount, Lord Younger, has had to leave the Chamber but I can see that he is aware that it is Mental Health Awareness Week, so we need to include that in our thoughts. Of course, it arises in two ways. First, as I think a number of speakers have highlighted, coping with the situation creates mental health problems for people with physical disablement but, secondly, parallel to that are the problems faced by people who have mental health problems in coping with the situation as it is. My noble friend Lady Donaghy quite rightly drew attention to the excellent briefs that

we receive because we are taking part in these debates. I will just highlight those from the Royal College of Psychiatrists and from the British Psychological Society, which clearly focus on the mental health aspects.

The royal college is particularly forthright about the reform of the disability benefits system. It points out the stark rise in the number of people facing mental problems and nails the canard that it is, in some way, due to more people taking a day off because it is a blue Monday. The royal college says:

“This increase is driven by serious issues such as poverty, housing and food insecurity and increased loneliness and isolation. These factors are known to put people at greater risk of having a mental illness and were compounded during the pandemic”.

It is absolutely clear that it is no easy ticket to be receiving support for a mental health problem. It stresses:

“Only those with conditions which significantly impact their ability to function and have lasted over a year can receive PIP”.

It would be good if the Minister could acknowledge the knowledge and experience of the royal college in assessing where we are in this situation.

The royal college also stresses the importance of getting the Mental Health Act on board and of having resources to support mental health services, not just in the health service but in schools and the employment service. The British Psychological Society echoes those concerns. It stresses the importance of more education and understanding within the public services, so that the people providing these services are more aware of the challenge faced by people with problems with their mental health.

Turning to pensions, I recall that, more than 40 years ago, I was a member of a body called the Occupational Pensions Board, which produced a report *Occupational Pension Scheme Cover for Disabled People*. I reread our report, and we quite rightly found that the difficulty faced by disabled people is not with the pension; it is with getting a job in the first place. When they have a job, they accrue a pension. I think I have learned a little more since then because, of course, being disabled interferes with your career pattern. It means often that you have periods out of work. Because of that, your earnings and earning prospects are lower and you have gaps. Because of those factors, you end up with a lower earnings-related pension, and we have a system that depends on earnings-related pensions. That is an issue which needs some further consideration in the context of the benefits system.

I declare an interest, as in the register, with the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, which is doing work on identifying the problems faced by people with mental health problems in the financial arena. It has recently produced a report on pensions that included a series of key recommendations, which I would like to highlight, regarding the issues faced by people who are mentally disabled in achieving a decent pension. It highlighted the importance of the Money and Pensions Service—MaPS—and calls for MaPS to put more effort into understanding and providing support for people with poor mental health. There is a need for specialist advice in this area and a need for MaPS to train the staff it has to acknowledge the

problems that are faced. It is also important to ensure that, when advice is given, it is provided in an accessible way.

These issues come together. Poor pensions go with disability, and this needs to be acknowledged. I know the Minister has heard my speech on the gender pensions gap on more than one occasion; no doubt he will hear it again. Equally, we have a disability pensions gap, which needs to be addressed and acknowledged in a similar fashion.

1.49 pm

Baroness Brinton (LD): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes, on securing this important debate and setting the scene so well on the problems disabled people face in our country today. It is also a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Davies of Brixton. I declare my interests as vice-president of the LGA and the chair of the LGA disability forum.

I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, for her comment on wheelchair users not being able to sit with their party groupings. Should any of us in wheelchairs become Government or Opposition Front-Benchers, we could not, for example, use the Dispatch Box. At least we have this space here, which is more than can be said for the House of Commons, where there is no provision.

The noble Lord, Lord Shinkwin, and I took part in a survey by Westminster Council on the accessibility of Parliament Square, given the very large volume of pedestrians there. The researcher who conducted it said afterwards that he had never understood how hypervigilant people with disabilities need to be moving around our streets today. Actually, that woke me up too, because I had not understood the constant pressure one is under.

The noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, also referred to John Pring of the Disability News Service. He is an outstanding journalist who is not afraid to expose the realities of how challenging it is for disabled people to live in the UK today. I think he has had more refusals on FoIs from the DWP than anybody else, but still he rightly persists and we thank him for that.

This building is getting worse for people with disabilities. With security problems, they are closing doors. I do not know if any noble Lords have ever tried to open a door towards you sitting down, but when you have arthritic shoulders, I have to tell you that it is almost impossible.

I am sure that the Minister, in his summing up, will extol the details of the *Disability Action Plan* published in March this year. I remind your Lordships' House about how that was received by Transport for All. Katie Pennick said:

“Nothing on transport, nothing on housing, nothing on social care, nothing on PIP, nothing on hate crime, nothing on urban planning, nothing on healthcare, nothing nothing nothing...”.

My noble friend Lord Addington reminded us that the Government often say the right thing but then legislate in completely the opposite direction. Many noble Lords who have spoken have covered that issue.

[BARONESS BRINTON]

I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Andrews, for reminding us of the importance of unpaid carers and the consequences of the appalling benefits regime for them. Will the Government address the very particular problem they face now?

Health and social care remains a really big area for disabled people, especially under the current crisis conditions. The Cystic Fibrosis Trust says that people with CF should have access to social workers and to clinical psychologists. But one in four children with CF cannot access a CF social worker and CF clinical centres report that 61% of vacant psychology posts have remained unfilled for over six months. Young Lives vs Cancer reports that diagnosed patients face delays of upwards of 20 weeks for PIP/DLA decision-making. Why is there a three-month waiting period after diagnosis with cancer before applications can even be made for benefits?

Last month the UN once again criticised the UK Government on disability issues. The UN's CRPD called on the Government to end the detention of people with disabilities in hospitals. So have many of your Lordships over the years. When will this end? Can I ask the Minister for a timetable for this outrageous act to be discontinued?

The noble Baroness, Lady Andrews, referred to school transport and the problems caused by the severe cuts to councils. Also because of severe cuts to social service budgets and the increase in specialist care fees, a number of councils are now telling families that their disabled loved ones can no longer be supported at home and must go into residential care permanently. This is unacceptable and truly shocking.

I am glad so many noble Lords included transport in this debate, for without it many disabled people cannot get to work or have a social life. I point out the getting to work bit because the Government say not enough disabled people want to work. Getting there would be a good start. Outside London, without the wonderful black Hackney cabs, getting a taxi is a complete and utter lottery. Blind and visually impaired people with guide dogs are still refused rides with some Uber drivers. Doug Pauley's victory in the Supreme Court eight years ago about ensuring wheelchair space in a bus is a legal priority for—guess who?—wheelchair users. This week I have twice had to argue with bus drivers who have refused to move buggies. I had to intervene yesterday to negotiate for an empty buggy to be folded and ask somebody with a pram to pull it back, let me into the space and then put the pram back in front of me. The driver sat there silently.

The noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, referred to lifts. At Watford Junction, my local station, a few years ago they decided to completely replace two lifts at the same time, disabling access from four platforms and therefore journeys for six months. Lifts are as important as ramps. There is no point having ramps on a train if you cannot get to the platform. And I echo the points from the noble Lord, Lord Holmes, about bus lanes and bizarre decisions like Bank and the problems of shared space.

Housing has not been much mentioned so far. Habinteg Housing research shows that only 7% of our housing stock meets basic accessibility standards such

as a level entrance. And a government report says that, on average, a three-bedroomed semi-detached house would cost an extra £521 to build to the category 1 lifetime homes standard, with a further space cost of just under £1,000. This would mean thousands of elderly and disabled people could remain in their homes. Think how much money the state would save if that happened. We are still waiting for this standard to be implemented.

On supported housing, there is a real problem, because we are being told that, alongside financial pressures on existing schemes, there are now significant barriers to new development. A recent National Housing Federation survey showed that, because of a cash crisis, there is a significantly reduced appetite to develop any new schemes at all—which is ridiculous given the demography in the country at the moment.

The noble Baroness, Lady Donaghy, rightly brought up the work of the OU, which was rightly awarded gold for its provision. Disabled students are not just welcomed there but encouraged, and live in the mainstream of its provision. My noble friend Lord Palmer set out the delays with the changes to EHCPs. The scheme was originally proposed in the Children and Families Act 2014, but, despite review, it is still failing the children it needs to serve.

Many people have spoken about benefits, and I will say only a couple of points. I will pick up what my noble friend Lady Thomas and the noble Baroness, Lady Browning, said in setting out very helpfully the problems of claiming and the complexity of forms and processes when claiming PIP. The noble Baroness, Lady Browning, said that seven in 10 people who appeal a PIP decision get a judgment, but there is an extra clause that goes with that statistic—"on the same evidence that DWP already held". This is not new evidence.

The noble Lord, Lord Davies of Brixton, rightly highlighted the problem of people with mental health difficulties. This Government seem to have forgotten that the coalition Government agreed that mental health services were woefully underfunded, and agreed parity of esteem and funding. It took one year after the coalition ended for this Government to renege on that funding. People with serious mental health problems now face years before they can access treatment, which is a bigger scandal than people with severe depression and other psychiatric conditions wanting to access PIP, because they too face extra costs.

I pay tribute to the noble Lord, Lord Shinkwin, for his expertise on disabled people's access to work. One of the main problems, though, is what happens when people get into work. I am passionate about training, whether it is training for what is happening inside work or for the front line. My stepmother has been in hospital for most of the past month—three different hospitals and a care home. None of the front-line staff understood how to look after her at all. At one point, a pharmacist held up a very small pot of tablets and asked her what was in it. She said, "I can't see", and the pharmacist brought it closer to her eyes.

We have heard today from everybody that there is a real issue. Our lives as disabled people—and we are 16 million people in this country—are affected in our

fundamental rights and access to services. We are also victims of attacks and hate crimes. This Government really need to understand how they have further disabled us through their policies and language. We need to make sure that that changes. It needs to change rapidly, otherwise the next report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will be as unfavourable as its previous three.

2 pm

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, I am grateful to all noble Lords for the depth and breadth of this fabulous debate, and particularly to my noble friend Lady Hughes of Stretford for the very comprehensive and helpful way in which she framed it. As she pointed out, we are debating the challenges facing nearly one-quarter of our population. That makes it a major issue for any Government.

Let me start by setting out a couple of principles behind Labour's approach. Just for the record, Labour is committed to using the social model of disability. We will look to produce policies in partnership with disabled people that have dignity and respect at their heart, and we are determined to provide support and break down barriers to opportunity for disabled people. I shall try, in the limited amount of time that I have, to offer some of the things that a Labour Government would do, if we were elected—not to make party-political points but simply to offer accountability from our side as to the kinds of things we would want to do were we to be entrusted with government in future.

Disabled people who can work should have the same right to access decent jobs as those who are not disabled, but that is not where we are—a point well made by the noble Lords, Lord Holmes and Lord Shinkwin. At the end of last year, the disability employment gap was 28%, and it has barely moved in recent years. Disabled people are more likely to be unemployed and much more likely to be economically inactive. Only 13% of those with complex disabilities are in full-time jobs. The position of autistic people was highlighted very well by my noble friend Lord Touhig. I pause briefly to say that I hope that autistic people realise what a good advocate they have in both him and in the noble Baroness, Lady Browning, and how well their interests are represented in this House. I commend them for that. The contrast that the noble Lord drew between the vast majority of autistic people who want to work and the minority who are doing so is stark, and I look forward to a cup of coffee in the Fair Shot cafe at some point.

The quality of work is also poorer. The Learning and Work Institute tells us that, in the last decade, disabled people in Britain have seen sharper increases in rates of flexible working, self-employment, zero-hours contracts and jobs at risk of automation than have non-disabled workers. I wonder whether that is a contributing factor to the fact that the ONS says that the disability pay gap is 13.8%, as my noble friend Lady Donaghy pointed out. That is two percentage points higher than 2014. We are not going in the right direction, but I can take the opportunity to reassure the noble Lord, Lord Shinkwin, that Labour's new deal for working people will introduce mandatory disability pay-gap reporting for firms with more than

250 staff, as well as stronger family-friendly rights, including carer's leave. Will the Minister match that today at the Dispatch Box and send his noble friend home happier than perhaps he arrived?

On how government helps disabled people to get and progress in work, Scope says that it is just not working, with disabled people saying that coaches do not understand the true impact of conditions and impairments. There is the Access to Work scheme, but polling for Scope found that 40% of those who had left work because of their disability or impairment had never heard of it, and those who do apply face long delays. In March 2021, under 5,000 people were on the waiting list, which was bad enough. Last month, the figure was over 32,000.

A Labour Government would overhaul Access to Work, with improved targets for assessment waiting times and also in-principle indicative awards, so that disabled people would know what kind of equipment, adaptations or support they could get before they start work, to give them more confidence to take the plunge. We would also reform jobcentres, with a new focus on tackling the barriers to good employment, devolving powers over employment support and requiring better collaboration with the NHS and other support agencies. We would make it simpler to secure reasonable adjustments in a timely manner, such as when jobs or circumstances change, and we would introduce an into-work guarantee, so that sick and disabled people could try a job out without being pushed back to square one if it did not work.

That takes me to social security. I am very grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Thomas of Winchester, who it is lovely to see in action, and the noble Baroness, Lady Browning, for their accounts of the way the system is working at the moment—or rather is not working. PIP was created by the Government: in 2013, they abolished DLA and created PIP, which they promised us would be better, more sustainable and more sensitive to issues of mental health, and sensory and cognitive impairments. After various reviews and consultations, in 2021, the Government published a health and disability Green Paper, launching a consultation on PIP and ESA. Last year, they published a health and disability White Paper, which promised to change how universal credit supports those who cannot work and abolish the work capability assessment, which was people's gateway to those benefits. They then said that there will be only one health and disability functional test in future: the PIP assessment. Roll forward a year and we now seem to be going backwards.

Having said that DLA was the problem and PIP was the answer, the new Green Paper says that PIP is the problem and that the PIP assessment will be abolished as well. No one loves the PIP assessment, but how is anyone going to get assessed for anything? People who depend on PIP are panicking. Carers want to know how they will get support, because PIP is the gateway to carer's allowance—and that is on top of the issues with carer's allowance highlighted by my noble friend Lady Andrews, for which I thank her.

The Minister says gently that there will a conversation, and I have a lot of respect for his character and the way he approaches these issues. I am sure he believes

[BARONESS SHERLOCK]

that things can be worked out. Meanwhile, his colleagues in the Commons are chasing headlines about getting tough on “sick note” Britain. I am sorry, but it all feels rather more about politics than policy.

A record 2.8 million people are locked out of work due to long-term sickness, but how much of that is down to the Government’s own policies, a point flagged up by my noble friends Lady Donaghy and Lady Hughes of Stretford? The chair of the Work and Pensions Committee told the Commons that

“PIP assessment providers confirm that worsening delays in NHS treatment are a big factor in the increase in the number of people applying for PIP”.—[*Official Report*, Commons, 29/4/24; col. 52.]

This needs urgent attention. A Labour Government would drive down NHS waiting lists, with 2 million more weekend and evening appointments, and would provide specialist mental health support in every school, and walk-in access in every community.

The noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, and others spoke about the wider challenges of healthcare for disabled people. We have heard about problems with transport, costs and long waiting lists, and a lack of understanding. Sense reports that many people with complex disabilities are still getting letters that they cannot understand, and cannot get the communication support they need for appointments.

The pandemic shone a light on healthcare and disability. The ONS reported that disabled people in the UK were more likely to die as a result of Covid, and the Marie Curie briefing that we have all seen shows that the approach to making “do not attempt CPR” decisions during the pandemic revealed a lack of understanding and that assumptions were being made about people’s quality of life that were key barriers to involving them appropriately in decisions about their own health and life. Can the Minister tell the House what the Government are going to do about this?

I do not have time to go into social care but I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, the noble Lord, Lord Palmer of Childs Hill, and some of my noble friends for raising this. I hope the Minister will have something to say about that as well.

As we heard from a number of noble Lords, we have problems with accessibility, the condition of housing and poor landlord behaviour in the private sector, and with challenging conditions and costs in social housing. The RICS says we have an “accessible housing crisis” which is getting worse. Can the Minister tell the House what systematic work is being done in government to address the crisis in accessible housing?

A number of noble Lords highlighted some of the challenges in education, both in differentials in qualifications and the real challenges, raised by the noble Lord, Lord Palmer, and others, for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. ONS research shows that parents are struggling to access appropriate schools and get support plans, and that schools are just not responsive enough to young people’s needs.

There are big issues around transport, as the case raised by my noble friend Lady Andrews highlighted so clearly. I am grateful to the noble Lord,

Lord Addington, for his strong challenge on what it is we measure, why we measure it and how we use, understand and value the technology that enables people to engage in society and take the steps forward that are needed. What are the Government doing about this?

I am a follower on Twitter of the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, and follow her adventures in attempting to turn up and go at many stations around the country on a regular basis. I commend her tweets to noble Lords who want an insight into the day-to-day life of someone with a disability, and I commend her on a fabulous speech. She revealed that the journey of life is like a swimming test, in which everybody else is allowed to swim downstream and disabled people are made to swim upstream, and then someone asks why they are not going as far or as fast. At every single stage, things are thrown in their way. I thank her for highlighting that so comprehensively and brilliantly.

There is so much more I want to say but time is running out. What we have heard today is a scandal. If I want to criticise the Government for what has, or has not, happened in the last 14 years, I need to look back at Labour’s record. There is much there that I am really proud of—the Disability Rights Commission, EHRC legislation, the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, the landmark Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010, and legislation on public transport and discrimination against disabled pupils—but listening today I know that there is so much more to do. If we get the opportunity to serve again, a future Labour Government will work with disabled people to create policies that remove barriers to opportunity and will try to level the playing field.

It is wonderful to hear as part of this debate from so many disabled Members of this House who have achieved so much and continue to do so. It is a sign for all of us that we need to change society, not only to make life better for disabled people—though we should do so—but because of what we are missing out on from all those who cannot play a full part in society, through no fault of their own. We have to do better than this.

2.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Viscount Younger of Leckie) (Con): My Lords, I thank all noble Lords for their very valuable contributions to this important and wide-ranging debate. As it has highlighted, disabled people share the same hopes, aspirations and ambitions as non-disabled people to fulfil their potential and play a full part in society. However, I acknowledge that they often experience barriers that can prevent them realising this.

I pay tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes, who provided a good overview of the many issues that are challenges for disabled people. Although she would not expect me to agree with many of her conclusions, she raised a number of questions which I will attempt to cover. As the noble Baroness, Lady Donaghy, acknowledged, it may not be possible to cover all the many themes encompassing disability that were raised today. Having said all that, the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, in her usual style, won the verbal marathon to canter through most of the issues.

Over the last 25 years, this country has made important progress in tackling the barriers, through the work of campaigners and across different Governments, from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which was alluded to by the noble Lord, Lord Addington—he was here in the House for that, which is interesting—to the Equality Act 2010 and, more recently, the British Sign Language Act and Down Syndrome Act. Today, in Mental Health Awareness Week and on Global Accessibility Awareness Day—I have a badge to match—I reflect that these are reminders of how far we have come in talking about, and having awareness of, disability and accessibility issues. They also highlight what still needs to be done.

I have listened carefully to all the issues raised. Let me say clearly that there is more to be done. My noble friend Lord Holmes is right that I should be aware—I reassure him and others that I am—of the lived experience of those who are disabled. I will take back to the relevant channels his points about floating bus stops, black taxi cabs and the bank issue; I very much noted that.

Having said all that, I am proud that this Government have continued to tackle the barriers faced by disabled people. As a bit of a pushback, let me say that there are now 2 million more disabled people in work when compared to 2010. We have 20 Ministers across government committed to championing accessibility and opportunity for disabled people within their departments. Our *Disability Action Plan*, which we published in February, sets out the actions that we are taking this year across these and other areas, and lays the foundations for longer-term change. I will talk more about this later.

To ensure that this country is the most accessible place in the world for them to live, work and thrive, we are going further through the support delivered through the benefits system, helping disabled people to start, stay and succeed in a more flexible and accessible labour market. We are also ensuring that disabled children—also mentioned today—get the best start in life, creating more accessible homes, which I will allude to later, and improving health and care outcomes.

This Government are delivering for disabled people. The noble Baronesses, Lady Hughes and Lady Sherlock, asked when disabled people can expect an update on the national disability strategy and the disability action plan. The actions set out in the disability action plan are planned to be delivered over 12 months, to lay the foundations for longer-term change. To track our progress, we will publish updates on the progress of actions from the disability action plan after six months and 12 months. The six-month update will also include an update on the delivery of the national disability strategy.

The noble Baronesses, Lady Sherlock and Lady Hughes, raised the differences between the documents. The disability action plan will be taken forward in parallel with the national disability strategy and is designed to complement the long-term vision set out in the strategy. In a Written Ministerial Statement of 18 September 2023, we announced how work on the strategy would be taken forward. Other significant work being taken forward by individual government departments in areas that disabled people have told us

are a priority include reforms to employment and welfare via the DWP's *Transforming Support: The Health and Disability White Paper* and strategies to address health and social care via the DHSC's *People at the Heart of Care White Paper*, which the House will be aware of.

I turn to the support provided through our benefits system. I am proud that we have a strong and generous safety net for those who need it. We expect to provide £88 billion worth of support for disabled people through the benefits system this year. Last month, we increased the extra cost disability benefits by a further 6.7%. I have listened carefully to comments today on access to the benefits system. We know that, in some cases, people may not be able to engage effectively with the claim process due to various vulnerabilities. That is why the DWP has a range of different support measures at every stage of the benefit claim. This includes a “move to universal credit” helpline, a “help to claim” service delivered independently by Citizens Advice and face-to-face support in local jobcentres, where the staff will have been specifically trained and prepared for this work. Where a claimant cannot manage their claim due to a lack of capacity, they can appoint a third party to manage the claim on their behalf.

Our wider reforms look more fundamentally at different options to reshape the current welfare system. As the House will know, we have published a Green Paper, which was much spoken about today. It considers options to provide better-targeted support to those who need it most, ensuring that it is fit for the future. This subject was raised by my noble friend Lady Browning and the noble Baroness, Lady Sherlock. I was particularly pleased to hear the remarks from the noble Baroness, Lady Thomas—it is good to hear from her again.

My noble friend Lady Browning asked how PIP provides support to claimants with mental illness. PIP was designed to help disabled people and people with long-term health conditions by making a cash contribution towards their extra costs. As part of this consultation, we want to understand whether there are other forms of support that may be more suitable for people with mental health conditions. We know that being in suitable work is good for people's physical and mental health, well-being and financial security. As we set out in 2023 in *Transforming Support: The Health and Disability White Paper*, the Government aim to support more people to start, stay and succeed in work.

The noble Baroness, Lady Hughes, asked about the reason for the rise in PIP, suggesting that it was not due to the increased prevalence of disability and health conditions but was perhaps linked to NHS waiting times. I reassure her and the House that cutting waiting lists is one of the Prime Minister's top priorities. We are making good progress in tackling the longest waiting lists, to ensure that patients get the care that they need when they need it. This is incredibly important. Thanks to the incredible work of NHS staff, we have virtually eliminated waits of 18 months. NHSE management information from March 2024 suggests that these waits have been reduced by over 95% since September 2021, but there is clearly more to do.

Alongside the support available through the welfare system, the Government also recognise the valuable work and the needs of those who care for disabled

[VISCOUNT YOUNGER OF LECKIE]

people while holding down a job. My noble friend Lady Browning and the noble Baroness, Lady Donagh, asked whether the PIP consultation was simply a money-saving exercise. It is not a money-saving exercise; this is about the Government's long-standing approach to supporting disabled people and people with long-term health conditions. We want the system to provide the right support to those who really need it. It is right that we should look at this after 10 years or so—as I said, we introduced it in 2013.

As the House will know, the Carer's Leave Act came into force in April, giving a new unpaid leave entitlement that is available from day one of employment for employed unpaid carers. I will briefly touch on the point raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Andrews. I am very aware of the issues surrounding overpayments for carers; the Government are taking this extremely seriously. It is the responsibility of individuals who receive the carer's allowance to let us know if their earnings exceed £151 per week. We are looking very seriously at it, particularly to see how we can improve the communications exercise. Everyone will receive a letter every year to remind them, but I believe there is more that we can do. As was said the other day in the media, we are already ringing as many people as we can, from the information that we have received, to remind them of what happens if their earnings go over the threshold, so that they understand what to do.

Baroness Andrews (Lab): My Lords, I am extremely grateful for what the Minister has said. Do I understand correctly that this is the response to the issue of the IT system not automatically triggering any action that would lead to information being sent immediately to the carer? Does the Minister think that this will address that issue?

Viscount Younger of Leckie (Con): I think that it will go a very long way. We are looking seriously at getting the information out quickly—the link with HMRC is incredibly important here. We already get real-time information from HMRC anyway. We are asking the same question: what more can we do to be sure that those who do not let us know, for whatever reason, will do so? We also must not forget that the vast majority do let us know. This is a very important point. I believe that there will be a Question in the House next week on this issue, which I will be willing and ready to answer.

The subject of work was raised in particular by my noble friend Lord Shinkwin. This Government will always protect the most vulnerable, but we must also do everything possible to support those who can to move into work. I echo the Prime Minister's speech at the Centre for Social Justice on 19 April, which I attended:

"The role of the welfare state should never be merely to provide financial support ... but to help people overcome whatever barriers they might face to living an independent, fulfilling life". That is why we are supporting thousands more disabled people to start, stay and succeed in work through our £2.5 billion back to work plan. That includes exploring reforms to the fit-note process through the call for evidence—another theme raised today—and rolling out WorkWell, to bring together local health and employment support. Questions were raised today

about who is best placed to make health assessments for work. I do not intend to go further on that, but we may well receive some information through the conversation and the PIP consultation on that subject.

From 2025, we will reform the work capability assessment to reflect new flexibilities in the labour market while maintaining protections for those with the most serious conditions. My noble friend Lord Holmes of Richmond and others raised the disability employment gap. The Government have an ambitious programme of initiatives to support disabled people and people with health conditions. The disability employment rate was 52.9% in the first quarter of 2024, compared to 81.7% for non-disabled people. For disabled people, that is an increase of 0.1 percentage points. The disability employment gap was 28.8 percentage points in the first quarter of 2024, a decrease of 0.6 percentage points on the year before.

We are also expanding access to mental health treatment, with nearly 400,000 additional places through NHS talking therapies, which I think the House will be well aware of. All this builds on existing support, such as Access to Work grants, our Disability Confident scheme and disability employment advisers in jobcentres.

The noble Baronesses, Lady Donagh and Lady Hughes, asked what the Government are doing to help those in poverty. There is a long answer I could give, but the short answer, which I think I have given in the House before, is that we are committed to supporting people on lower incomes and expect to spend around £303 billion through the welfare system in Great Britain in 2024-25, including around £138 billion on people of working age and their children. These statistics cover 2022-23, a year when inflation averaged 10% and benefits were uprated by 3.1%, in line with the CPI.

On the disabled, the latest statistics show that the number of people in families where someone is disabled and in absolute poverty—which is our preferred measure—fell by 100,000 between 2021-22 and 2022-23. The proportion of people in families where someone is disabled and in absolute poverty after housing costs has decreased by two percentage points since 2019-20, and the number of people in such families has increased slightly due to an increase in the number of people in families where someone is disabled.

Briefly, on education, which I think was mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Sherlock, and others, in the special educational needs and disability sector our improvement plan will establish a single national system so that children can achieve good outcomes. We have increased high-needs revenue funding for children and young people with complex needs to cover £10.5 billion this year, up 60% over the last five years. The Law Commission is also undertaking a review of disabled children's social care legislation to help clarify the law and to ensure that families of disabled children receive the support that they need. I hope that this may help address the remarks from the noble Lord, Lord Addington.

I will go further on the question of what the Government are doing to achieve greater national equality in the support offered to children. Our improvement plan outlines our commitment to establish a single national SEND system with a proposal to

deliver national standards. National standards will improve mainstream education by setting standards for early and accurate identification of SEND need, and they will include clarifying the types of support that should be available in mainstream settings and who is responsible for securing the support. Finally, national standards will create a more consistent SEND system. That may not provide the whole answer, but I hope that helps.

Lord Addington (LD): Are we suggesting that there will be a consistent approach to those who are not taking on plans in the classroom? Much of the talk here is about the plan, which is incredibly expensive and slow, is appealed and then goes through. Will we get better support for those who have not had that official diagnosis? That is the real issue here.

Viscount Younger of Leckie (Con): I certainly always listen to the noble Lord. It will be for others to judge, but I very much hope so, and I take note of that.

Quickly on housing, which was raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, and briefly by the noble Baroness, Lady Sherlock, thanks to the Government's actions more disabled people have the support that they need to be able to live independently and safely. The Government have more than doubled the funding for the disabled facilities grant, from £220 million in 2015-16 to £625 million in this financial year. Our Renters (Reform) Bill, abolishing no-fault evictions and creating a new ombudsman for the private rented sector, will give disabled tenants more security and confidence to hold landlords accountable for reasonable adjustments. The Government have also proposed to mandate that all new homes will be built to a higher accessibility standard, providing greater independence and safety at home—which again was raised.

Baroness Brinton (LD): Could the Minister write to me about my other question, which was about supported housing and the ability for housing organisations to be able to access capital for it? They are finding it very difficult to do so.

Viscount Younger of Leckie (Con): Certainly, I will write to the noble Baroness on that.

Briefly, on healthcare matters—I realise that time is marching on—my noble friend Lady Browning was right to raise the issue of loneliness. We are aware that people with disabilities or long-term health conditions are more than four times more likely to report feeling lonely. New research on that matter will emerge during the summer.

The noble Baroness, Lady Donaghy, spoke about access to social care for disabled people. Local authorities are responsible for assessing individuals' care and support needs and, where eligible, for meeting those needs. Where individuals do not meet the eligibility threshold, they can get support from their local authority in making their own care arrangements for care services, as set out in the Care Act—as the noble Baroness will know.

On the subject of local authorities, I noted the question from the noble Baroness, Lady Andrews, about school transport. I will certainly pass her message through the right channels.

I am also aware of the remarks made by the noble Lord, Lord Touhig, about autism. He will know that we published our refreshed national autism strategy in July 2021, which aims to improve understanding in society, reduce diagnosis waiting times and improve access to high-quality health and social care for autistic people. I could say a lot more about that, but I shall just say that, through the rollout of the Oliver McGowan mandatory training on learning disability and autism, which he will know about, we are helping health and social care staff to have the skills and knowledge they need to provide safe and compassionate care for autistic people and those with a learning disability.

Through the NHS long-term plan, the Government are increasing the mental health workforce so that more people, including disabled people, can get the mental health support they need. That is a very important point to make.

The noble Baronesses, Lady Grey-Thompson, Lady Andrews and Lady Brinton, asked about accessibility and transport. I shall allow myself some time in the last few minutes to address this because they are right: the voices of disabled people should be central to how transport policy is planned and implemented. That is what it means to be truly inclusive. The Department for Transport's statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, provide expert advice and constructive challenge to Ministers to help in the development and delivery of policies. The DPTAC has a statutory requirement for at least half of the committee to be disabled people, meaning that it is well placed to provide advice that will ensure that the DfT builds into its work the needs of all disabled people.

To pick up the points raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, and my noble friend Lord Holmes, the Government are fully committed to improving transport accessibility, supporting disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else. The Department for Transport has made good progress against the commitments in the *Inclusive Transport Strategy*. I acknowledge and say to all those who have raised points today that there is definitely more to do.

I realise that time is against me and that I have not been able to answer a lot of questions. As noble Lords would expect, with my team I will look in *Hansard* at the questions raised and write a letter to all those who have contributed.

To conclude, this has been a fascinating and important debate. The range of significant support and reforms that we, as a Government, are undertaking within the welfare system and the world of work, as well as in education, housing and healthcare, underlines this Government's determination to make sure that disabled people and those with health conditions get the right support to improve their everyday experiences—the lived experience of being disabled—so that they can lead full and independent lives.

2.33 pm

Baroness Hughes of Stretford (Lab): My Lords, this has been an absolutely extraordinary debate, with powerful contributions from right across the House that have been passionate, challenging and full of insight. I thank all noble Lords who have made their

[BARONESS HUGHES OF STRETFORD]

contributions, many from personal experience of living with disability themselves or of having disabled people in their families. Should anyone assume that debates in this House are pedestrian or formulaic, they should read the *Hansard* record of this debate. I will certainly read it, and I am glad to hear the Minister say that he will, too. I hope that he will take it back to his colleagues, because many of the points made here bear discussion in the ministerial team.

I cannot thank everybody, and it has already been done, but I want to pick out a few themes which are important. We heard powerful contributions about how disabled people feel about how they are treated by the department and their experience of assessments that do not seem to be fit for purpose. I hope that the Minister will take that away. The daily discrimination at every turn in every minutia of daily living, as we heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, and others, and meeting barriers in almost everything that we have to do to get through the day, let alone make our way through life, education and employment—this all needs to be heard.

The pre-eminent importance of inaccessibility to good education, employment and transport, the lack of progress in those areas, despite government commitments and the Minister's comments, and the Government's failure to follow through, are causing disabled people and families to lose confidence in whether the Government are serious about this. There are also the negative attitudes towards disabled people, their invisibility in public policy and so much of daily life, and the disastrous and sometimes ridiculous consequences of making decisions without input from disabled people. The example of floating bus stops will stay with me for a long time. However, we did have a welcome challenge at least, that if only the Government would stop sticking doggedly to conventional ways of doing things and think creatively and radically about what modern technology offers, many of these artificial barriers would fall.

Overall, the key message raised in my opening speech and by so many noble Lords is that disabled people must be at the heart of policy and implementation. "Inclusion by design and accessible by all" should be the watchwords. This debate has demonstrated, if anybody needs evidence, the profound difference that it makes to have the voice of disabled people with lived experience in the room, and its benefit.

Motion agreed.

Relationships, Sex and Health Education: Statutory Guidance

Statement

2.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education (Baroness Barran) (Con): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I shall now repeat a Statement made in another place by my right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Education. The Statement is as follows:

"With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a Statement to the House setting out the Government's proposals for updating the 2019 statutory guidance on relationships, sex and health education, which my department has published today for consultation. I thank my department for its hard work in getting us to this point.

This Government have a plan to deliver a brighter future for Britain, one where families are supported and given the peace of mind that their children are safe and being equipped with the skills they need to succeed. Good relationships, sex and health education—RSHE—plays a key role in this. However, following disturbing reports from parents of pupils being taught inappropriate content in schools, and requests from schools which wanted more clarity on when to teach certain topics, the Prime Minister and I decided to bring forward the review of RSHE. We have listened to colleagues across government and the House, have gathered evidence from stakeholders and considered advice from an independent panel of experts who generously gave their time, experience and knowledge to support the review last year. I put on record my personal thanks to each individual panel member.

We need to make sure that the content of lessons is factual and appropriate and that children have the capacity to fully understand everything that they are being taught. We need to make sure that our children are prepared for the world in which they live, but not in a way that takes away the innocence of childhood. In short, we need to let our children be children. It is a fine line to tread and schools need clarity on how to approach it.

Overall, this guidance is underpinned by three core values: one, parents have a right to know what their children are being taught; two, teachers are there to teach children facts and not to push the agendas of campaign groups; three, schools should not teach about the contested issue of gender identity, including that gender is a spectrum.

There are five major policy changes that I would like to set out. The first is the introduction of age limits for teaching sensitive subjects. The purpose of the new age limits is to make sure that children are not taught things before they are ready to understand them. Informed by the advice of the independent panel and others, the guidance places specific age limits on the teaching of certain subjects.

In primary schools, children learn about the importance of boundaries and privacy and that they have rights over their own bodies, but no 10 year-old should be taught the details of intimate sexual acts, sexual harassment and sexual violence. In primary schools, sex education is not a requirement and should be introduced only from year 5 onwards. The content should align with the national curriculum's science teachings on conception and birth, ensuring that it is rooted in fact. It should absolutely not be preparing primary-age children for sexual activity.

The second flagship change is complete openness with parents. Parents are their children's first teachers and they must know what they are being taught. The guidance contains a new section that makes the need for transparency with parents crystal clear, and clarifies the scope within the law to share materials. The bottom

line is that curriculum providers should not be seeking to hide their materials from parents. This practice is completely unacceptable; parents have a fundamental right to know what their children are being taught about healthy relationships, sex and development.

Thirdly, on teaching about gender reassignment, many schools have told us that they need clear guidance to help them teach about this highly sensitive, complex issue in a factual and safe way. We are making it absolutely clear that the contested topic of gender identity should not be taught in schools, at any age. Schools should not be providing classroom materials that, for example, include the view that gender is a spectrum.

While protected characteristics, such as gender reassignment, should be taught, they must be done on a factual basis, at an appropriate age, and not based on contested ideology. This reflects the cautious, common-sense approach that we have taken in our guidance on children questioning their gender, which also reflects the recommendations of the Cass review.

There is also a dedicated section on sexual harassment and sexual violence. The growth of malign influencers online, who pose a risk to children and young people, has been significant and is one of the key ways the world has changed for young people since this guidance was originally published and, indeed, since all of us were in school. This new section covers some specific types of abusive behaviour which were not previously discussed, such as stalking, as well as advice for teachers about how to address dangerous, misogynistic online influencers.

Now I would like to consider the sensitive but important issue of suicide prevention. Ministers and I have met bereaved families, experts and teachers to explore how suicide prevention could be taught as part of RSHE. I pay tribute to the incredible work of 3 Dads Walking, who have used the unimaginable tragedies in their lives to campaign for important change.

The current RSHE guidance already included content in relation to teaching pupils to look after their mental well-being and support themselves and their friends. We have now made clearer how this content on mental well-being relates to suicide prevention. Of course, the topic of suicide itself needs to be handled sensitively and skilfully, and not before pupils are ready to understand it. Obviously, children's maturity varies, but our engagement suggested that children typically develop the necessary understanding from when they are in year 8. We have made sure that this updated guidance acknowledges that it can be important to discuss this with pupils, and we have added advice to set out how schools could address suicide prevention in their teaching.

Finally, the guidance also includes a new topic on personal safety. This includes additional content on understanding the laws around carrying knives and knife crime and the dangers of fire, roads, railways and water.

Together, I am confident that this guidance will give teachers and head teachers clarity over what should and should not be taught, provide parents with the peace of mind that their children are being taught in a

safe and factual manner, and reassure everyone across society that pupils are being taught what they need to know at the right age and time in their lives. A copy of the guidance has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. I commend this Statement to the House”.

2.46 pm

Baroness Twycross (Lab): My Lords, I thank the Minister for repeating the Statement made this morning by the Secretary of State for Education. There is much in it that is welcome. Teachers and school leaders have long pushed for clearer guidance on RSHE to be published, particularly in relation to gender identity. A child's education should and must equip them for the world in which they live. It should stand them in good stead for their life in the adult world, including healthy relationships. It is particularly welcome that there will be additional content on suicide prevention and on tackling the malign influence of online misogyny and hate. As former deputy mayor for fire resilience in London, I was also pleased that wider harms including fire and knife crime will be included.

Labour agrees strongly with the principle that parents should have an explicit right to know what their children are being taught. It is also right that what children are taught is age appropriate. But, behind the phrasing and the stated aim of allowing children to be children—the Secretary of State used the phrase “we need to allow our children to be children”—lie some serious concerns that need to be addressed through the consultation process.

First, far from protecting the innocence of children, not talking about sex in schools in an age-appropriate way does not keep children as children but potentially exposes them to harm and emotional distress. It also risks reversing very hard-won progress in preventing teenage pregnancies. The NHS website states:

“Most girls start their periods when they're about 12, but they can start as early as 8, so it's important to talk to girls from an early age to make sure they're prepared.”

It goes on to say:

“Boys also need to learn about periods. Talk to them in the same way as girls about the practicalities, mood changes that can come with periods, and the biological reason behind periods. It will keep them informed, as well as help them to understand about periods.

When a girl starts her periods it's a sign that her body is now able to have a baby. It's important that she also knows about getting pregnant and contraception.”

Can the Minister outline how, if schools cannot teach sex education until children are 13, a girl who starts menstruating at the age of eight or nine whose parents do not prepare her for this will be able to understand what on earth is happening to her? How will the Government address the fact that both girls and boys need to understand menstruation well before the age of 13? How was the age of 13 arrived at? Did the DfE discuss this with the Department for Health and Social Care or with the NHS? What assessment, if any, have the Government carried out of the likely impact of this proposed change on the number of child pregnancies?

The notion that providing sex education encourages sexual activity, which the Statement appears to suggest, is as outdated as it is dangerous. I confess that I am struggling to understand the logic. We simply cannot

[BARONESS TWYXCROSS]

return to times when children believed that you could get pregnant simply by kissing another person because they were not taught about sex in a clear way.

Secondly, we know that, regrettably, for too many children childhood is not an age of innocence. We need to be clear that it is the case, or we cannot protect vulnerable children. Schools are among the strongest levers for preventing and identifying child abuse; any guidance has to enable, not prevent, this. The Statement does make it clear that teachers should speak about unwanted touching at an earlier age. However, how will the DfE ensure that teachers are not so scared of talking to children directly or responding directly to questions that the opportunity to protect children is missed? With half of children seeing pornography by the age of 13, if schools are teaching about online safety—including, presumably, online pornography—at an earlier age than they can teach about sex, how on earth will teachers navigate this? Does the Minister agree with the *Telegraph* that it is

“Precisely because children are doing so much of their growing up online, they need sex education classes more than ever”?

Labour believes that what defines a family is not the shape it has but the love it gives. I am therefore also concerned that potentially drawing down the shutter on discussing different types of relationships and the lived experiences of those who are transgender means that some children may grow up with a narrow, potentially prejudiced, view, and that this may harm children who, or whose family, do not conform with this. How do the Government intend that schools deal with questions around transitioning and the process people can go through to change their gender?

My final point concerns the apparent exclusion of school leaders in the drafting of the guidance so far. I hope the Minister can assure us today that the voices and views of school leaders and teachers, who appear not to have been consulted in developing the guidance published today, will be heard and reflected in the final document. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Earl Russell (LD): My Lords, I thank the Minister for repeating the Statement in your Lordships’ House. If it is not broken, do not fix it: we on these Benches do not welcome most of these changes, which are politicised solutions that are mainly looking for a problem. Indeed, we fear that the net result will be to put our children and young people at greater risk.

The Government are choosing to water down the safeguarding of our children on the altar of yet another pointless culture war in the run-up to the general election—legislation for leaflets, I call it. Sex education, particularly in the early years, is not about teaching young people to have sex; it is about safeguarding. It is about teaching them to know what is appropriate, what is invasive, and what is abusive; it is about informed consent. Age-appropriate education is vital for empowerment of our young children, so they can live healthy and happy lives.

Where children are questioning their gender identity, they should be supported with open and inclusive discussions centred on their health and well-being. The Government should be careful what they wish for;

it is better that appropriate support be provided in schools, because the only alternative is that perhaps inappropriate information will be sought elsewhere.

Finally, what actions have the Government taken to ensure that these changes do not pose greater safeguarding risks to our children and young people?

Baroness Barran (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness and the noble Earl for their remarks. I will start with the remarks of the noble Earl, Lord Russell, who said, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. The evidence we have heard from parents, schoolteachers and school leaders is that the lack of transparency with parents about what their children were being taught, and the teaching of contested material, in particular on gender identity, were very broken. Those are essential things that need fixing.

I turn to safeguarding, which both the noble Baroness and the noble Earl rightly raised. The noble Baroness said that school is a very important safeguarding agency and that talking about some issues gives children an opportunity to disclose and therefore to respond. The guidance is very clear on how to deal with safeguarding issues.

When we turn to the age-appropriate approach, which I think the noble Baroness agrees with, we see there is something about giving children this information in stages. They do not need all of it when they are very young. It must be phased and age-appropriate. In relation to menstruation specifically, the new guidance sets out that children should be taught about puberty, including menstruation, no earlier than year four, so that would be when children are eight or nine. That means that the majority of children will learn about puberty before it happens to them.

The noble Baroness talked about the importance of relationships education and different types of relationship. That is clearly set out in the curriculum we are consulting on, but the focus will be very much on the facts. For example, the protected characteristics will be clearly taught. Gender reassignment will be clearly taught as a factual thing that happens to adults. The noble Baroness raised the issue of school leaders. The guidance is out for consultation, so there is every opportunity for leaders and teachers to contribute to the consultation, and we would welcome that. She will also be aware that our expert panel included experts from the education system, as well as from health, in particular. I think that also addresses the question asked by the noble Earl about whether we have assessed whether we could increase the safeguarding risk. I hope the safeguarding risk does not stem from school, but I think the noble Earl means the ability to identify. Those issues were considered very carefully by the expert panel.

2.56 pm

Lord Farmer (Con): My Lords, I welcome the Government’s statutory guidance. How will this guidance be enforced, especially the requirement to stop teaching the contested subject of gender identity, as there are many teachers who have been captured by the very ideology that has been called out? Moreover, it has not been universally welcomed by the teaching unions. Can my noble friend also confirm when schools will need to begin to implement the new guidance?

Baroness Barran (Con): The process in terms of timing is that the guidance is out for consultation. Then we will finalise it and, when it is finally published, schools will have a period in which to implement the new guidance. However, I think it is fair to say that the direction of travel is extremely clear and those key principles about communication and transparency with parents, teaching the facts and not contested ideologies and that content should be delivered in an age-appropriate way are very clear, and I am sure that the vast majority of schools welcome that clarity. Given that the guidance is statutory, schools must have regard to it and can deviate from it only with good reason. In terms of enforcement—on holding schools to account on this—Ofsted, as part of its personal development judgment, will consider whether schools are teaching RSHE in line with the statutory guidance.

Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town (Lab): My Lords, I welcome this Statement and the change it will bring. The provider of some teaching materials called Pop'n'Olly says he has spoken to 100,000 children and told them about gender identity. I looked at the material. It explains that Olly is able to choose whether he is male, female, non-binary or another sex. Can the Minister assure us that that sort of teaching material will no longer be in any school in any authority under this Government?

Baroness Barran (Con): I am delighted to reassure the noble Baroness that she is right.

Baroness Berridge (Con): My Lords, in relation to the point that the noble Baroness raised about resources and materials, it is the usual policy of this Government that you outline content and then allow teachers to choose how they teach that and what resources they use—except of course for phonics, on which there is little discretion. Oak National Academy is going to be producing resources, and I note that here these are called “compliant resources”. Could my noble friend the Minister outline the timeline for it to produce those resources so that, when the regulations change, teachers know they are using resources that are appropriate for children?

Baroness Barran (Con): I thank my noble friend for her question. She is right that Oak National Academy is collaborating with Life Lessons Education to develop new relationships and health education in primary and relationships and sexual health curriculum in secondary. That will be made available in full from autumn 2025.

Lord Russell of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, I declare my interest as a governor of Coram, and for 24 years I was the chair of the largest provider of health education to primary schools in the country. It is extremely pertinent that the noble Lord, Lord Parkinson, is in his place because, when the Minister has heard the question I will pose, she may wish to spend some time with him.

The independent expert panel that assisted the department is notable for the absence of anybody who is an expert on online safety. It is as if the department is unaware that we spent a great deal of the last year

on what became the Online Safety Act, looking in great detail at the protection of children. We say the purpose of the new age limits is to make sure that children are not taught things before they are ready to understand them, but does the Minister not accept that the problem is that children are seeing things that they do not understand and at the moment will not be able to discuss in school or ask their teacher about? They are also unlikely to ask their parents about it. Some 25% of children under the age of nine have smartphones, while a large proportion of under-11 year-olds are, illegally, using WhatsApp. This is the reality. This is the innocent childhood that the children of today are experiencing; it is not the childhood that we had. So I beseech the Minister to work closely with the team that has done huge work on the Online Safety Act, and with the people at Ofcom who are drawing the code together, to make sure that the left hand knows what the right hand is doing, preferably with a brain in between.

Baroness Barran (Con): Luckily, since we are talking about officials, I can confidently say that the right and left hands know what they are doing and there is definitely more than one brain in between. In all seriousness, I would be very happy to meet with the noble Lord once he has had a chance to look at the content of the new curriculum. I hope he will be reassured by the extent to which it acknowledges the issues to which he refers around online risks to children.

There is of course nothing to stop any parent talking to their children about risks online; indeed, I think we all hope that parents would be doing that. This also does not prevent children asking questions in the classroom or more privately to a teacher. None of this prevents the asking of questions about a child's curiosity or worries; it just ensures that it is age appropriate in the way that it is delivered at the front of the classroom—and I hope the noble Lord supports the Government's move to ban mobile phones in schools.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall (Lab): On the point that the Minister has just raised about what happens if a child brings a problem to a teacher, rather than a teacher addressing the problem with the child, is she confident that it will be clear to teachers, once the guidance is up and running and embedded, that they are not prohibited from having conversations with children who have encountered, as the noble Lord, Lord Russell, has mentioned, things online that they certainly should not have encountered, but they have, and they need to talk to somebody about it? I am sorry to mention this but, going back over quarter of a century to the days of Section 28, whatever the letter of the law may have been, many people felt they were not able to have these discussions without running the risk of being on the wrong side of the law. I hope the Minister will agree that it is important that teachers are not unintentionally inhibited from having the very conversations that they need to have.

Baroness Barran (Con): The noble Baroness makes, as ever, an important point in thinking about the reality in the classroom for teachers. I suppose I would say a few things about that. First, that is why we are so

[BARONESS BARRAN]

grateful to our expert panel for bringing their expertise and judgment into the shape of the new guidance. Secondly, there is absolutely discretion for teachers, so if they identify a particular problem, it is clear that they can talk to their class about it. But they need to let parents know and to share the materials that they plan to use, and it needs to be age-appropriate. In relation to whether this is a new Section 28—I think the noble Baroness was giving it as an example, rather than suggesting that is where we are going—again, it is absolutely clear that teachers must teach at the right age about protected characteristics, sexual orientation and gender reassignment but, simply, they must stick to the facts.

Lord Polak (Con): My Lords, while I warmly welcome this Statement, while of course I have not read everything I would like to follow up on the point made by the noble Lord, Lord Russell of Liverpool. During our consideration of the Victims and Prisoners Bill, we were able to hear from a young lady called Poppy Eyre. She gave her evidence, which was very moving. The problem was that she was being abused at home by her grandfather from the age of six. My worry is that, if everything is so black and white, we will have another problem. Let us turn it round: perhaps the abuse that she was receiving, which she talked about only once she was 11, could have been curtailed at an earlier stage, so I am just worried about babies and bath-water. So that I am clear, I think it is being suggested that above the age of nine there will be some sort of sex education. Will parents be consulted on that too? If a majority of parents in the primary school do not want that to happen, will it then not happen?

Baroness Barran (Con): In relation to the very disturbing case that my noble friend cited, of course, primary school children are taught from a very young age about their personal safety, the safety of their bodies and the boundaries that should be respected. That is perhaps the age-appropriate way for such issues, we believe, to give a child like the one my noble friend mentioned a chance to talk to an adult safely and for the abuse that she suffers to be addressed. In relation to sex education in primary schools, parents cannot veto the curriculum. What we are saying is that parents have a right to see the curriculum and, of course, in primary parents also have a right to withdraw their children from sex education, if they so wish.

Baroness Barker (LD): My Lords, the Statement says that this is about teaching children facts, not pushing the agendas of campaign groups. With that in mind, will the Minister provide details of the groups which lobbied for this change? The Government will of course have done due diligence, so she can give us details of their ideology and funding? Can she say what meetings Ministers and their advisers had with the representatives of those groups? Could she also give details of contact between Ministers and advisers and the EHRC on this matter?

Baroness Barran (Con): I may need to follow up in writing. I think it is important to put on record that this guidance was pulled together by an independent

panel. I am sure the noble Baroness is not questioning the integrity of that panel. I would like to reiterate that they have brought great expertise to this, and we have followed their advice. There is nothing ideological in this. It is dealing with facts rather than ideology.

Lord Hampton (CB): My Lords, I declare an interest as somebody who has delivered quite a lot of sex and relationships education lessons. I welcome a lot of what is going on here. I think particularly that teaching about suicide, the hidden male killer, is really important. The Minister said that children develop the necessary understanding from year 8, yet there seems to be a lot we are just not going to talk to them about ever. The timing of teaching on puberty will be before most girls have had their first period. Why not before every girl has had their first period? How scary is that going to be?

Teachers are best placed to know their form. Teaching is usually done with your form, who you know very well. A question bounced off can be answered straight away and you know the age-appropriateness of your answer. To start giving age ranges of 15 to 18, for example, is extremely dangerous. We have to be very careful about this because, sadly, some parents have some very weird views.

Baroness Barran (Con): I am not quite sure what to say about parents with weird views. As long as they are legal, I guess we have to roll with it—’twas ever thus.

It is possible that the noble Lord misunderstood what I said in the Statement about year 8. Year 8 is the age from which most children have the emotional maturity to learn about suicide prevention. There are different age limits in the guidance, which I know the noble Lord will enjoy getting familiar with.

In relation to menstruation, as I said in response to the initial question from the noble Baroness, Lady Twycross, children should not be taught about menstruation earlier than year 4. Most children will be taught from the age of eight or nine. For the vast majority of girls that will be, as the noble Lord suggests, before they start menstruating.

On the limits being dangerous, I feel that the noble Lord used quite a strong word. I do not think for a second that the Government are trying to second-guess the ability of teachers to judge what is age-appropriate for their class. As I said earlier, in a circumstance where a teacher feels strongly that it is important to teach something, as long as they are transparent with parents about it, and as long as there is transparency around the materials and they are age-appropriate, then there is a degree of flexibility for teachers to do that. Many schools and teachers asked us for clarity around age-appropriate boundaries, and that was also the advice of the expert panel.

Baroness Falkner of Margravine (CB): My Lords, I chair the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I will turn to that, but first I would like to ask a question in my personal capacity. It is to do with the guidance and the comment that refers to contractual obligations of companies which provide training material. I think the Minister told us that those clauses will not be enforceable. Recognising that commercial interests

are engaged in the enforceability of some aspects of those clauses, could she elaborate on how they intend to clarify that?

Turning to the role of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, there seems to be some confusion in this Chamber. To save public servants time and money, perhaps I could explain to some quarters of this Chamber that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has a statutory duty under the Equality Act 2010 to advise the Government. However, as far as I know, on this occasion it has not yet engaged. It looks forward to doing so in response to the consultation.

Baroness Barran (Con): I thank the noble Baroness for clarifying that point. In relation to contractual obligations, she is aware that my right honourable friend the Secretary of State has written twice now to schools clarifying the position on copyright and intellectual property. The simple way through this is that schools should not engage and use third-party providers of materials where copyright presents an issue or where their perception of their copyright rights is a block to transparency with parents, which we believe is the overriding principle.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington (Con): My Lords, on behalf of the many parents who have been in touch with me and with many other Members of this House, I welcome this Statement. It has been an extremely widespread problem. I have seen, as I am sure the Minister has, many of the materials being taught as fact, many of which are extremely disturbing. Will my noble friend consider the immediate removal of some of the contested materials, pending the final guidance being published?

Baroness Barran (Con): I understand and have a lot of sympathy with the question my noble friend raises. All I can say at this stage is that this guidance, and the consultation which follows, is sending a very clear message both to schools and to parents. Of course, the autumn term is a good time for many schools to think about when they might refresh their curriculum, and, as I said to my noble friend Lady Berridge, in the autumn term of next year we will have the full suite of materials from Oak. Similarly, this is an important message to give parents peace of mind, and I hope very much for all concerned that the conversations they can have with schools can change now.

Community Sports: Impact on Young People

Motion to Take Note

3.16 pm

Moved by Lord Wood of Anfield

That this House takes note of the contribution of all sports to society and the economy, and in particular of the impact of community sport on young people's health and well-being.

Lord Wood of Anfield (Lab): My Lords, I am delighted that we are having this debate on the social and economic contribution of sport in our country. I want to start with something I have always wanted to include in a Lords debate: a quote from my hero, Jürgen Klopp, the manager of our beloved Liverpool Football Club, who sadly will be managing his last game for Liverpool this Sunday. Jürgen, if you are watching, thank you, and my best wishes for the future—you'll never walk alone. Klopp famously said of football, during the suspension of sport in Britain during the pandemic—though it could be said on behalf of fans of all sports—that although it is not that important, it seems

“the most important of the least important things”.

The 58% of Brits who follow at least one sport know how true this is.

Sport teaches resilience, patience, discipline, the importance of combining practice with flair and combining individual excellence with teamwork, dealing with disappointment, and resolving to recover. For fans like me, sport provides a crucial dimension of the narrative arc of our lives. But research shows that the playing of, love of, and social capital generated by sport has immense power to improve lives beyond those of just the fans. Playing sport is obviously key to personal physical fitness. It improves the quality of sleep—in turn a gateway to all sorts of higher well-being indicators. It generates higher levels of happiness, satisfaction, quality of relationships, confidence and self-esteem. It reduces anxiety, depression and isolation, sometimes more effectively than medication. These positive effects are more pronounced for girls and young women. NIH research shows that watching sport—my favourite quote of the speech—leads to

“increased brain activity and the structural volume in ... brain regions related to well-being”.

On Monday, the excellent Youth Sport Trust released data showing that participation in physical activity in school is worth between £4.5 billion and £9 billion in well-being benefits, and that those benefits are most valuable to poorer and disabled pupils.

When it comes to social policy, sport is far more than the most important of the least important things. In our communities, especially in relation to more marginalised groups, sport and physical activities often have Heineken properties, reaching the parts that other policies find hard to reach. Sports initiatives across the piece report positive effects in improving employability and reducing anti-social behaviour, for example. There is the Premier League Kicks programme, which targets some of the most deprived communities, with free football sessions for children, combined with workshops on social inclusion, the dangers of crime and other social problems. The programme, launched in 2006, is now so popular in reaching at-risk young people that 36 different police forces have partnered with the Premier League to deliver Kicks.

In cricket, the Chance to Shine programme reaches half a million children in state schools and communities across Britain, many of whom are from minority backgrounds. The Golf Foundation will soon launch its Unleash Your Drive programme, using teaching and the playing of golf to instil essential life skills. Across the country, charities such as the excellent

[LORD WOOD OF ANFIELD]

StreetGames, whose Doorstep Sport programmes offer cheap, accessible ways into sport for children in the most deprived areas, are transforming the lives of many of those in the most need, from reducing holiday hunger to supporting personal development and inculcating leadership skills.

A basic measure of the strength of sports in our country is rates of participation. Here, the record of the past decade, since the 2012 Olympics, has been, I think it is fair to say, a bit disappointing. Some 22% of British adults play at least one sport, which is about middle ranking internationally, but when it comes to our children under half of under-18s meet the CMO's guideline of doing an hour or more of sport or physical activity each day. Sadly, since the London Olympics, the number of hours that children spend doing school sports has gone down by 12%, and those who do not participate are significantly more likely to be on free school meals. There is also continuing evidence of what is referred to as a gender play gap among school-aged girls, two-thirds of whom say they would like to engage in more sport than they are being provided with.

Among less active groups, there has been mixed progress over the past decade—reasonably good for some, such as disabled people and the over-75s, but with far less progress for others, such as black, Asian and minority groups. Worryingly, the income and class divide in participation statistics is persistent, perhaps even strengthening since Covid.

Returns on public investment in sports participation are sizeable. Sport England has shown that, for every £1 spent, nearly £4 of social and economic value is created. While I welcome the Government's ambition in their 2023 *Get Active* paper for 2.5 million more adults and 1 million more children to be active by 2030, I worry that those who lead this drive, for all their excellent work, do not have the mechanisms, means or metrics to deliver those step changes. I worry too that we have not made enough headway among groups that face particular barriers to access and participation.

Take the example of women's sport and physical activity. The last few years have seen huge steps forward in the prominence, success and coverage of professional women's sports, in particular following the phenomenal achievements of England's Lionesses, but also in cricket, rugby and many other sports. Football's Women's Super League in England saw an extraordinary 40% increase in attendance during the first half of this season alone. Average crowds are now well over 7,000, which makes it Europe's most attended league. Yet sporting participation rates for women have been static for nearly a decade. Of course, the main metric for elite sports is not simply the extent to which it triggers a participation revolution at grass-roots level, but I wonder whether we have as a country placed a bit too much faith in the catalytic effect of breakthrough moments and achievement in unleashing a participation revolution, especially among groups that have historically engaged less in sport.

Key to delivering on this revolution is money and funding. There can be no doubt about the economic value of the UK sports industry. Sport's total contribution

to the UK economy in 2022 was £18 billion, about 0.8% of total GDP. The industry supports over half a million jobs in our country, and the sector has grown 50% faster than the rest of the economy since 2010. The benefits of sport at all levels are felt across different parts of British society and, of course, make huge contributions in areas such as healthcare, crime reduction and education. It does not rob us of the right to have strong views about reforms to football governance to celebrate at the same time the extraordinary economic success of the Premier League, the biggest audiovisual exporter in the UK, with an audience of 1.8 billion people in 190 countries.

Sport is both a constant companion for the majority of people in our country and a powerhouse of our economy. But when it comes to public funding for sport, we still lack consistent commitment across the sporting landscape, especially at grass-roots level. These challenges pre-date the obstacles that came in the wake of the pandemic. Spending on grass-roots sports and recreation facilities fell by 47% between 2010 and 2020, when Covid hit us. In the same decade, the number of PE teachers in schools fell by 2,500. On top of this, we have seen the cost of living crisis impact on poorer families' ability to engage in sports, so now over two-thirds of parents say that worries about affordability have limited their kids' participation in sport.

Facilities, in particular, have borne the brunt of many years of austerity. Cutbacks to council budgets have had a dramatic impact on a range of local sports infrastructure, and a recent survey indicated that 70% of councils are considering further cutbacks as their finances tighten further. Many community clubs, in poor states of repair before Covid, have stayed shut or closed permanently in the years since. Sport England has taken steps to protect hundreds of community facilities, which I am sure we all welcome, but the challenge is absolutely immense, with 45% of our country's public park tennis courts in poor, very poor or unplayable condition. The FA reports that only one in three grass pitches is of adequate quality; 150,000 matches a year get called off because of unfit pitches. We have very low numbers of artificial sports pitches compared with many of our European neighbours and, as Sport England's chair, Chris Boardman, outlined just this morning:

"Extreme weather is increasingly making it difficult for us to live healthy, active lives".

It is a problem that will only get worse. In the next half century, for example, wetness is predicted to increase by 30% in British winters. Just imagine the effect that will have on people's ability to engage in community sports.

Again, I do not want to underappreciate areas where the Government provide strong financial support—in particular to Sport England, which receives £250 million a year from government and Lottery sources—and long-standing support for initiatives such as the Football Foundation, which has supported over £1.5 billion in investment in community facilities. I hope the Government, whoever they are, commit to continue this important funding in the years ahead. The predominant picture at grass-roots level is one of multiple long-term challenges: underfunding, climate

change, cost of living pressures, councils forced to deprioritise sport, and inequalities of access. These urgently need not just more financial support, of course, but more certain and longer-term financial support.

The funding challenge is actually more complicated than simply more money for sports, although of course that is crucial. Protecting local facilities and community sports requires a step change from the last 14 years in protecting councils' budgets and their autonomy to spend with more freedom, because only with a broader securing of local authority finances can sports and leisure services be protected from their all-too-frequent fate of being the first items to get cut when pressures increase. At central government level, the paradox of sport is that it benefits the outcomes of many other departments—education, health, home affairs—but those departments do not see sport as a central priority for their own funding programmes. This kind of paradox led, for example, to the very ill-advised decision in 2010 to end government support for school sport partnerships. Part of the policy challenge is aligning the funding streams for sports with the areas in which sport has such positive impacts on people's lives. That is a difficult task, but I am hopeful that my own party's commitment to radical new devolution may allow more discretion on spending allocations for combined authorities, for example, to make that alignment happen a bit better at local level.

There is also a range of issues in the way elite sports operate in our country that need to be addressed and debated. The infrastructure of our most popular national sports is increasingly dependent on trickle-down support from a narrow top tier of successful leagues and competitions. Financial precariousness and dependence have become a constitutional condition of lower-league sports teams all the way down in our country. Alongside this, we have understandable and widespread concerns about the way in which the quest for broadcasting revenues, corporate backing and sponsorship, catering to the demands of foreign audiences and the interests of shareholders in large sporting clubs and organisations are all impacting on the character and integrity of the sports we love. These are concerns we will debate in relation to football governance, for example, but they also encompass the LIV tour controversy in golf, global cricket's dependence on India for its survival, and issues to do with ensuring that sporting events are available free-to-air not only in their live form, as now, but on digital catch-up.

Lastly, there is a host of issues around the culture within elite sports, from combating doping and corruption to eliminating abuse and exploitation. These remain serious challenges on which my friend, the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, has done so much work, including her recommendation from seven years ago to introduce a duty of care to elite sportsmen and sportswomen, supported by a sports ombudsman.

We need to think more forensically about the methods by which increases in participation can be delivered, be successful and be sustainable, and how disabled people, young girls, minority children, lower-income families and rural residents can be engaged in sporting activity more regularly. We need to map the funding structures for sport in ways that mirror more accurately the areas of society in which sport has such a huge

impact. We need to ensure that governance, culture and finances in sport continue to embody the values that give sport its popularity and integrity.

We need to celebrate the remarkable power of sport in our country, and I look forward to hearing examples from noble colleagues showcasing that. I also look forward to hearing the maiden speeches of two new colleagues in your Lordships' House, the noble Lord, Lord Hannett of Everton—yes, I did bring myself to say “Everton”, even though I am a Liverpool fan—and the noble Lord, Lord Shamash, whose beloved Manchester United, I am glad to say, have avoided relegation this year. I hope to hear ideas from noble Lords about how our approach to increasing the value of sport's contribution to our country and widening the net of those who enjoy full access to sport can be improved. I beg to move.

3.31 pm

Baroness Sater (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Wood, for securing this important and broad-ranging debate. I congratulate him on covering so much of the sporting sector in 15 minutes. I draw noble Lords' attention to my interests in sport and health as laid out on the register.

The Sport England Active Lives survey 2023 paints an encouraging picture of participation in community sport but, sadly, also shows continued disparities. Children and young people of black, Asian and other ethnicities, as well as those from less affluent families, are still less likely to play sport or engage in physical education or activity. Girls are less likely than boys to be active, with the Women in Sport charity recently reporting that the gender activity gap is wider today than it has been since reporting began. Women and girls aged 16 to 24 are three times more likely to be affected by mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Sport England estimates that only 47% of children meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines of at least 60 minutes of sport and physical activity per day. The Association for Physical Education is adamant that every child should receive, weekly, two hours of physical education and two hours of physical activity in school, and a chance of two hours of physical activity in the community. This will help develop the positive attitudes associated with continuing healthy, active lives in the community when they leave school. To make our children healthier and fitter for life, we must also put physical development at the heart of early years education and prioritise every child's play with 60 minutes of physical activity daily.

How can we do more? The excellent physical education and sport premium must become a permanent feature of our future education budgets, with improved monitoring and greater accountability to enable teachers to plan their physical education and sport provision properly. It has more than proved its value since 2013.

The rise in obesity rates in children and young people is often spoken of in both your Lordships' House and other places, but few practical solutions have been suggested. The roles of physical education, sport and physical activity are, by themselves, not a silver bullet, but they are practical tools to help reduce this trend. They merit more specific, in-depth consideration and collaboration across government departments.

[BARONESS SATER]

These activities help address further societal problems, including helping at-risk children entering the criminal justice system and those already in it, for whom I am a keen advocate. These children face significant mental and physical health challenges and endure marked health inequalities. Their needs are multiple, persistent and severe, often shaped by their family and social environments.

The taskforce on physical activity and sport in the criminal justice system, which I chair, funded by NHS England and driven by the Alliance of Sport in Criminal Justice, launched the Get Well, Stay Well agreement in 2022, which helps improve, through sport, the well-being of those in and more likely to enter the justice and welfare system. We know that community sport and physical activities are positive interventions that help rehabilitate children and young people—from early intervention and diversion to sustained participation—and Get Well, Stay Well is now working with nine government departments to remove barriers to physical activity and increase health promotion.

The College of Policing research on sports programmes designed to prevent crime and reduce reoffending confirms that these programmes do just that, as well as discouraging criminal behaviour and related attitudes, and improving psychological outcomes such as self-esteem and emotional well-being. To deliver these important programmes, we need a vibrant and sustainable community sporting sector.

However, enabling sport and physical activity to solve this range of societal challenges—from obesity to criminal justice—in financially constrained times requires increasing delivery within existing community contexts and infrastructure in a cost-neutral manner. Crucial to this effort are facilities, including sports and leisure centres, swimming pools, playing fields and parks, and the opening of more school facilities to their local communities, not to mention the thousands of sports clubs all over the country.

I had the privilege of chairing StreetGames, which the noble Lord, Lord Wood, mentioned earlier, which delivers the doorstep sports programme, bypassing many traditional barriers to activity. It is a robust example of the community delivery we need so badly, reaching those young people who Sport England's *Active Lives* report tells us we have been missing.

In conclusion, I would like my noble friend the Minister to comment on the fact that we must keep investing more in all our community sports and leisure centres, swimming pools, sports clubs and playing fields, and open up more school facilities to enable greater community access to both free and low-cost participation. We must ensure that schools provide more physical education activities every week, enabled by a permanent physical education and sport premium. Finally, we must ensure that we genuinely promote the value of sport and physical activity, as Sport England's 10-year vision, *Uniting the Movement*, recommends, and support initiatives like the Mental Health Foundation's *Moving more is good for our mental health*, published this Mental Health Awareness Week.

Physical education, community sport and physical activity benefit individuals' emotional well-being, physical health and life skills, but their value to UK society is

even greater. A happier, more active society is more successful, more equal and more economically productive—I am sure that my noble friend the Minister and everyone here today can agree on that.

3.37 pm

Lord Hannett of Everton (Lab) (Maiden Speech):

My Lords, I am pleased to follow the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, and thank him for securing this important debate. It would be inappropriate for me to refer to the last derby game, when Everton beat Liverpool, so I will not mention it.

Sport is well proven to be good for both physical and mental health. It makes a major contribution to the economy, employing thousands of workers. Given our respective allegiances, I also look forward to further discussions with the noble Lord, Lord Wood, beyond this Chamber, on the fortunes of our respective clubs.

I place on record my thanks to my noble friends Lady Smith of Basildon and Lord Kennedy of Southwark. I have known them both for some time, and in recent months they have guided me on how this place works. I also thank Black Rod and her staff for their support and patience as I navigate my way around this building, getting lost numerous times. The welcome I have received from Members on all sides of this House has been wonderful.

I was also perhaps fortunate to join at a time of intense debate on the Rwanda Bill. I was impressed by the quality of the contributions, from all sides; it was an invaluable lesson in the processes of the House.

It is with great pride that I make this speech. Born into a working-class family in Liverpool, one of six children, I learnt from an early age that getting on in life involves hard work. But it also involves the support of those closest to you, and for that, I offer loving thanks to my wife Linda, who is in the Chamber, and, of course, to my family.

I also owe a great debt to those I have worked with through both the Labour Party and the TUC—but especially my own union, USDAW, which has played a significant role in my development. Elected general secretary in 2004, I held that post for 14 years, during which I was determined for us to modernise as a union and face the many challenges of the workplace going forward. We introduced a bespoke model based on union values and then put in place the strategy and resources to represent our members effectively. We grew our membership by over 100,000, up 25%, just when unions were in apparent decline—and even more so in the private sector, where we negotiated.

USDAW also organised successful campaigns. As well as the Christmas Day training campaign, which included discussions in this House, there have been campaigns to delay cuts to working tax credits, to deliver an extension and improvements to maternity leave, and to amend the law to introduce a distinct criminal offence for assaulting shop workers. The latter has been running for 20 years and has been adopted by many unions in many other countries.

Another body that I served on with great pleasure, for 11 years, was the Low Pay Commission. It celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and is an important example of different stakeholders reaching a consensus.

Commission recommendations have been accepted by all Governments, raising the living standards of some of the poorest paid.

I was also on the Women and Work Commission, tackling the gender pay gap, and the Future of Work Commission, addressing the policy challenges of new technologies. As a keen champion of disability rights, I was more than pleased to see British Sign Language introduced as a GCSE option. All of that illustrates, I hope, how my interest in representing working people includes not just concerns about workplace rights, important though they are; I also very much believe in improving people's broader quality of life. That means anticipating the inevitable impact of change, and requires partnerships between unions, government and business.

I alluded to my support for my club—the clue is in my title, because I am a true, life-long supporter. One positive aspect of how Everton FC is run is the work of its charitable arm, Everton in the Community. It does so much to support people across the Merseyside area. It is particularly adept at working with those communities often thought of as hard to reach or hard to help. Notable successes include: the “Starting Well” programme, which supports new and expectant parents; a wide range of mental health initiatives, including one focused on suicide prevention and another that specifically targets girls and young women; ongoing efforts to tackle the scourge of social isolation; and the “Pass on the Memories” dementia support programme. It supports much more than just the football itself. Working with a wide network of experts while engaging current and former players, Everton in the Community is a best practice example of a sporting club trying to connect positively with all aspects of people's lives and make a real difference.

I end by thanking again those who have made me feel so welcome in this House. I also make it clear that, just as my club ensures that the vehicle of sport helps change lives, I intend to play my part in the House to show how politics itself can do much more.

3.43 pm

Lord Monks (Lab): My Lords, I warmly congratulate my noble friend Lord Hannett of Everton on his excellent maiden speech. It demonstrated to everyone in the House that we have acquired a new Member with a deep knowledge of the rough ends of the world of work in the UK, combined with a strong record of working constructively with employers who seek to do the right things.

My noble friend will bring Liverpool wit and, because his office was in Manchester for many years, Manchester wisdom to the business of the House. I look forward to his future contributions and to those of my noble friend Lord Shamash, who will contribute shortly. I also thank my noble friend Lord Wood of Anfield for his initiative in securing this debate and for the excellent and comprehensive way in which he outlined the issues involved. We have had Anfield in the past and now we have Everton; I can tell your Lordships that the banter will be unbearable.

Civilisations have long been aware of the power and importance of sport. It was often linked to military prowess, and the UK was no exception. There was

always a recreational side to sport here and, as the British Empire expanded, sport went with it—and beyond it, in the case of football to the whole world. To this day, our heritage remains strong. Juventus plays in the colours of Notts County, which donated its original set of shirts, and in Bilbao, Sunderland shipyard workers influenced the establishment of Athletic Bilbao, which still plays in colours like those of Sunderland.

However, politics was never far away. The poor physical state of many men from the industrial towns and cities worried the British Army in the Boer War and was an influence in developing support for the welfare state, which started shortly afterwards. English public schools evangelised, especially among boys, the role of team sports. They codified rules and spread an ethos of sporting excellence, manners and sportsmanship—which is not always the most fashionable thing to pay tribute to, but it is important. It spread quickly, and the vibrant institutions of working-class Britain—chapels, churches, local factories, the Scouts, the Guides, the Boys' Brigade and, above all, the schools and local authorities—formed teams and leagues, especially in football, although rugby prevailed in some areas and a range of other sports came up as well. In retrospect, it was a huge effort by the community. We should remember that when talking about the social history of this country. It was commonplace to see 40 or 50 teams playing on a Saturday afternoon on a patch of grass such as Wormwood Scrubs and its equivalent in other towns and cities.

I think everybody in this debate appreciates that the role of sport is crucial in so many ways. I want to pick on three areas. It is a key weapon against the burgeoning growth of obesity, which is a national crisis. I know that the Government have applied their mind to this on more than one occasion, but we have so much to do that the profile of this campaign needs to be right at the very top. I was in the Netherlands just last weekend. If you go down a street there, you see the different physiques of the people compared to those of many in our own country, particularly in the poorer parts. Obviously, cycling has a lot to do with that, but participation in sports is also high and developing, and is publicly encouraged to a considerable extent. We need new ways of making sport and exercise generally attractive across all the population—able, disabled, regardless of gender and so on. It cannot just be for the elite and the enthusiastic.

The second problem—my noble friend Lord Wood touched on some of this—is the fact that, since pay-for-view came in, some sports have edged away from promoting mass participation and interest. In my view, cricket has suffered by not having test matches on general view. Sports need to rethink whether they have the balance right between paywalls on TV rights and the population in general having access to their sport. Even the existing listed events, which are free to air when transmitted live, are not protected in the digital on-demand coverage of sporting events, which is growing considerably as viewing of live events declines. We will lose free access in a few years' time if we do not do something to regulate the digital world in this area, so I have a couple of questions for the Minister. Are the Government considering this issue in relation to the

[LORD MONKS]

Media Bill, which is before the House? Do they have plans to extend the existing list of 10 free-to-air sports in relation to individual sports and, importantly, to the fast-developing digital world?

Finally, I will touch on medicine and medical research into sports and the many injuries that can come from sports. The current worries about dementia, particularly in rugby, must be a huge turn-off for parents who would like their children to play the game but want to know that it is safe to do so. I know that the football and rugby—both union and league—authorities are trying to improve research and tighten the rules. However, for contact sports—not just rugby—rapid improvements are necessary in the knowledge and treatment of potential risks.

For some of us, exercise and sport are a crucial part of our lives. In some form or other, they should be a crucial part of everybody's lives. Can we, in our time, develop a surge in interest like the late Victorians did across the whole of the United Kingdom?

3.51 pm

Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB): My Lords, I draw noble Lords' attention to my entry in the register of interests. I am chair of Sport Wales and of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and president of the LGA, among other things listed in my entry.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, for raising my work on duty of care. It took about 18 months of my life and was not without lots of challenges, as some people in sport really did not want the debate to happen. There is no doubt that a number of governing bodies have been through challenging times in the drive to win medals. People who did not want to address the issue pushed back hard—they were very worried about lifting the lid—but many people in sport were extremely supportive. It is about getting the right balance in the system, which includes coaches, athletes and volunteers.

In my role with Sport Wales, I also sit on the board of UK Sport, which in recent years has gone through a transition from “medals and more” to “winning and winning well”. That is really important to me because, as a young athlete, my mum always used to ask me whether I had won and my dad asked me whether I had competed well. They are two really important things when we are looking at elite sport.

Some positives have come out of my work. A coaching register is being worked on and the positions of trust legislation has got across the line. Sadly, the ombudsman has not quite happened, but a lot of work is ongoing on integrity in sport—in the governance, culture and process—which is incredibly important because it has a big influence on community sport. I am delighted that many in your Lordships' Chamber are interested in debating listed events. I have tabled some amendments to the Media Bill for the second day in Committee on Monday. All are welcome to contribute to that.

There are many different ways to measure the impact of sport: the social return on investment, the psychological impact and the medal table—which, of course, is a hard outcome. Major games are important, but we have to be careful not to overemphasise the impact of

watching sporting events. It certainly brings people in, but we have to find smarter ways to keep them involved. I am delighted that the noble Lord, Lord Wood, quoted Jürgen Klopp—I am a huge fan of his. I will raise it up a level and quote Nelson Mandela, who said:

“Sport has the power to change the world”.

I absolutely believe that.

A lot of really good work is going on at the moment. In February 2023, the Sports Council for Wales, known as Sport Wales, commissioned Sheffield Hallam University, in partnership with Loughborough University, to carry out a social return on investment study of sport in Wales. The research builds on previous studies of sport in Wales in 2016 and 2017. It is centred in the policy context of Wales, taking into account the Vision for Sport in Wales and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Sport Wales is one of 44 public sector organisations which are subject to the Act, which requires public bodies to put sustainable thinking and partnership working at the heart of their role and to improve social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being in Wales.

The Act requires public bodies, including Sport Wales, to work towards seven well-being goals: a prosperous, resilient, healthier and more equal Wales; a Wales of cohesive communities; a vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language; and a globally responsible Wales. There were many benefits highlighted: ill-health prevention, a sense of belonging, leadership skills and increased educational attainment. The report revealed that £3.43 billion of social value was generated from £1.19 billion of input, giving a social return on investment value of £2.88 billion. This means that for every £1 invested in sport in Wales, financial and non-financial, £2.88 billion-worth of social impact was created for individuals and society in 2016-17. The largest amount of social value, 61%, was generated through subjective well-being, equivalent to £2.08 billion. Considerable social value, £651 million or 19%, was also created by social capital, £295 million or 8.6% by health, and £312 million or 9% by volunteer labour.

There is always a need for more money. This is not an appeal to the Minister—after all, sport is devolved, so as much as I would like to ask for more money it is not within his gift. However, we have to think about what we do differently. We have to think about physical activity as well as sport. Some research from ukactive, Sport England and Sheffield Hallam University shows that every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates £4 for the English economy. Physical activity is essential in preventing over 20 chronic conditions, including type 2 diabetes, obesity, heart disease, musculoskeletal issues, depression, anxiety and dementia, and generates more than £5.2 billion in healthcare savings per year. Physical activity plays an important role in preventing a number of serious conditions, with research showing that it provides £9.5 billion in value to the economy. We should also look at physical inactivity, which costs £3.5 billion annually, of which £2.9 billion is borne by the public health system.

There is definitely a benefit in sport but I would like to look forward and think about what more we could do if we could join up the different organisations that

are involved. We know that disabled people struggle to get involved in sport. Disability Sport Wales and Activity Alliance are doing great work in this area. Professor Rosie Meek is working in the criminal justice system. For women in sport, there are three organisations that are doing incredible work. The Women's Sport Trust has just produced figures to show record-breaking TV viewership. The Women's Sport Collective is bringing women in sport together. When I first got involved in working in sport, I did not need two hands to count the number of women working in sport. There is now a huge WhatsApp group, which is incredibly exciting. Also, Women in Sport is about to celebrate 40 years of challenging media portrayal and imagery. I say well done to Tess Howard, a GB hockey player who changed the rules of hockey to allow women to wear shorts, which brings more people in.

We now have role models—Olivia Breen, Hannah Jones, Jess Fishlock and Lauren Price—who do incredible things in sport. They cannot do it alone. We need to be supporting some incredible athletes out there and using their power—and the power we have—to change how people view sport and physical activity and really live up to Nelson Mandela's words that sport can change the world.

3.59 pm

The Earl of Effingham (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, for introducing this important debate and I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Hannett of Everton, on his excellent maiden speech. I am also looking forward to hearing the speech from the noble Lord, Lord Shamash. My only concern is that I understand that the noble Lord is chairman of the Manchester United Supporters Trust, whereas my wife's business partner won the award for Manchester City's supporter of the year. This makes me a blue, but I hope to avoid noble Lords drawing pistols at dawn in the Prince's Chamber over our respective teams.

One has only to look at the newspaper headlines over the last couple of weeks to see that the health of the nation is in crisis:

"UK sicknote culture is fuelled by obesity crisis",

"Almost half of cancer cases linked to obesity".

However, this is all totally solvable with both food education and physical education.

I flag that you cannot out-train a bad diet, so sport by itself is not the full solution. But, by combining regular sport with a healthy diet, you absolutely can eat and exercise your way to material good health and benefit both society and the economy. I will draw on a few personal experiences to show why I am passionate about this topic and why I know that it is incredibly important.

I worked for 23 years in a large City dealing room, which involved my alarm going off at 5.45 am to be at my desk for 7.15 am, followed by frequently 12-hour days of often intense mental activity. The only reason I was able to operate at optimum performance consistently, for so many years, was that I would take 45 minutes of exercise on a bike every day, without fail, and eat healthily.

I look at my son: he took up rowing at school and it had a huge positive impact on his life. He learned how to be a team player: they trained together and carried each other through difficult times. It kept them physically and mentally fit. The nine of them had to work as one or fail. Sport is a fantastic leveller, and you can see this at the regular 10 am Saturday football for children: everyone is welcome, bar none.

I had the privilege of visiting Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney recently. Perhaps one of the reasons for its 15% Oxbridge acceptance and 65% Russell Group acceptance is its commitment to sport. It successfully beat some of the UK's top rowing schools at the Schools' Head of the River Race a few years ago. The head coach was the first in his family to row; it changed his life and he simply wants the same things for Mossbourne children—to open the doors that it did for him growing up. Sport is and should be for all.

Sport, combined with a healthy diet, is the perfect catalyst for a circular economy. People exercise; they feel good; they gain self-confidence; they are mentally healthier and sharper; they want to succeed in their jobs; they earn money; retail sales rise; consumer confidence increases; and gross domestic product flourishes.

Through sport we also achieve lower levels of obesity, fewer instances of cancer, reduced NHS waiting lists, increased energy, better sleep, self-esteem, confidence, crime reduction and tens of billions of pounds saved in Treasury expenditure. However, as we all know, actions speak louder than words and everything is in the execution.

If we were able to facilitate just a small change in behaviour, it would have a huge multiplier effect. Currently, 46% of primary schools have signed up to the Daily Mile initiative. I ask my noble friend the Minister why the Department for Education cannot make the Daily Mile the Daily Four Miles, and make it compulsory for every school in the country as part of the curriculum. That would ensure that all schoolchildren meet the Chief Medical Officer's guideline of 60 minutes of exercise per day. Would it not be possible to introduce this with relative ease?

Cycling to school is another easy win, as children need to travel there and back, so why not use a bike, which can also be used at the weekend for family and community activity? Cycling is fun. It is good exercise and it reduces pollution. Will the Government consider a cycle-to-work scheme for schoolchildren, funded from their parents' pre-tax pay, where the societal and economic benefits significantly outweigh the tax cost to the Exchequer? Will the Government ensure that Bikeability has enough funding to reach all schools in the UK? How will they encourage more schoolchildren and parents to cycle to school?

These are a number of manageable solutions which would make a material difference to society and the economy. I truly hope that the Government will focus on sport and physical exercise to stem the current mental health and obesity crisis that we face. I look forward to hearing from my noble friend the Minister.

4.05 pm

Lord Shamash (Lab) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, it is an enormous privilege to follow on from the noble Earl, Lord Effingham, and even more so to follow on

[LORD SHAMASH]

from the national treasure, the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson. I never thought I would find myself in a situation like this. I also congratulate my noble friend Lord Hannett of Everton on his maiden speech, and my noble friend Lord Wood on introducing the debate—I will not rise to the barbs of those two clubs down the other end of the East Lancs Road. I very much look forward to welcoming my noble and dear friend Lady Hazarika, who has only recently joined us, and listening to her maiden speech.

I pay heartfelt thanks to all House officials, who in the last few weeks since the announcement of my ennoblement and my introduction could not have been more helpful. All my new colleagues on this side of the House, as well as a lot of noble friends opposite, were very generous in welcoming me with their support and advice. I also thank my two sponsors, my noble friends Lady Smith of Basildon and Lady Hayter of Kentish Town—who I am privileged to see in her place—for all their encouragement. I also thank my wife Naomi and my family, who are here, for their love and support over the years.

My father was born in 1882—I repeat, 1882—in Baghdad, which was then in the Ottoman Empire and the oldest Jewish community, and he arrived in Manchester in 1895 to further develop the family business in the cotton trade. Some 65 years later, I popped up. My father has a brother, and his son was my noble kinsman, the late Robert “Bob” Sheldon, Lord Sheldon of Ashton under Lyne, who served for 37 years in the other place before he entered your Lordships’ House and served for 14 years here. I suspect that many noble Lords will recall Bob Sheldon. I hope that I can at least try to equal his contribution. It is, in a way, a tribute to the multicultural nature of our nation that both I and my late noble kinsman became Members of your Lordships’ House.

I am a solicitor who is still practising. My firm covers the whole range of community legal work, supporting those who seek access to justice, primarily through the legal aid scheme. This scheme provides a sorely needed service to respond to critical issues such as homelessness, domestic abuse, Court of Protection matters and special educational needs, but it is under huge financial pressure. It struggles to survive, despite the battles with successive Governments for funding, while at the same time providing a crucially needed service—an issue I hope I will return to during my membership of this House.

Through my long membership of the Labour Party, I have been fortunate to find myself over some four decades advising the party on a whole range of legal issues of all types, including some high-profile cases involving Members of both Houses. However, my main area of advice to the Labour Party is that of electoral law. My engagement in this specialised area has enabled me to see that there is much that can constructively be achieved by way of substantive reform. I hope to play a part in seeing that achieved through the long-overdue consolidation of our electoral law, as well as by ensuring that our electoral registers are accurate and reflect the true number of electors entitled to vote. The Electoral Commission in 2023 estimated

that there were up to 8 million people missing from the register. That is a huge number, and we must address that.

I also very much look forward to the Football Governance Bill coming to this House. The Bill, currently in Committee in the other place, sets out the creation of an independent regulator, a licensing structure, and protection of the football pyramid. I declare an interest in that I am the immediate past chairman and a current board member of the Manchester United Supporters Trust, MUST, the country’s largest football supporters trust, and I am pleased to say that I have now increased the number of Manchester United fans in this House by one.

That leads me to the substance of today’s debate, in the name of my noble friend Lord Wood of Anfield. A quarter of the adult population are inactive and so, somewhat alarmingly, are one-third of children. An article in the *Times* earlier this week highlighted the problems of obesity and its link to “record sickness levels” in the workforce. As we have heard in the debate today, sport of all types is a positive route to begin dealing with this problem.

The loss of leisure facilities, through cuts and increasing pressure for new housing development, has meant the loss of playing fields up and down the country. However, there are signs that harnessing the sporting world could be used for the benefit of all. For example, Manchester United has a charitable foundation that has thus far contributed £48 million in social value. This is repeated, though not at all levels, across other foundations in the football pyramid, and in all probability across all our major sports. The aim is to work mainly with those aged five to 25 to ensure that they become healthier, happier and more socially connected, and ultimately more employable.

Central to this is working within communities in which clubs—not just football clubs—are based. Work within schools by clubs can be a springboard for engaging children who may be disaffected in some way. A classic way to engage children, which I learned from my elder son when he was working at the Arsenal in the Community scheme, was by teaching maths. For example, he would ask the pupils to think of their favourite two players—say Tony Adams and Thierry Henry of Arsenal, who had shirt numbers 6 and 14. The question to the children would be, “If you subtracted Tony Adams from Thierry Henry, what number would you get?”—a very simple but effective way of progressing. The answer was Ian Wright.

This community-based contribution by sports experts as positive role models encompasses and provides leadership skills and understanding of teamwork, and assists in the development of positive social skills, which are invaluable in today’s society. It cannot be overestimated or overstated.

This debate is one that I am privileged to take part in. I again thank my noble friend Lord Wood for moving the Motion and I very much look forward to being able to participate fully in the times ahead in your Lordships’ House.

4.12 pm

Baroness Nye (Lab): My Lords, it is a real pleasure to follow that excellent maiden speech from my noble friend Lord Shamash. My noble friend has been a devoted public servant, and I and many colleagues across both Houses have had the benefit of his wise counsel over many years. I know his family are hugely proud of him. Among the many accolades that followed his appointment to this House, he has been described as a “legend” in electoral law. While we on this side of the House want an election sooner rather than later, I rather hope that we do not call upon that particular expertise too often. I also thank my noble friend Lord Wood for securing this debate and for his tour-de-force opening remarks.

I declare an interest as set out in the register and also speak as vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Golf, but—more importantly to me at least—I speak as the mother of two professional golfers, which means I have some experience of the highs and lows of that sport.

It is clear that everyone speaking in this debate will start from the consensus view that sport has a vital role to play in its power to be a force for good that brings communities together, as well as improving the health of the nation. But the Minister will know that, sadly, less than half of children currently meet the daily guidelines for sport and physical activity, and the majority of children would like more. The long-awaited government strategy for the sports sector is long on task forces but short on granular delivery. Will the Minister give some more detail this afternoon about how those plans are to be funded?

If the Government are serious about transforming activity levels, they must start in schools. That is why the Government should commit to giving PE the focus and time in the curriculum that it needs, with properly trained and resourced staff, so that sport and physical activity continue as lifelong habits, with the consequent benefits for health and mental well-being. Traditional PE and competitive sport work for some children but not all. Being active has also to be fun.

One example of the power of non-traditional school sport is the initiative recently launched here in Westminster by Nick Dougherty in his role as president of the Golf Foundation. This is a charity which introduces golf to children from all backgrounds and works in schools and youth clubs as well as golf clubs. Through its work, the foundation became increasingly aware of the decline in young people’s mental health since the Covid lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. To help combat this, the foundation launched an initiative called Unleash Your Drive, which seeks to promote mental well-being in schools with mental toughness tools embedded across six weeks of fun golf games. The programme can be taught by any teacher and in any school hall or playground and has already been rolled out in 500 schools. Children can achieve success straightaway, and the games can be adapted to all abilities. There is also a potential link up with the local golf club and community.

The programme works because golf is an ideal sport to set personal best scores, develop persistence and discover strategies for how to improve and track progress, which are all crucial transferable skills that

can be used inside the classroom but also outside the school environment. The programme will cost an estimated £15 million to roll out across all 32,000 primary and secondary schools. I know that the Schools Minister has agreed to meet the Golf Foundation to discuss the scheme, and I hope that the noble Lord the Minister will also support the calls for government funding.

The R&A supports the work of the Golf Foundation, but it also runs programmes of its own to promote the health benefits of playing golf. Eighteen holes is the equivalent of walking four to five miles—significantly more than the 10,000 daily steps recommended—and if that is not enough, research from the Swedish Golf Federation has shown that golfers live five years longer than non-golfers.

The benefits to the economy can also be calculated. Research by Sheffield Hallam University, supported by the R&A, in 2023 showed that the gross value added of the golf industry was £2.6 billion and that it brought £338 million to the UK economy in inward golf tourism, with consumer spending on golf being nearly £5 billion, and the industry employs nearly 64,000 people.

It would be remiss not to say that more should be done to make golf more diverse, and that is recognised by the R&A. As part of its drive for change, the R&A has launched the *Women in Golf Charter*, to attract more women, girls and families into the sport, and its #FOREeveryone campaign to develop a more inclusive culture within the golf industry. In order for women’s golf to continue growing, there needs to be greater airtime for women’s professional golf. Every sport needs visible role models—we only have to look at what has happened with women’s football following the success of the Lionesses. There are some signs of success. In 2020 in the UK, 25% more women tried golf for the first time during the pandemic, but in England the regular participation rate for men is still five times greater than that for women, and people from ethnically diverse backgrounds and deprived areas are also underrepresented.

Golf should be accessible for all. It is a game that can be enjoyed by people of all abilities and all ages because of its unique handicap system. It teaches decision-making skills and persistence, but above all it relies on honesty and integrity. I, too, would like to share a quote with the House that is used quite often when my professional daughter and son return from a round of golf. The late Bobby Jones said:

“Golf is the closest game to the game we call life. You get bad breaks from good shots; you get good breaks from bad shots—but you have to play the ball where it lies”.

4.18 pm

Lord Polak (Con): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Nye. I was weaned on golf. My late mother was the lady captain of the Lee Park Golf Club in Liverpool. I agree with everything the noble Baroness said.

I thank my noble friend Lord Wood, as I shall call him on this occasion, for initiating this debate. It is very important. He made a comprehensive introduction and has already done the bits I was going to talk about. We do not meet only here; we are often on the terraces together watching our beloved Liverpool.

[LORD POLAK]

I congratulate the two newbies, the noble Lords, Lord Shamash and Lord Hannett, on their excellent speeches. I hope the noble Lord, Lord Shamash, will not mind if I call him a north Londoner rather than a Mancunian. He will understand, being a Scouser. I welcome the noble Lord, Lord Hannett, a fellow proper Scouser, to the House.

Today is a bit like a local derby, with the noble Lords, Lord Wood of Anfield and Lord Hannett of Everton, here. This reminds me of the Scouse sense of humour. Noble Lords who know Liverpool will know there is a shopping area there called Liverpool ONE. Everton has a shop in Liverpool ONE and the shop is called Everton Two, so anyone who writes a letter to it has to put the address, “Everton Two, Liverpool ONE”. However, they beat us 2-0 this time.

People who know me assume, because of my involvement in politics, that I did PPE at university. I did not; I did PE. Sport is my great love. In preparing for this debate, I looked up Edge Hill University—again, up in the north-west—and noticed that it has an MSc in sport, physical activity and mental health, in association with Everton in the Community. The course examines how mental health can be improved with sport, physical activity and exercise, and I was really impressed. I ask the Minister how widespread these courses are around the country—once again, the north-west seems to be in the lead.

I promise not to stay too much on the topic of Merseyside, but my great interest, beside all sports, are cricket and football. The noble Lord, Lord Wood, mentioned the Chance to Shine cricket programme. It is an amazing programme that exemplifies the transformative power of cricket, fostering inclusivity, community engagement, personal development and access to sport, providing central life skills and helping to shape a positive future for disadvantaged and disabled young people. We cannot do better than that.

On the subject of football, my noble friend the Minister knows full well my interest in the health and well-being of the Premier League, so that the league is able to continue leading its funding and supporting programmes in over 100 club community organisations across the country. I hope the Government will do nothing that could impact the continued growth of the Premier League. That growth allows funding to increase, and that funding impacts positively on so many lives and communities throughout the country, whether through the Premier League Primary Stars programme, Premier League Inspires or, as the noble Lord, Lord Wood, talked about, Premier League Kicks. The importance of the Premier League to the economy is well known. I was thinking about the tourism that it brings into this country. Over 1.5 million tourists come from abroad into our country for game days.

I cannot resist coming back to the topic of my hometown. As the noble Lord, Lord Hannett, talked about, Everton in the Community has over 120 full-time staff offering more than 50 programmes covering a range of social issues—health, employability, anti-social behaviour, crime, education and so on. I refer noble Lords to its brilliant and excellent website.

Liverpool’s LFC Foundation is not that shabby either. As its website says, its mission is:

“To harness the power of the LFC Family to create life changing opportunities for the most underserved communities home and away”.

Last season, the LFC Foundation supported 123,000 young families across Merseyside and beyond.

I shall finish by focusing on individuals. Not just the sports themselves—we have all talked about that—but individuals can make a difference. I am glad the noble Lord, Lord Shamash, has just left the Chamber for a minute because I am going to ignore Marcus Rashford and what he did and talk about Jamie Carragher, the great icon who used to play for Liverpool. I do so because what he did and got involved in, the particular issue that I will raise, can change people’s lives.

During lockdown, I was watching the TV when I saw a guy talking about his son, who had passed away at a swimming baths in Liverpool at the age of 12. Oliver King sadly died of a heart attack, and there was no defibrillator at the school. I realised that the swimming pool he was talking about was that of my old school, where I learned to swim. I contacted the Jamie Carragher foundation and said, “Is there anything I can do to help?” It came back very quickly, and I subsequently worked a little with Jamie and with Mark King, who was in the year below me—the father who lost his son.

Thanks to Nadhim Zahawi, when he was Secretary of State for Education, and thanks to the brilliant work of someone such as Jamie Carragher, there are now—or will be—defibrillators in every single school where they were not before. That will change lives because it will save the lives of so many people, and that is what individuals have the ability to do in sport. I just hope that there will be many more Jamie Carraghers and, dare I say it, Marcus Rashfords.

I will also finish with a quote, because everybody seems to be doing it. I am going a little further back than the noble Lord, Lord Wood—to the late, great Bill Shankly, who I also talked about in my maiden speech. He said this:

“Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that”.

4.25 pm

Lord Hampton (CB): My Lords, it is always a joy to follow the noble Lord, Lord Polak, and I join in the chorus of thanks to the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, for tabling this important debate. We have had references to Jurgen Klopp, Nelson Mandela and Bill Shankly: I am going to describe the noble Lord’s inspirational opening speech as Churchillian, and raise that one more. I also congratulate the noble Lords, Lord Hannett of Everton and Lord Shamash, on their excellent maiden speeches and look forward to hearing from them for many years to come. Can I beg the indulgence of the House? I am going to declare my interests rather as I go; I think they will become obvious.

I also thank all the organisations that sent me briefing materials on this subject. I have ignored them all, except for Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Groce’s statistics

on rugby league, which I read and then ignored, because we all know how important this is. That is why we are here. We all know the billions of pounds that we could save if our children were healthier, felt better and were more motivated. That just goes without saying, so like the noble Baroness, Lady Nye, I urge the Government to keep looking at sports education in schools, because it is just not good enough. It is like arts education; we expect this multi-billion pound economy to spread from nowhere.

The need for community sport is becoming more and more important. My daughter is an extremely able right-back with Hackney girls' under-14 football team, which is a wonderful community club funded by Hackney. But I am afraid I am not going to be talking about her—not because it is not relevant but because my son's experience is more relevant.

My own active engagement in sport dwindled and it was not until my son was six years old that I had that opportunity, as one does, to relive your life through your children, so I took my child along to Stoke Newington Cricket Club. Stoke Newington is not what it sounds; it is not some lovely Cotswold village. The dreaming spires of Stoke Newington are in Hackney, east London. Stoke Newington Cricket Club is a case study that we need to look at and replicate. It is community sport at its best.

The club trains Saturdays and midweek throughout the year: indoors in local schools during the winter and outdoors on Hackney Marshes in summer, in the home of football. Thanks to funding from the ECB, Sport England and Hackney Council, a cricket hub was opened on Hackney Marshes in 2018 with three full-size grass cricket pitches, seven astroturf pitches and all-weather nets that can be used by anybody, any time. They are now used every day, particularly Christmas Day. With a little note to Chris Hoy on this one, Hackney Marshes nowadays are not marshes. They are on six feet of bomb rubble, so they drain really quickly.

The club's mission is to give as many adults and young people as possible the chance to enjoy and play cricket to the highest standard they can achieve. Every week in the summer it puts out 10 men's teams, three women's teams and 16 junior teams. All equipment is provided, not doing so often being a barrier to sports. I started watching my son playing but, like all good cults, the club reeled me in—a fielded ball here, a bit of shouted advice there and suddenly, there was a friendly voice behind me saying "Join us. They don't understand you; come with us".

Before I knew it, I was coaching on a Saturday; I was taking nets on a Tuesday; I was organising the under-11 Gubby Allen team. I was ringing people up saying, "Why aren't you here?" I even ended up as a member of the committee and coached the Hackney team for the London Youth Games for several years. The club paid for me to do my level 1 and level 2 ECB coaching badges. At the same time, I started coaching for Chance to Shine, which the noble Lords, Lord Wood of Anfield and Lord Polak, have already mentioned. It is a wonderful charity that provides free cricket equipment in schools, mainly in really deprived areas.

During this time, I really saw the value of community sport. I would regularly pick up players for practice and games from tower blocks, from squats and from multi-million pound houses. Once you got them together, it did not matter what culture they were from. It did not matter what home they came from, or who they were. They learned discipline, and self-discipline. All my sides were very good fielding sides. You just learn that—that is hard work. On good teamwork, one of the best skills you can learn in life is how to console somebody who has just messed up and possibly cost you the game. That is really important. Life is not always fair, but you accept the umpire's decision.

Years later, my son Charlie still has really good friends from that team. Like several of my fellow coaches, I found the experience of working with this community team so rewarding that I changed careers and became a secondary school teacher, which I am now.

4.31 pm

Lord Hayward (Con): My Lords, this afternoon I am wearing my rugby club tie: Kings Cross Steelers Rugby Club. Given the presence of both the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, and the noble Lord, Lord Hannett of Everton, I probably should have worn my referee's tie—although it would have been a different sport, and we would have required more courtesy.

While referring to previous speakers, I also take this opportunity to say that it is an odd thing about this House that there seems to be more experts on electoral law here than at the other end of this building. I have had the good fortune to know the noble Lord, Lord Shamash, for some 20 years. It has been a pleasure and will continue to be so.

I would like to concentrate on the benefits of team sports, which the noble Lord, Lord Hampton, has just referred to. They contribute substantially to the community, in whatever form. Team sports take children, teenagers and young adults away from the family home and should, and often do, provide another form of support network. The younger ones who misbehave should be supported and guided by the older ones. However, on rugby tours I have, on occasion, been amazed and sometimes embarrassed at the behaviour of the older members of the tour, rather than the younger ones. There is no doubt in my mind that, overall, team sports contribute substantially to society at large.

My opening comments related to my own club. I will confine my comments specifically to rugby, but I think they apply elsewhere. I acknowledge wheelchair rugby, women's rugby and the like. In a week's time, I will be in Rome celebrating the Bingham Cup. It is the world's largest gay rugby tournament, and it will be attended by 3,500 people from all over the world. It is named after Mark Bingham, who played for the San Francisco Fog and was one of the people who tried to fight off the terrorists on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania on 9/11.

There are many teams coming from the United States—from Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia and New York. It is a truly worldwide competition. But I am

[LORD HAYWARD]

pleased to say that we play at different levels. The Kings Cross Steelers firsts and seconds will be defending the relevant trophies which they won two years ago in Ottawa.

When we founded the club, the intention was just to find a convenient home for people who happened to be gay to play rugby. It has gone on to become much more than that, as have all the other clubs for other minority communities, such as people with disabilities and women. I remember first standing on a touchline and being told by a supporter of our club that he thought that, had we not existed, his boyfriend would be dead.

Team sports so often provide support that goes way beyond physical activity. It is about mental health. We have a player, a young guy called Ethan Phillips, who felt alienated from his whole community—and had been in a psychiatric ward aged 17—until he discovered the Kings Cross Steelers. A few years ago, Eammon Ashton-Atkinson, an Australian journalist who came to this country and had been bullied at school, made a film called “Steelers”, which featured three particular players: Nic Evans, our coach, who was female and had played for Wales and been subjected to misogyny in a bad way; Drew McDowell, a black player from the United States who knew all about life’s difficulties because his father was brought up in the deep south; and Simon Jones, a top-flight lawyer for Google who admits that, until he discovered rugby and a gay rugby team, he would curl up on the floor, go into fits of tears and cry for a prolonged period. Team sports can provide an enormous amount of support in such a different way to so many people. As far as I am concerned, sport and physical activity improves all sorts of health, not just physical health.

I will conclude on somewhat happier matters, and revert to the Liverpool/Everton saga that we have heard so much about today. I used to negotiate as management in a bottling plant in Fazakerley for Coca-Cola. This was in the 1970s and I remember there was a match where one of the two Liverpool teams was due to play at Wembley. The shop steward turned the ticket over with pride and said, “Look, we haven’t got a map on our tickets to get to Wembley. The other club needs a map to get there”. I will leave it to the two noble Lords to work out which club he was referring to.

4.38 pm

Lord Drayson (Lab): My Lords, I add my congratulations to my two noble friends on their excellent maiden speeches and thank my noble friend Lord Wood for securing this debate and giving me the opportunity to speak about the sport that I have been passionate about throughout my life, both as a competitor and a spectator. I am speaking about motorsport. In doing so, I declare my interest as a racer, an entrepreneur and a former adviser to the FIA and Formula E championship and former president of the Motorsport Industry Association.

Motorsport contributes very significantly to the UK economy, turning over more than £9 billion annually, a figure which has more than doubled in the last

20 years. The industry consists of around 4,500 companies, employing over 40,000 people, with 25,000 of them highly skilled engineers. It has a strong pipeline of driver development, apprenticeships and graduate programmes to bring young people with the drive and talent to make their contribution to the sport, such as Formula Student, where university teams compete internationally to design, build and race a single-seater racing car under the guidance of experienced race engineers and race marshals. I pay particular tribute to the thousands of race marshals who volunteer their time every weekend to ensure the safety of what is an inherently dangerous sport. I can vouch for their efficiency and good humour when called on to resolve the consequences of over-exuberant racing.

Motorsport is a major contributor to UK exports, with over 90% of companies exporting and benefiting from the huge growth of the sport in recent years, particularly in the United States and the Middle East. Motorsport companies typically invest more than 25% of their turnover in R&D, because they understand that winning depends on innovation—and we are very good at winning. Britain has produced more Formula 1 world champions than any other nation, 10 in total. Germany is second, with three. More British drivers have won the 24 hours of Le Mans than those representing any other nation—including a former Member of this House, Earl Howe, who won Le Mans in 1931. British-based constructors have won no fewer than 33 Formula 1 constructors’ championships, well ahead of Italian teams, which come second with 16. Today, six of the 10 current Formula 1 teams are based here in the United Kingdom.

Those statistics back up what I am saying about the quality of our talent and engineering and the impact on our economy. But now, as the world shifts towards net zero, these strengths remain very relevant today and are in tune with what the modern consumer wants and what our planet needs: performance with energy efficiency and environmental sustainability. In 2009, Formula 1 introduced hybrid engines, speeding the development of very efficient electric motors and lightweight high-power batteries. The software and control systems that were developed to harvest the energy of the car under braking and recharge the battery are now used in all modern electric vehicles to help blend the recovery of energy with the driver’s feel of the car when braking. Virtually all those systems were developed in the UK. Now Formula 1 is pioneering the use of sustainable fuels and will use 100% sustainable fuel from 2026.

In 2013, the UK team set the new world land-speed record for electric vehicles, which still stands today. In 2014, the new Formula E all-electric championship was launched and led the development of fully electric powertrains, as it was the first time that a high-performance battery was used solely to power the racing car. The 24 hours of Le Mans—my favourite motor race—has, with its famous Garage 56 for experimental prototypes, pioneered biofuels and hybrids and is now developing regulations for a new hydrogen class in future.

Motorsport is a racing laboratory that enables engineers to innovate under the intense pressure of competition. Hydrogen fuel cells, hybrids, EVs, active aero, battery

technologies and rapid charging systems have all been tested and proven and had their development accelerated through motorsport competition. As well as accelerating innovation, motorsport also helps to shape the public's confidence and acceptance of new automotive technologies.

The industry also helps to strengthen our defence. In 2007, the Motorsport Industry Association “motorsport to defence” initiative was launched to help motorsport companies work with the defence industry to speed up the design and development of protected patrol vehicles. It was a great success, enabling the Mastiff vehicle to be delivered in record time, 23 weeks from order to deployment and operations. This initiative continues today, with McLaren working with the MoD on the electrification of military vehicles, building on the technologies used in the Extreme E championship for electric rally cars—another offshoot from Formula E.

The past 20 years have shown that motorsport is a highly skilled, world-leading R&D resource for the United Kingdom and a major creator of wealth for the UK economy. It is an exhilarating celebration of what can be achieved in the crucible of sports competition. As Steve McQueen said:

“Racing is life. Anything that happens before or after is just waiting”.

4.44 pm

Lord Londesborough (CB): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lords, Lord Hannett and Lord Shamash, on making their maiden speeches—or, to use sporting parlance, on getting off the mark in such spectacular style. I thank the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, for securing this critical debate. I note that, as a Liverpoolian, he took the opportunity to salute Jürgen Klopp before his final match so, declaring my interest as a West Ham supporter, I feel it is only right to tip my hat to David Moyes, our outgoing manager, just days before his final match—if, indeed, David is watching this debate alongside Jürgen.

This debate comes a year after some of us here debated the Select Committee's report *A National Plan for Sport, Health and Wellbeing*. As I did then, I will focus today on the rather grim subject of inactivity, because this is a huge and troubling issue, not just for our mental and physical health but for society and the economy, including the health and well-being of our workforce. This is a topic of great significance to the Economic Affairs Committee, on which I now sit.

The UK has suffered a disturbing increase in the number of economically inactive people since 2019. This threatens to become the single biggest drag on our economy, in terms of both productivity and growth. In just five years, some 900,000 people of working age have been signed off as long-term sick, taking the total up to 2.8 million. On top of that, short-term sickness is also growing fast, while thousands of 50 to 64 year-olds have opted to retire early and become economically inactive. As we know, inactivity in all its forms drives up obesity, particularly among the young, which is now reported to be costing the UK more than £100 billion a year, so it is all the more concerning that levels of physical activity have fallen in recent years, replaced in

part by increasing sedentary behaviour fuelled by smartphones, social media, video gaming, online shopping, multichannel TVs and general screen addiction. Working from home is another unhelpful trend.

I am surprised that no one has yet mentioned the Government's policy paper, *Get Active: A Strategy for the Future of Sport and Physical Activity*. It was published last year, after several delays, and has some very good intentions. It was described by our Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport as “unapologetically ambitious”. I point out that this is our eighth Secretary of State in the last six years. The key objectives are to see 2.5 million more adults and 1 million more children in England being classed as “active” by 2030. But let us put that in perspective, because the Government report that 12 million adults are “inactive”, doing less than 30 minutes' activity a week—in other words, less than five minutes a day. On top of that, we have another 5 million adults deemed by our CMO to be “fairly active”, meaning they do between 30 and 150 minutes a week, a bizarrely broad bracket with a misleading label. So we have 17 million adults in the UK, 37% of our population, who are either inactive or what I would call underactive, which is a shockingly high number.

As we have heard, when it comes to children it is no better: 53% are doing less than the recommended 60 minutes of activity a day. History shows that the vast majority of these underactive children will become low-activity adults, storing up further trouble down the road.

This drop in activity has happened in spite of the legacy of such events as the London Olympics in 2012, or indeed the billions spent since then by Sport England. As we have heard many times today, Sport England estimates that for every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity, a return on investment of £3.91 has been created for individuals and society. That is a really important claim. Can the Minister explain how that figure is calculated? I am not sure we are seeing the sum of the parts.

In my former life, I was an information and data entrepreneur, brought up on concepts such as statistical significance and returns on investment. They are all highly relevant here, not just for sport and recreation but for the Treasury, health, social security, and work and pensions. We are struggling with a multiplicity of players and stakeholders, both national and local, while the health and well-being remit runs across all these departments, to which we have now added levelling up.

I conclude by calling for much greater cross-departmental collaboration and, possibly, the creation of a new ministerial role to tackle our growing inactivity crisis. If there is room for a Minister of common sense, surely there is room for a Minister of activity.

4.51 pm

Lord Addington (LD): My Lords, the first and very pleasant task for anybody who is winding up today is to welcome the “new boys”. It is good to see them on the Benches and taking part. I slightly challenge the emphasis on football. It is not my favourite sport, but

[LORD ADDINGTON]

it is the biggest one. I welcome them and look forward to hearing from them on this and other subjects. I hope that we will become allies in the great cross-sectional activity of this House. The noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, who is a friend of mine, leads the drive on sporting matters. We are missing the noble Lord, Lord Moynihan, who has a wonderful expression: “a friend in sport”. There should be more of us driving this agenda.

When we talk about the importance of sport and the economy—I thank the noble Lord, Lord Wood, for bringing it forward—football has a key place as the big money-spinner. It is also the sport that has managed to annoy its own fan base by changing structures. There is a limit to what people will accept in changes to their leisure activities. I have always felt that people will fight much harder to defend a hobby than a job, bizarrely. That seems to be what is going on here. Let us face it, the Government did not want to bring forward legislation. They gave football every chance to avoid legislation, but it has it.

I do not know what is going to happen but, when the Bill comes forward, I would like to see us doing a little more about social responsibility. When people told me about how great various charitable activities were, I said, “Yes, but what would you say you are going to give back to us if we make it so that, for instance, the Premier League is going to guarantee a better chance of survival for those below it and, let’s face it, an exit strategy if things go wrong? That is something we are building in”. They did not seem to quite grasp that. I hope that, when we get the Bill, we will have a little caveat that anybody who is instructed in any of those football clubs has some duty to support local voluntary groups.

My starter for 10 on that would be training people to be secretaries, treasurers and chairmen of voluntary groups and charities. That would be good because you would have a way of building into the local voluntary structure—not only sports clubs, all of which need it—something that says, “You have a commitment to those communities”.

At the heart of this process is, what are we doing to encourage grass-roots sport? First, we need to encourage people to play it. Schools sports partnerships were probably the first attempt to make a formalised link, brought about because of the break of the link between school sport and local community groups. It had to come in, we tried it, but it got cut. It was one of the things that I was very annoyed about in the coalition. I should have rebelled on it, but I waited.

We have to try to get something else that encourages the link from school to club, and to keep that going. If you only take your sporting activity in educational circumstances, in the majority of cases you stop when you leave those educational institutions. The link between ages 16, 18, and 21—when people drop out of sport—is incredibly well-established. We have to make sure that people carry on. If we get a reply here saying that school sport is wonderful and we are doing far more of it, it makes absolutely no difference if you stop when you leave school; you might as well have not bothered.

There is also the fact that we know it ups grades. It is weird that we do not actually think about this and push it forward; possibly because the Department for Education and at least one former Secretary of State for Education really did not get the idea at all. We have to establish this and make sure that it goes across and carries on.

The noble Lords, Lord Hayward and Lord Hampton, gave very focused examples of the fact that, once you get into a small club, you build a community—hopefully a community for life. Noble Lords would never guess that I am an old rugby player, still turning out for the parliamentary team. The description is “a life in rugby when you are close to death”—but, let us face it, physiotherapists have to eat as well. I go back to the small club I started with, which was then the Lakenham Hewett Old Boys, from the Hewett School in Norwich. It was a community club that has had to merge again, which tells another story, and is now Lakenham Union. There, I have a group of friends who will be with me for life. The same is true of other clubs I have played for, but that is the one I started with and where I had my last game in a league structure. If you can create that, you have something which you can go back to, and somewhere where you can use those skills and encourage people coming up to believe that they have a future.

All sports have a similar structure to this. Rugby is one of the property-owning sports, where buying your own clubhouse, or at least running, it is encouraged. Cricket follows on. If you encourage this and work hard at it, you have an asset which can go out to the rest of the community. Will the Minister please give us an idea of what the Government are doing to encourage this? Local government has a lot of this responsibility, but it is skint at the moment. How are we encouraging people to take on this great social asset and push it forward? It is something through which you can interact with your community. We have to encourage this link and encourage clubs’ survival by pushing new players through. Veterans’ teams are all very good, but they are not the future.

How are we going to encourage this? How are we going to make sure that we have that asset—that point at which we can interact? There are many examples of what sports clubs can do and of good sporting practice, but one which builds on what the noble Lord, Lord Hampton, did is the wonderful rugby union project, Tackle London. It gets youngsters to interact with that sport. The odd thing about rugby is that it seems to be growing in popularity in the female community at a phenomenal rate. More than half the participants in this project are female.

In the coaching department, it is very good at providing a stable base for people who have problems. The acronym is ACEs: adverse childhood experiences. Other sports have their strengths and weaknesses, but rugby’s strength is that it is very structured, with a central figure who is reliable and who is there—often a volunteer who is turning up because they like it. They will be very reliable. They are building into their club and its structure. When you get that kind of person, the response is that people keep coming back: they are a stable centre. You can start to build

the kind of community that we have all been talking about, and you can get something that builds up with it.

If we are to encourage these voluntary groups—yes, these are voluntary groups—to come in and make sure that they are supporting groups outside, such as schools or other educational establishments, we need to have the support and structure from government to allow it to happen. It should be local government, but if it cannot afford to take on things such as making sure that your new clubhouse is built on a bus route, central government will have to do so.

Think about it: we have built and developed a wonderful new clubhouse, but we have put it three miles down the road. Can you think of a better way to get rid of your junior teams? Mum and dad have to drive them—but what if mum and dad do not have a second car, or even one car? You have to make sure there is access. So central government will have to push, local government will have to listen and somebody will have to make sure that the money is there for either the continuing bus route or the new bus route that gets you back from training as well as to it—and remember, this is voluntary activity, so it has to be after work.

Can the Government tell us exactly what their attitude will be to encourage amateur sports clubs—the social bedrock of many communities—to function properly and deliver these benefits to society? If we do not do that, we will miss something that, when all is said and done, is rather more important than who you cheer for on the odd Saturday or Wednesday afternoon.

5.01 pm

Baroness Thornton (Lab): My Lords, I first congratulate my noble friend Lord Wood on initiating this debate and my noble friends Lords Shamash and Lord Hannett on choosing to make their maiden speeches in this important debate.

My dear and noble friend Lord Shamash has demonstrated what a great addition he will be to our debates in your Lordships' House, particularly with his experience of working with the most deprived people in our communities and with his expertise on electoral law.

I say to my noble friend Lord Hannett that I am a former member of USDAW, because I worked for Co-op for 12 years; it was a great trade union to be a member of. I am particularly pleased to welcome him to our House, because he has a great record of championing women and issues around low pay, and he will be a great addition to our debates. I note that Everton have not been relegated this season, despite the odd problem I am told they have had.

I am grateful to the many organisations and the Library for their briefings, which I have read and of which I have taken some notice, occasionally.

This has been a stimulating debate. Was it too football orientated? Football looms large in our nation, with clubs contributing billions to the economy, generating substantial social value, which many noble Lords mentioned, and otherwise capturing the national

imagination. I join with my right honourable friend Thangam Debbonaire MP, who said at Second Reading of the Football Governance Bill in the Commons:

“The prize could be greater financial sustainability across the whole football pyramid, and, crucially, fans having a greater say in how their clubs are run. It could be those things, but it is up to us to make sure that it is. That is what fans deserve, and what Labour has called for in our last three election manifestos”.—[*Official Report*, Commons, 23/4/24; col. 837.]

In line with everybody confessing their football teams, I probably need to note that my husband is a passionate Leeds United supporter, so in our household I fear there is some tension, with the playoffs looming.

We are all united in our recognition of the importance and love of sport in the life of our nation, and this debate recognises that in abundance. It has not actually been dominated by football; we have heard about many other sports. My noble friend Lady Nye talked about golf, the noble Lord, Lord Hampton, about cricket, the noble Lord, Lord Hayward, about rugby and my noble friend Lord Drayson about motorsports. However, I join my noble friend Lord Wood in saying that it is worrying that there was a report today that three in five adults in England say that extreme weather events are impacting their ability to be physically active. Can the Minister say whether the government schemes recognise the particular challenges raised by climate change, including new and increased pressures on our health service?

I will talk a little about social enterprises, co-operatives and charities and their role in sport and in sports centres. I declare an interest as the founding chair and patron of Social Enterprise UK and an associate of Social Business International. As a Labour and Co-op Party member, I am committed to and interested in the role that democracy, ownership and community-based organisations can play in bringing access and inclusivity at a local level. The Labour and Co-operative parties have a long history of supporting fans on this issue. In fact, it was under the last Labour Government, in 2007, that we founded the fan ownership organisation Supporters Direct and campaigns for further funding and resources to support increased fan ownership.

In this capacity as a passionate advocate for charities, social enterprises and co-operatives, I have been a supporter of GLL since it was founded in 1993 as the first social enterprise operating leisure centres in Greenwich, taking over its leisure services, which were about to be sold off or closed down. As many will know, GLL operates under the name Better. It is an independent charitable social enterprise. Across the country it operates 230 leisure centres and swimming pools, 50 libraries, and world-class sporting venues such as Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, the London Aquatics Centre and Copper Box Arena at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. It runs numerous children's centres, recreation grounds, spas, ice rinks and other spaces, making it the UK's largest leisure provider. The point is that it is community based and community owned, does not serve shareholders and is not going anywhere. During the pandemic it turned itself around on a shilling to support its local communities, and we should value that.

[BARONESS THORNTON]

Better is not alone: there are hundreds of other social enterprise leisure services in the UK. Therefore, I ask the Minister: given the pressures on and under-resourcing of local government when budgets are so stressed, how can we ensure that these important community facilities continue to be the sort of places people want to go to?

It is important in these debates to pay tribute to those who make such a huge contribution to our sporting life in this country, particularly the volunteers. As one of the staff in the office said to me in preparation for this debate:

“One of my cousins’ husbands is a football coach and he gives up most of his Saturdays because he loves working with the kids and has thick enough skin to tolerate comments from parents. There’s no pay and very little thanks, but him and others keep kids fit, healthy and happy, rather than getting up to no good”.

There are hundreds of thousands of volunteers like this, and we owe them our thanks. They often make the difference, in that a young person has a trusted adult who introduces them to the joy of sporting activity. That also raises the question of coaching in the community being even more important, in the context of PE being cut back in our schools. Have HMG been assessing the impact of the reduction in timetabled PE hours?

I turn to the challenges of equality and access, because as well as being the DCMS spokesperson I am the women and equalities spokesperson in your Lordships’ House. As a Yorkshirewoman, I am deeply ashamed about the racism exposed in the Yorkshire cricket club in recent times. However, I was not surprised. I grew up in Manningham, in Bradford, in the 1960s and 1970s, where there were boys playing cricket in the streets and parks. They knew, and my schoolmates knew, that they would never play for Yorkshire, however good they became, because they were from Caribbean, Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi families, who had come to Yorkshire to work in our mills and hospitals and drive our buses. Even those who were born in Yorkshire would not be chosen. It took until 1992 for the first non-white player to play for Yorkshire.

What subsequently happened to non-white players is a shaming and well-known story, which came out when Azeem Rafiq described the racist abuse and bullying he faced during his two tenures at the club. What is also profoundly depressing is that racism still lurks in the Yorkshire cricket club, despite everything. Yorkshire was docked points and fined last year by an independent commission appointed by the England and Wales Cricket Board after admitting to failing on four charges, including a failure to address and take adequate action against racist and discriminatory language. It is time for this to stop. Race, colour and religion should be irrelevant for our cricket team in Yorkshire, which should be a beacon reflecting the best players in our diverse and rich communities.

The excellent Kick It Out campaign was set up to fight racism in football in 1993, and in 1997 it expanded to tackle all forms of discrimination. It does an excellent job. It says,

“right now we’re here to put an end to every form of discrimination. We won’t stop until it stops”.

As we know, there is still work to be done on the terraces and in the clubs.

I thank Women in Sport for its excellent brief for this debate, with its description of the challenges and proposals for change. The headline message is that sport has an overwhelmingly positive impact on the health—including mental health—and well-being of everyone who takes part, but too many girls and women are being excluded from that positive impact. No one should be excluded from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport. It is deeply unfair on women and girls, and a huge missed opportunity for society.

The role of the Lionesses is huge, and I feel tearful with joy and admiration at their journey and the impact that they have. It is a matter of personal celebration that my 10 year-old granddaughter plays football at school. She is in the squad and competes rather well in Camden—in fact, better than the boys’ team. But 1.3 million girls drop out of sport between primary and secondary school.

I wish the noble Lord, Lord Hayward, all the best in the Bingham Cup in Rome next week. His record of championing and founding the Kings Cross Steelers is of huge benefit for everybody in rugby and for gay rights. I am proud to know him as a friend.

Today, the leader of my party, the right honourable Keir Starmer MP, announced the first steps we will take, if we form the next Government, to begin a decade of national renewal. Given the importance of sport in our national life and our well-being, and given that the last Labour Government won the Olympic Games for our nation, who knows how the next generation of young people will benefit and what we can achieve? Watch this space.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay) (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Wood of Anfield, for securing this excellent debate and the brilliant way in which he kicked it off.

I congratulate and welcome the two noble Lords who made their maiden speeches; we were delighted to hear from them both. The noble Lord, Lord Hannett of Everton, already has the measure of the less partisan debates that we have in your Lordships’ House, with his carefully judged and diplomatic comments on the fraught politics of Liverpool derbies. He spoke proudly and powerfully about the community work undertaken by Everton Football Club. The noble Lord, Lord Shamash, gave us some red-blue clashes, but only in connection with the football clubs of Manchester. He also gave us a rare example of a maiden speech from a life Peer that was able to refer to his noble kinsmen and to some 19th-century lineage. We enjoyed both speeches and look forward to hearing from both noble Lords in the future.

Millions of people across the country play, watch and enjoy sport every day. As noble Lords mentioned, it is central to our national identity and to the identities of communities across the country. The benefits of participating in sport and physical activity are well known: an active life is a happier, healthier and more

prosperous life. Being active promotes individual well-being and improves both our physical and mental health. It was good to hear both mentioned in the contributions today.

Being active reduces loneliness, fosters social cohesion and strengthens our communities. A more physically active nation can help to ease the pressure on front-line services such as our National Health Service, and research commissioned by Sport England shows that, for every £1 invested in community sport and physical activity, there is a return of almost £4 in wider social and economic value. I was glad that the Motion that the noble Lord brought before us focused on both the social and economic contribution that sport makes to society.

That is why His Majesty's Government are committed to ensuring that everyone, no matter their age, background or ability, is able to play sport and be active. A robust and high-performing sport sector is also immensely valuable to our economy, contributing almost £49 billion a year in gross value added and providing over half a million jobs.

The government sport strategy *Get Active*, published last summer, sets out our ambition to build a more active nation and our vision to ensure that the sector can thrive in the years ahead. It commits us to helping 2.5 million more adults and 1 million more children meet the Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines by 2030. In addition to this national ambition, we have also committed to specific goals aimed at groups of people identified as among the least active. *Get Active* also sets out our desire to ensure that our country has a sport and physical activity sector which is efficient, resilient, financially robust and environmentally sustainable and which effectively protects and supports everyone who wants to play sport.

While my department holds the remit for sport, it is the responsibility of many departments and organisations across government and beyond to support that shared ambition to shift the dial on physical activity. That is why we have set up the National Physical Activity Taskforce, to bring together government departments, the sport sector and independent experts, to deliver co-ordinated and innovative policies that will encourage people to be more active. Regular physical activity can help prevent and manage over 20 chronic conditions and diseases, including some cancers, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and depression, vitally easing the pressure on our health services. Physical inactivity is associated with one in six deaths in the UK and is estimated to cost the UK £7.4 billion annually, including about £1 billion to the NHS alone. Increasing physical activity can therefore deliver cost savings for the health and care system as well as the obvious benefits to the lives of individual people.

In England, one in three children leaving primary school is overweight or obese, with one in five living with obesity. In total, obesity costs the National Health Service around £6.5 billion a year. With a direct link between a lack of physical activity and obesity, there is a clear benefit to encouraging physical activity in our children, particularly, as noble Lords mentioned, if these habits are maintained into adulthood. Research

suggests that active adolescents who maintain this good habit into adulthood have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, and better mental health.

We provide the majority of support for grass-roots sport through our arm's-length body, Sport England, which receives £323 million in funding from the Exchequer and the National Lottery each year. Sport England's work is focused on tackling disparities in participation and increasing opportunities for those in greatest need. One of Sport England's partners is the Active Partnerships network, which exists to create a healthier nation by funding and enabling levelling-up opportunities for participation in sport across the country.

At least 75% of Sport England investment is being committed to areas of the country with the lowest levels of physical activity and social outcomes. It funds work spanning established sports such as football and netball, as well as newer sports and activities such as padel, dance and BMX, which extend their reach to wider audiences. We will continue to monitor how money is spent, to gather data to show its impact at a local level and to work with Sport England to include specific key performance indicators to decrease inactivity, particularly among underrepresented groups.

We heard from noble Lords about a range of sports. The noble Baroness, Lady Nye, gave a powerful case study of golf. I am pleased to say that one of the special advisers with whom I had the pleasure of working at DCMS, Mr Robert Oxley, now works for the R&A doing great work to champion many of the benefits that the noble Baroness extolled in her contribution. My noble friend Lord Hayward spoke very powerfully about the value of sports teams—to everybody, including marginalised groups. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, I wish all those taking part in the Bingham Cup in Rome next weekend all the best.

I was very glad that the noble Lord, Lord Drayson, mentioned motorsports, including Formula 1, which is the sport that I follow most keenly. Fans across the UK were delighted to see Lando Norris secure his first win, in Miami. We hope that it is the first of many. I was glad that the noble Lord also mentioned Earl Howe, winner of Le Mans and inaugural president of the British Racing Drivers' Club, which still owns and operates Silverstone, the home of the British Grand Prix. I hasten to add that this was the fifth Earl, not my noble friend the current Deputy Leader of the House, whose own achievements are manifold.

The Government are particularly focused on how we can support our children and young people to be more active. Participation in school sport has significant well-being benefits, improving young people's mood and confidence, as noble Lords noted, as well as having a positive impact on their work and behaviour in school. The Government want all school pupils to have access to high-quality PE, school sport and physical activities. Quite simply, experiences in school have a significant impact on young people and can inspire a lifelong habit of being physically active.

PE is a compulsory subject in the national curriculum from key stage 1 to key stage 4. It may be the only exposure that some young people get to organised physical activity. As my noble friend Lady Sater mentioned, the Government continue to fund primary

[LORD PARKINSON OF WHITLEY BAY]

PE through the sport premium. Last year, we confirmed over £600 million of investment in the PE and sport premium for this academic year and next, helping primary schools to deliver high-quality PE and sport provision for their pupils.

Alongside community sports facilities, facilities on school sites represent an important resource for pupils and their families. Last year, the Government confirmed that up to £57 million was being made available to support schools to open their sporting facilities beyond the core day, at weekends and in school holidays. As of last month, over 1,400 schools across England are taking part in the programme, and funding has been targeted where it will have the most positive impact.

The Government also support sport and physical activity outside the school term through the Department for Education's £200 million investment in the holiday activities and food programme. Last summer, that programme reached over 680,000 children and young people across each of the 153 local authorities in England.

The Government are acting to deliver the right facilities that communities everywhere need across the UK. Our direct investment is delivered mainly through three major programmes. The £327 million multisport grassroots facilities programme provides funding to create and upgrade up to 8,000 football and multisport facilities across the UK. It is not just football focused; 40% of our projects will deliver facilities that can support multiple sports. The noble Lord, Lord Wood, referred to tennis courts in his opening speech; our £21.9 million park tennis court renovation programme aims to renovate over 3,000 public park tennis courts to a playable standard, across Scotland, England and Wales. Our £60.8 million swimming pool support fund supports public swimming pool providers in England with immediate cost pressures to make their facilities sustainable in the longer term.

The Government recently announced an investment of £35 million to extend the England and Wales Cricket Board's primary and secondary schools programme and to deliver the construction of 16 new cricket domes in places connected with the hosting of the women's and men's T20 World Cup. This investment builds on existing investment from Sport England to support children from lower socioeconomic groups to get active. Further details on the location of the new domes and the targeting of funding will be announced in due course.

The Government proudly have a manifesto commitment to maintain the UK's world-leading reputation for hosting major sporting events, which we know deliver a range of benefits across the whole country. For example, we have just published the final evaluation report into the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, which concludes that around £1.2 billion of GVA was added to the UK economy as a result of those Games. There was a 6% increase in visitor numbers to Birmingham that year and a 27% increase in foreign direct investment projects in the West Midlands. I commend the leadership of the outgoing Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, for that and in many other regards.

The Lionesses' fantastic performance at the European Women's Championship two years ago truly inspired the nation, with a record-breaking crowd of over 87,000 people attending the final and more than 23 million people across the UK tuning into the BBC's coverage. It is essential that we take the opportunity to build on the success and legacy of the team to secure a long-lasting and sustainable future for the women's game.

A UK Sport report found that sporting events staged here in 2022, excluding the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, had a direct economic impact of £132 million, supported 1,600 jobs and had a 6:1 return on investment. The same UK Sport report also found that 83% of Britons are proud that the UK hosts major sporting events, with 70% saying that watching or attending major sporting events has a positive impact on their happiness. This year sees the return of the UEFA Champions League final to Wembley, as well as the World Indoor Athletics Championships in Glasgow, which took place in March, and next year sees the Women's Rugby World Cup coming to our shores.

The noble Lord, Lord Monks, asked about the listed events regime, which exists to ensure that as wide an audience as possible can access and enjoy sport. That, of course, has to be balanced against the ability of rights holders to reinvest in their sport at every level to encourage more people to play it. As the noble Baroness, Lady Grey-Thompson, advertised, she has amendments to the Media Bill on this topic, which we will debate on Monday afternoon.

This is also an Olympic year, of course. UK Sport has invested £382 million of funding from the Exchequer and the National Lottery in the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games. The investment of public money in Olympic and Paralympic sport allows UK athletes who have the potential to achieve at the highest level on the world stage to train full time and focus fully on achieving their sporting potential. We support UK Sport's ambition for our teams to remain in the top five of the medal tables of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris this summer.

As well as making us all so proud, Olympic and Paralympic sport drives economic growth. In 2017, the GVA of Olympic and Paralympic sports in the UK was almost £25 billion. This means that Olympic and Paralympic sport generates 1.3% of GVA, making it a larger contributor to the UK economy than, for instance, agriculture, forestry and fishing. Two-thirds of the British public say they have been inspired by the success of our Olympic and Paralympic teams, and 40% of these people say that, as a result of being inspired, they have been motivated to do more physical activity themselves. Success in Olympic and Paralympic sport is a superb advert for the UK on the world stage, and our athletes' success showcases the UK at its very best.

Of course, getting moving is not confined to playing sport. As my noble friend Lord Effingham set out, people can get fitter and healthier through increased walking and cycling in their daily lives. This year, Active Travel England announced £101 million of government funding for high-quality walking and cycling routes. This will unlock sustainable transport options

for millions more people across England and give people the choice to travel safely on foot or by bicycle. The importance of active travel in increasing physical activity in children is highlighted in the school sport and activity action plan, which was updated in March. For example, the Bikeability programme has already helped over 4 million children in schools and community settings to learn how to cycle safely. Through our national physical activity taskforce, we are committed to supporting the Department for Education, the Department for Transport and Active Travel England to deliver initiatives to increase active and safe travel to school, such as the Daily Mile, which my noble friend mentioned.

I echo the words the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, gave in tribute to the volunteers who facilitate so much sporting and physical activity across the nation—my noble friend Lord Hayward mentioned his referee's tie. All achievements in sport are facilitated by the coaches and trainers, and the mums, dads and guardians who provide the lifts, wash the kits and cheer from the sidelines. It is right that their contribution should be remembered today.

In expressing my gratitude to noble Lords who have taken part in this debate, I note that I was struck by the unanimity of spirit: I think we all agreed that sport and physical activity forms an essential part of our society and is vital to improving the health and well-being of the nation. I hope that my response this afternoon has demonstrated that His Majesty's Government remain committed to helping make physical activity an essential part of everyone's daily life. The more active we are, the stronger and healthier our communities and economy, and the more prosperous our society. I am very grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Wood, for reminding us and others of that today.

5.29 pm

Lord Wood of Anfield (Lab): My Lords, I will not detain us much longer. I thank all noble Lords for a really stimulating debate, and thank the Minister for a comprehensive reply. I also thank my two new noble friends Lord Hannett and Lord Shamash. My noble friend Lord Hannett talked a lot about Everton in the

Community, which does fantastic work, as he pointed out. It is good to hear more about Everton—as Bill Shankly said, the third-best team in Liverpool, behind Liverpool and Liverpool reserves.

I have learned a lot from various noble colleagues' contributions today. We were all quite moved by the noble Lord, Lord Hayward; I did not know anything about the Bingham Cup, so I thank him very much for that. We learned from my noble friend Lady Nye that we should all take up golf if we want to live five years longer. The noble Lord, Lord Drayson, also reminded us that sport can be a catalyst for innovation in all sorts of ways, but particularly in motorsport, as he so eloquently set out.

The Minister said at the end that we are a sporting country. We know we are a sporting country, and we know about the passion that volunteers bring to sport, which my noble friend Lady Thornton talked about. We know, if we are parents, how much sport matters to our children. We know how much the sports that we follow matter to us all. Without being partisan about it, however, we do know that, particularly in the last 14 years, the passion we have as a country for sport has become more and more distant from the adequacy of the facilities that deliver community sports. Community sports facilities and sports clubs, and school sport, have borne more of the brunt of incremental cuts than a lot of areas of our public service landscape. I hope we can work across parties to change that in the years ahead.

We have a summer of sport coming up; we always have summers of sport, but we have a particularly amazing summer of sport coming up, with the Olympics and Paralympics, the Euros—of course, we wish England and Scotland great success in that—the men's T20 World Cup and lots of other things. Let us resolve, across parties, to try to use this extraordinary summer of sport to make good on a lot of the issues and policy priorities we have talked about today, in delivering after the summer.

Motion agreed.

House adjourned at 5.31 pm.