

Vol. 839
No. 5



Friday
19 July 2024

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

ORDER OF BUSINESS

King's Speech <i>Debate (3rd Day)</i>	133
--	-----

Lords wishing to be supplied with these Daily Reports should give notice to this effect to the Printed Paper Office.

No proofs of Daily Reports are provided. Corrections for the bound volume which Lords wish to suggest to the report of their speeches should be clearly indicated in a copy of the Daily Report, which, with the column numbers concerned shown on the front cover, should be sent to the Editor of Debates, House of Lords, within 14 days of the date of the Daily Report.

*This issue of the Official Report is also available on the Internet at
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-07-19>*

The abbreviation [V] after a Member's name indicates that they contributed by video call.

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

No party affiliation is given for Members serving the House in a formal capacity or for the Lords spiritual.

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Lords 2024,
*this publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence,
which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.*

House of Lords

Friday 19 July 2024

10 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of London.

Oaths and Affirmations

10.06 am

Several noble Lords took the oath or made the solemn affirmation, and signed an undertaking to abide by the Code of Conduct.

Arrangement of Business

Announcement

10.08 am

Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Lab Co-op): My Lords, before we resume the debate on the Motion for an humble Address, I thought it would be helpful to the House to remind all Back-Bench speakers that the advisory speaking time for today's debate is five minutes. This means that, when the Clock has reached four minutes, noble Lords should start making their concluding remarks, and, at five minutes, their time is up. This shows respect and courtesy to the House and, by sticking to it, we will rise at around 3.30 pm today. I have asked the Whips on the Government Benches, if necessary—I hope that it will not be—to intervene if Members go over the allotted time.

King's Speech

Debate (3rd Day)

Principal topics for debate: Creating opportunities—education, early years and healthcare

10.09 am

Moved on Wednesday 17 July by Lord Reid of Cardowan

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty as follows:

“Most Gracious Sovereign—We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled, beg leave to thank Your Majesty for the most gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament”.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Baroness Smith of Malvern) (Lab) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, it is an enormous honour to deliver my maiden speech in introducing today's debate on creating opportunity through education and skills, early years, children's social care and healthcare. When I first entered the other place, I determined to spend a considerable amount of time in the Chamber. My sudden and surprising appointment as a Minister last week, with my introduction only yesterday, means that I have not been able to absorb quite so much here. I can

assure noble Lords that I have given it a go with the methods available to me, but I am in absolutely no doubt that YouTube, and even the excellent parliamentary TV, cannot possibly emulate the vivid reality that I am now experiencing. I look forward to learning quickly, not just about the ways of working in this place but also from the enormous range of experience that I know rests with your Lordships.

In my ministerial portfolio, however, I am blessed with some prior experience. It is 25 years, almost to the day, since I first entered the Department for Education as a Schools Minister. In that role, I could reflect on my previous teaching career of 11 years, in Worcestershire schools and at Worcester Sixth Form College, and on the experiences of those close to me. I am surrounded by educators: both my parents were teachers, my father being both a head teacher and the principal of an adult education college; my sister has just finished a distinguished teaching career, while my son is just starting his; and my partner is a senior university academic. Colleagues have told me that I can expect forensic and informed but civil challenge in this Chamber. As noble Lords can see, I also get that at home—just without the civil bit.

Of course, I will miss the other roles that I have played since my last ministerial career. I chaired the Jo Cox Foundation, where I am particularly grateful to the wonderful staff and the board as well as to both the noble Baroness, Lady Bertin, and my noble friend Lord Coaker, who chaired our Civility Commission to tackle the abuse and intimidation that blights our democracy. I also chaired the Sandwell Children's Trust, where I worked with committed social workers and other staff safeguarding the most vulnerable children and families. Of course, there is also the “For The Many” podcast, which I have been doing with LBC's Iain Dale for seven years—starting long before others jumped on the bandwagon of doing a podcast with two opposing political views.

As the former chair of two internationally recognised health trusts, in University Hospitals Birmingham and Barts Health, and of the Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust—the most improved NHS trust last year—I will listen with interest to both my noble friend Lady Merron and other noble Lords, as we discuss the challenges for our healthcare and the commitment from this Government to mend a broken system.

Before I go further, I pay tribute to my predecessor, the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, who has shown a tireless dedication to reducing the number of children in underperforming schools. I thank her for her work and wish her well.

We will create a new era of opportunity, especially for those who have seen nothing but dead ends and closed doors—like the parents who are struggling to pay for childcare; like the children whose life chances are damaged through persistent absence from school; or like the workers who are sidelined by technological whirlwinds that have left them wondering what has happened to their jobs. Whatever the source, we will work to break down these barriers to opportunity and deliver greater economic growth, better health and education excellence for everyone.

[BARONESS SMITH OF MALVERN]

I will start with the most important people in society, the youngest and the most vulnerable: our children. A children's well-being Bill will ensure that the first years of a child's life give them the best start possible. We will ensure consistently high and rising standards across the whole education system. Early years are a vital period for children to flourish and they are not going to do that if they are not in school or able to concentrate when they get there. This is why we will introduce universal breakfast clubs in every primary school for all children. This will help children learn, help get them into school and into school on time. Funded breakfast clubs can help boost attendance, and we know that persistent absence can cripple a child's learning and long-term life chances. It will also help their families cope with cost of living pressures. On that, families will be further supported to make ends meet by ensuring the affordability of school uniforms, building on the good work started by my noble friend Lady Lister of Burtersett.

We want to see more children in school for more of the time but, wherever they are, children need to be kept safe and have the best chance of learning. So we will create registers of children not in school and expect local authorities to maintain them. We will also expect parents to do their bit by keeping local authorities informed. Your Lordships have already shared your thoughts on children not in school in the previous Schools Bill. It has greatly strengthened the work that we are doing now and I thank you. There will also be a duty on local authorities to provide support to families who choose to educate children at home. In this way, fewer children will slip under the radar when they are not in school and more children will reach their potential through suitable education.

We will make changes to the regulation and inspection of independent schools, including by providing Ofsted with stronger powers to investigate the offence of operating an unregistered school. We will move to enable serious teacher misconduct to be further investigated.

We are committed to the highest possible standards for every child, wherever they are or whatever their circumstances. This is especially important for children with special educational needs and disabilities. I know that there is a great deal of interest and expertise in this place, and I can assure you that I will be looking to harness your collective wisdom as we drive the change that is needed.

Many academy trusts have vastly improved school standards, particularly in the poorest-performing schools in the country. We want to work collaboratively with them to make decisions that best enable schools to support their pupils. In the case of the curriculum and qualified teachers, we think it is right that we require a high-quality national curriculum to be taught in all schools by qualified teachers. We will continue to explore other ways to raise school standards and improve fairness for every child. Today, we have delivered the Government's commitment to an independent, expert-led review of curriculum and assessment to ensure high standards in the curriculum in England, greater attention to breadth and flexibility, and that no child or young person is left behind.

Our responsibility is greatest where children cannot depend on their own families for their safety and opportunity. We will extend the protections that exist for the most vulnerable children and those in care. I know from my recent experience chairing the Sandwell Children's Trust that, despite the excellent work of our children's social care workforce, we are not doing well enough for the most vulnerable children and families. In particular, it is difficult to find the right, loving places for children to live when they cannot stay with their family. This is devastating for children, but this market failure has also driven enormous cost for children's social care. Profiteering in the children's homes market is totally unacceptable and we will crack down on it. We will also strengthen the regulation of the sector and ensure that the people who are working so hard for children in care and those who need our protection get better support. This is part and parcel of making this a fairer society for everyone, where excellence is something for all, not just the most fortunate.

All our missions are driven by the need for economic growth, and it is no secret that growth and the opportunities that flow from it are being held back by a yawning skills gap. Growth and skills go hand in hand, which is why we are building a coherent, joined-up plan for the future. This will be a major focus for me personally: I have taken on the skills, further and higher education brief, and I will be working across government to make sure that we have the commitment and collaboration that we need to drive growth and secure opportunities for all. We will launch "Skills England", which will drive forward the Government's plans to tackle skills shortages and support sustained economic growth. It will unify the skills landscape, bringing together employers, trade unions and training providers to ensure that skills policies align with the broader economic ambitions set out in the Government's industrial strategy. It will be able to identify where skills gaps exist now, what we need for the future and how we can plug those gaps.

Our university sector is one of this country's greatest enablers. It provides opportunities for people to follow their passions and expand their horizons. Through research and teaching, it enables us to challenge our understanding and develop new ideas. In many communities, it provides a vital anchor for wider economic development. Our universities are vital engines for economic growth and opportunity for everybody throughout their lives. I am well aware that many of your Lordships are leaders within the higher education community, and I know how interested and concerned you will be that we have plans to safeguard it for future generations. I will not be shy about seeking your considerable wisdom as we work through our plans to deliver this.

On healthcare, healthy lives are the bedrock of opportunity throughout our lives, and we now have a considerable bank of evidence to guide us in the next steps to take. It is a terrifying thought that in just the time I have been speaking, around 16 people in England will have been admitted to hospital because of smoking. The strengthened tobacco and vapes Bill will be a landmark step in creating a smoke-free UK. It will introduce a progressive smoking ban, gradually ending the sale of tobacco products across the country. When

I was last in government we raised the legal age at which people can be sold cigarettes and banned smoking in pubs and restaurants. We now have the chance to finish the job. Vapes have a key role to play in helping smokers to quit, but where vape manufacturers deliberately target and market vapes at children we will put a stop to such advertising.

Healthy habits that are built in childhood will pay dividends as children get older. Our children need protection and support for the best start in life. More than one in five children in reception class is currently overweight or obese. By year 6, that figure has shot up to one in three, with grave repercussions for their future health and for the NHS. Through the child health action plan, we will cut the amount of TV and online advertising of less healthy food to children and ban the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16s. These measures will contribute to the Government's commitment to raise the healthiest generation of children ever.

Poor mental health can be a massive barrier to opportunity and learning at any age. We are working hard to promote good mental health and well-being for everyone: from the earliest stages, with a specialist mental health professional in every school, and with young futures hubs, which will offer additional access to mental health support workers for young people at a time when they so desperately need that intervention, when they will have to wait too long for other mental health services.

It is a sad fact that rates of detention under the Mental Health Act have nearly doubled since it came into place in 1983, so the mental health Bill will deliver our manifesto commitment to modernise the Mental Health Act. It will give patients greater choice, autonomy, enhanced rights and support, to make sure that everybody is treated with dignity and respect during their treatment.

My professional life has been about ensuring opportunities for learning and for better, safer and healthier lives. I know that this mission is shared by this House. It is an enormous honour to now be able to work alongside your Lordships to ensure that this Government can translate our shared objective into opportunities for all to flourish, and so that all can succeed in their lives, regardless of where they start and the hurdles they need to overcome.

10.23 am

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness for introducing today's important debate on the humble Address. It was a privilege to be present to hear the second King's Speech of the King's reign in your Lordships' House on Wednesday. It is good to see that he is making a good recovery from his recent illness.

I warmly welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, to her place at the Dispatch Box and congratulate her on her excellent maiden speech. She brings a wealth of experience to your Lordships' House through her work as an economics teacher, a local authority councillor, a Member of Parliament, and an Education Minister—and, of course, she can be very proud of the fact that she became the first woman Home Secretary and the third woman to hold one of the great offices of state, after Margaret Thatcher as

Prime Minister and Margaret Beckett as Foreign Secretary. Finally, I think I am right in saying that the noble Baroness is the first at the Dispatch Box to have appeared on "Strictly Come Dancing". This will help her to be fleet of foot at the Dispatch Box, to pirouette around the departmental civil servants, and to get into the rhythm of this great place. For my side, I do hope I will not step on her toes.

We on this side of the House are proud of our track record while in government in relation to education. Our children are now the best readers in the West, ranked fourth globally in the PIRLS survey, and ninth in maths in the TIMSS survey—a marked improvement on the position in 2010. We have seen 90% of our schools judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted, and our free schools programme delivered quality, innovation and great education for pupils, particularly in disadvantaged areas and for those with SEND.

It is so important to have stability in skills policy. Apprenticeships are unrecognisable now in their breadth and quality compared with 2010, a time when some people doing apprenticeships did not even know what they were. They are real engines of social mobility and directly address our skills shortage. We have real concerns about the Government's proposals to reform the apprenticeship levy. First, we think that this approach risks diluting the focus on apprenticeships and halving the number of apprentices. Apprentices are key to addressing our skills gap in the economy, including in our public services. Secondly, there is a real risk that the state ends up funding skills training that employers would otherwise have funded themselves. How will the Government avoid this?

Finally, we were determined to support as many families as possible with access to high-quality, affordable childcare. This is why, in the 2023 Spring Budget, we announced major new investments, providing up to 30 hours of free childcare a week from the age of nine months by September 2025. This translates to over £4 billion of additional funding by 2027-28, and a total of over £8 billion of spending annually on free hours and early education. Will the noble Baroness reassure the House that there is a commitment to stick to our plan?

It gives me and my noble friend Lord Markham great pleasure to welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, to her new role as Health and Social Care Minister—a just reward for her hard work and dedication serving on the Opposition Front Bench in your Lordships' House, as Member of Parliament for Lincoln, as a Government Minister, and as chief executive of the Board of Deputies of British Jews. She is entering a challenging environment. We wish her luck and our constructive support—accompanied, of course, by constructive challenge.

We are pleased to see the continuation of many of our policies, such as the smoke-free Bill and the mental health Bill. I hope and trust that work will continue in other areas where there is broad agreement, such as the long-term workforce plan and implementation of the Cass recommendations. Will the Minister confirm that this is still the case? We hope the Government will continue the work on technology and see this as a major way to take the NHS into the 21st century. App

[LORD EVANS OF RAINOW]

usage is exploding and presents a real way for people to take control of their own health. Artificial intelligence can truly transform in ways we are only just beginning to understand. This will all be fuelled by our NHS data, which is unparalleled in the world and gives us the opportunity to be the Silicon Valley of AI tech here in the UK. Will the Government continue to prioritise these measures?

We will support the Government's focus on waiting lists. We took a lot of action in this space and managed to bear down on some of the longest waiting lists post Covid, but it is a source of frustration that these efforts were hampered by the junior doctor strikes. We wish the Government well in the negotiations with junior doctors and hope that they can reach a settlement without breaking the bank.

Key to this, of course, is NHS productivity. Given the importance of the productivity plan, can the Minister assure us that this process will continue? Another area that is key to productivity and patient care is the capital programme, in particular the new hospital programme. While it is understandable that new Ministers will want to review the programme, it is essential that there is continuity and no loss of momentum. Can the Minister assure us that this review will be undertaken in a timely manner and tell us when we can expect the results?

We also note that very little was said about social care in the King's Speech. We appreciate that this is a very difficult area, but one that I am sure we all agree is crucial to get right for the sake of patients and to free up beds in hospitals. The steps we took in government in providing a career structure and professional qualifications and training programmes are key to making it an attractive profession to work in, but we realise there are challenges around the cost and supply of social care. Given the hot potato this subject represents, a cross-party conversation might be the best way forward. I note that the £86,000 cap on social care is still due to be implemented. Do the Government intend to continue with this implementation?

Finally, and most importantly, we have all agreed for some time that we need to get up stream of the problem and shift resources from treatment in hospitals to investment in primary care and prevention. These are fine statements of intent, but making this happen is often far more difficult. It is often a gutsy move to move money away from hospitals and into primary care. Such moves require a grown-up conversation bolstered by cross-party support. In this vein, I offer our support in having such conversations and moving from statements of intent to firm action. We wish the noble Baroness all the best of British luck in her new position, and we look forward to working with her in the months and years ahead.

10.30 am

Lord Storey (LD): My Lords, I too offer my congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, on her maiden speech. I am sure that the portfolio she will be responsible for is in safe hands. I also thank the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, for her time as Minister; if there was ever an example of service, I think she fits

that bill. I am also looking forward to the valedictory speech from my noble friend Lady Jolly, who joined the Liberals back in 1984 in Devon and Cornwall and has had a distinguished career as our spokesperson on health, social care and defence, and outside interests on the Citizens Advice Bureau and Credit Union. She was on the board of the Diocesan Synod and was interested in regeneration organisations.

I congratulate Labour on its success, and my party looks forward to working with it. I think the things that it has said so far, both in its manifesto and in the King's Speech, broadly accord with many of the things we have been pushing for over the last period. There are a few things missing, and we will highlight those in due course.

The general election created two records. The first record was not for us but, sadly, for the Conservatives, with the lowest share of the vote, at 24%. The second was for the governing party getting only 34% of the vote. I do not want to rub that in, but it shows that there has to be a consensual approach to the way we work. We do that in any case in the House of Lords, so hopefully that will not be a problem.

I will talk first about schools and about teachers. The Government have talked about recruiting an extra 6,500 teachers, which is fine. We need to be clear that these teachers are just for England. Currently there are 20,227 primary and secondary schools, so 6,500 teachers, if my maths is correct, means that they will get 3.1% of the schools.

We have a crisis in our teaching profession at all sorts of levels: we have the highest number of vacancies, the fewest number of people wanting to train as a teacher, and the highest number of teacher shortages in shortage subjects. Those issues need to be addressed urgently.

How do we address those issues? First, we have to make the training of teachers first class. I do not believe that you train a teacher by their doing a 10-week crash course. Does a 10-week crash course look, for example, at a primary teacher understanding child development? Does it look at how teachers can identify special educational needs? We also need to make sure that teachers are properly rewarded for the job—properly paid, properly rewarded, and properly inspected. Over the years, I have been sick to death of hearing the phrase “the workload of teachers”. We never seem to grasp that issue. Let us actually grasp the issue of workload, because that is a problem that teachers and schools face.

Finally, we talk about mental health in schools, and I want to come back to that, but there is also the mental health of teachers and non-teaching staff in schools themselves. Some of the things we do in schools aggravate that mental health issue, whether it is the pressure of SATs or of Ofsted, or of having to do that job with very poor funding.

I now turn to pupils. In many ways, schools are facing a crisis. We have the highest number of pupils missing from our schools, the highest number of pupils being home-educated, the highest number of pupils being unregistered, the highest number of pupils who have been suspended from school, and the highest number of pupils who are permanently suspended

from school. What are we going to do about that? In my and my party's view, no child or young person should go to an unregistered provider in any form. Why? Because unregistered providers are not inspected. Who knows what is going on? There are safeguarding issues. Home educators should be registered, supported by the local authority, and visited by their local authority.

10.35 am

Lord Patel (CB): My Lords, I join other noble Lords in welcoming the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, and congratulate her on her maiden speech. I tease her a little when I say that it was a really apolitical maiden speech. I also extend my congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, on her appointment as Minister of State in the Department of Health and Social Care. I wish her well. I have no doubt that in days to come we will have many opportunities to interact and debate health issues.

In the brief time allocated to me today, I will confine my remarks mostly to issues related to health. I find myself much in support of the proposed areas of legislation that relate to health. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill, with powers to implement it, will deliver huge health gains. More than 80,000 people a year die of diseases related to smoking, from 18 different types of cancers to cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease, pregnancy-related disease, stillbirths and pre-term births. The measures will go a long way to reducing health inequalities. Figures show that there are more than 6 million smokers in the UK today, and more than 100,000 children take up smoking each year. The Government's aim over the years to make the UK a smoke-free country is ambitious but, in my view, worthy.

The proposals to ban the advertising and promotion of vapes are good as far as they go. We will have to wait for details in the legislation. I hope the Government will be bold enough in time to ban vapes altogether. Scientific evidence already shows their high levels of nicotine, and children are taking up vaping; 5% of children now use vapes and 20% have tried vapes. Vapes should be banned as much as tobacco smoking.

At long last, we will now have a Bill to amend mental health. No doubt the noble Baroness, Lady Hollins, will have much to say about that. For my part I welcome it. I hope that the legislation will have robust measures to protect and help particularly children and people with learning disabilities. Importantly, I hope that the legislation will include measures to monitor the impact of the proposed legislation, possibly through the appointment of a commissioner, without us having to amend the Bill. I also hope that the legislation will address funding issues in mental health.

The Government's wish to deliver healthcare closer to home is one that I hope they will pursue with determination, but it cannot be done without the reform of primary and community care, including a greater share of funding going to primary care and community care. This, with legislation related to the devolution of powers more locally, has to be the way forward for providing more care closer to home. We can learn much from countries such as Denmark, where locally managed primary and community health centres deliver much of the healthcare, with 99% patient

satisfaction. There will be much opposition from vested interests to develop such a model. I hope the Government will be bold.

I welcome the Government's commitment in the proposed digital and smart data Bill to allow use of data for medical research. As I have mentioned previously, the lack of legislation to allow the use of health data for scientific research has hindered us in improving the delivery of healthcare, driving innovations, conducting clinical trials, developing new treatments and much more. I hope that the Bill will remedy this.

While all that I have mentioned is positive, we do not yet have plans for the provision of social care or, apart from a promise of more GPs and midwives, a health workforce plan—particularly for the nursing workforce—for a service that by 2035 is likely to employ nearly 10% of the working-age population. Nor is there yet a sustainable funding formula for a service that may well end up costing more than £250 billion by 2035. The NHS for far too long has been a political football subjected to ideologically driven reforms not in the best interests of patients. What we need is long-term political consensus, and I hope the Government might work towards that. Securing political consensus is important given the amount of public money spent on health and adult social care, and so is accountability. Periodic reviews, commissions, parliamentary inquiries et cetera are not the answer. What we need is an independent body, such as an independent office of health and care sustainability, that will hold the Government to account for their funding, plans and long-term use of money.

10.41 am

The Lord Bishop of London: My Lords, it is an honour to respond to the gracious Speech. I welcome the Minister as she joins us in this House at the Dispatch Box. I also thank the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, for her contribution to the House, not just on health and social care; those of us who are female priests and bishops thank her for her support.

I welcome many of the Government's healthcare announcements, especially the two public health legislative measures. I too am glad to see the tobacco and vapes Bill continue. Smoking continues to be one of the leading causes of preventable deaths following the lines of inequality, so bringing forward this Bill will be a significant step forward in our public health agenda. The announcement that the Government will legislate to restrict the advertising of junk food to children and the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks is also welcome. As we have heard, obesity is one of the major health challenges that we face and, again, its impacts are hugely unequal.

The commitment to update the Mental Health Act is long overdue. Mind reminds us that black people are four times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act than white people, and more than 11 times more likely to be the subject of a community treatment order. People living in areas of high deprivation are more than 3.5 times more likely to be detained than those living in least deprived areas. I hope that in reforming the Mental Health Act the Government will pay attention to these inequalities.

[THE LORD BISHOP OF LONDON]

We now have a much better understanding of what contributes to health and well-being, so I welcome many of the announcements which will provide contributions to healthy lives for individuals, and for communities, such as for housing and education. The commitment to ban conversion practices is long overdue. The measures in the employment rights Bill, especially changes to the statutory sick pay system, are key. Taking time off when you are ill is vital to recovery and ongoing participation in the work in our communities.

I also hope that the Government will use the expanded scope of the national curriculum to promote key life skills, such as making financial education a component of PSHE at key stages 1 and 2, as recommended by many financial literacy charities.

My work inside and outside health has led me to believe with increasing certainty that, if we are to reduce health inequalities and the burden on the NHS, faith groups must be involved. Faith observance is highest in the most deprived areas. This means that faith leaders have the potential to provide vital insight and access to those communities least likely to access preventive healthcare. Faith leaders are trusted in their communities and are valuable partners for improving the health of their community. Ensuring that culturally competent services are available to everyone who requires them is vital if this Government are to halve the gap in healthy life expectancy. I hope that this Government will build on the work already undertaken in this area.

However, it is disappointing there is not a single mention of social care in the gracious Speech. The Government acknowledge that the sector is in need of deep reform. We have an ageing population that has more acute and complex needs. People with care and support needs are often unsupported in navigating the system. There are higher costs for councils at a time of restricted budgets. Unpaid carers provide care for their loved ones, sometimes at the expense of their own health, well-being and work. The Government's manifesto commitment to create a national care service is laudable, but requires action. We need a long-term funding settlement for local authorities and a workforce plan for the sector. I fear that without these measures we will not achieve the positive vision of social care, because social care is never an end in itself but is a means by which we can live lives of joy, fulfilment and purpose and contribute to the economic recovery of this country.

I regret the absence of palliative care from the gracious Speech. Reliance on charitable donations means that end-of-life care and provision varies depending on how affluent an area is. The cost of care is not being met, and services are being reduced. In the middle of a growing conversation about alternative options at the end of life, it is imperative that we properly fund palliative care.

Finally, every person we talk about in this Chamber is immensely valuable. We all bear the image of God. I look forward to working with noble Lords across the Chamber to ensure that people who are particularly vulnerable to the effects of inequalities and health inequalities are at the forefront of our thinking.

10.46 am

Baroness Andrews (Lab): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to follow the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of London from the spiritual security and shelter of these Benches. My real regret is that I cannot actually see our Front Bench, but I am very pleased that my noble friends are there and particularly welcome my noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern. I had the pleasure of working with her many years ago, and know that she understands the role of this House. She made a brilliant maiden speech. I am also very sorry that we are losing the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, who has made a real contribution to health and social care in this House.

The new Government have set a blistering place but, more importantly, have changed the tone of government. They have already begun the business of rebuilding trust and belief in public services. They have an audacious focus on the long term. What they demonstrate to me is the value that they put on the skills of the care economy, the invisible scaffolding that underpins the real economy and enables growth. The King's Speech made an intergenerational commitment to child and adult health and social services that is about much more than money. It is about skills and investment in aspiration and well-being.

Taking the long view means addressing the failure of the past 14 years to recognise the structural faults in the care economy by valuing skills, whether in child or adult services, and putting training and careers in place. The King's Speech does not duck the difficult issues. In 1945, women stayed at home and looked after families from children to adults, from cradle to grave. Nearly 80 years later we have an ageing and deeply unequal society. We now need a social contract between the generations and between the state, the family and the individual. We need to reset that social contract.

The King's Speech and the announcements made alongside it signify that. The skills for England Bill, the children's well-being Bill, the pledge to recreate the salary review for school support workers and, for me, above all, the commitment to a fair pay agreement for adult social care workers bring a new dimension to how we see the contribution as well as the aspiration of those who teach, support and care for the young and old. The children's well-being Bill recognises that children cannot learn if they are hungry, have special needs, or if the curriculum and assessment system is not fit for their future. Breakfast clubs will make a huge difference to hungry children, but let us add enrichment and learning in that extra part of the day.

The appointment of Kevan Collins is a wonderful step forward. I hope this Government will enable him to realise his ambitions for the whole child, so damaged during the Covid years, that he was not able to put in place. I hope that will also signal a commitment to an out-of-school learning programme just like the one the last Labour Government put in place, which was such a success for children.

This debate is about change. People working in childcare settings and adult social care have been waiting years for it. These professions attract the best people, mostly women, but we know too well that they

cannot recruit and retain staff. Early years providers are closing across the country because, despite the best efforts of the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, whom we all respected, the last Government did not address the reality of what rapid and unfunded expansion would mean. The children who lose out, as ever, are the poorest. Perhaps I might suggest that the Minister meets urgently with the Early Years Alliance to get its knowledge and experience of where the priorities should lie. There are still 150,000 vacancies in adult social care. Women's jobs seem to be worth less, with the minimum wage or less, low status and no career. That is where change needs to start—and it will with an unequivocal commitment to a fair pay agreement for adult social care.

To build for the long term, on Wednesday the Skills for Care organisation produced a workforce plan for adult social care to match the NHS plan. It is different because it is coherent, it is owned by the whole sector and it allocates responsibilities. Let us act on that and let it develop the relational skills that are central to the best quality of care. Let us acknowledge and act on the strong value we get from unpaid carers, not least with an amnesty for those who, through no fault of their own, have fallen into the debt trap. If there is to be a royal commission, let it be swift; there is no reason why it cannot be.

We have the longest prescription and the best set of what we can do—and we have a brilliant new Minister in Stephen Kinnock, who knows from experience what care means and has the skills and energy. This is the King's Speech we have been waiting a very long time for.

10.52 am

Baroness Jolly (LD) (Valedictory Speech): My Lords, the last year has seen health and social care rise up the agenda of the country. Most of my professional life was spent in the far south-west of England. I taught maths for over 15 years and became an early champion of IT in schools. In 1997 I was appointed as a non-exec director of a NHS primary care trust. I was a lay inspector for the Commission for Health Improvement and I was proud to be first chair of the Committee for Community Nursing. In the 1990s I was appointed to the board of an NHS trust providing community services across north Cornwall.

Now we are fortunate to have both local authorities and the NHS working together to provide health and care. Despite legislation introduced in the last 15 years, we need to take a close look at the state of care for older people and for those with a learning disability. I undertook the role of chair of Hft, an organisation working all across England that cares for people with a learning disability. Of all the roles I have had, this was the most rewarding. I made many friends from the Hft board and I am grateful for the insight I had into the world of adults with a learning disability.

I echo the words of the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of London: the challenges faced by the health services are extreme. Primary health services need much greater support than they currently receive. Emergency services are stretched beyond their limit,

posing risks for those who need urgent care. We also need a much greater focus on community healthcare. I wish the Government the best as they begin to make these challenges. The health service is the heart of our nation, and it is imperative that we begin to solve some of these deep-rooted issues.

Moving to a safety issue, I am particularly proud of the role I had with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. I was its president for some time and enjoyed working with its CEO, Errol Taylor. Working together and with many Members across this House, we set up legislation to embed the dimensions of stairs. Many were helpful in getting this done and will be grateful for this. British Standard 5395 is now embedded in the building regulations for new-build houses, and many lives will be saved. We needed the help of Ministers and businesses to get this done.

Finally, I offer my thanks to the staff of the House and Members across the House. I am extremely grateful for the support they have given me while I have been here. I know that those colleagues who remain will remain committed to the work we do here and getting legislation right. I am personally delighted that I leave when there is a newly enlarged group of 72 Lib Dem colleagues in the other place and I am especially pleased that this now includes a Liberal Democrat MP back where they belong in my home in north Cornwall.

I will miss this place and I will miss many good friends, but home and my family are in Cornwall, which is some long distance away. Do not fear; I will still be watching closely and I wish you all the very best.

10.56 am

Lord Baker of Dorking (Con): My Lords, I want to say how sorry I was to hear the valedictory address of the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly. She is a very familiar face in this House. I know she attends a lot, because I have watched her for years and listened to her speeches, which are always interesting. On behalf of the whole House, I wish her a happy, relaxed, peaceful and lengthy retirement. I say "lengthy" because, in my 90th year, valedictory addresses will be rather more regular events.

I also welcome back to office the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern. I gather from what she said that her parents were teachers, which is a very good start for an Education Minister. I may surprise her by saying that I entirely welcome all the proposals she put today to the House; I hope it is the beginning of a great reform in government. Endorsements by me of statements from the Department for Education over the past 14 years have been rather rare events, but I hope this is a very good start.

Labour's manifesto said there is going to be an "expert-led" review of the curriculum and assessment. Well done, congratulations; I urged the last Government to do that again and again. Seven committees were set up that all urged that and said the Gove curriculum of EBacc and Progress 8 should be scrapped, along with GCSEs, which I introduced but which I think are now outmoded. I hope the Minister will be able to come back in September and tell us the membership of the committee. I am not applying, but I will give all the

[LORD BAKER OF DORKING]

support of my charity to the setting up of successful technical schools, because we have a great deal of expertise and I will support that.

It is very important that we do this because, if you are going to achieve economic growth, you have to have students leaving at 18 with employability skills and there is a huge mismatch now between what industry and commerce want from the education system and what they are getting. By “employability skills” I mean things the Government already recognise, such as oracy and collective problem-solving. That is done when you work in teams. There is no teamwork at all in our existing schools today, but much of our lives when we leave school is about collaborative problem-solving. The Government have already said they are going to do that, so they are inevitably going to be a very reforming Government.

We are the only country in Europe that does not provide technical, cultural and vocational education below 16. All of them—Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland—do that, but Michael Gove did not support technical education. It is very important that that is done. We have to create a curriculum suitable for this century.

Over the last 15 years I have been developing university technical colleges and there are now 44 of them. They are for 14 to 18 year-olds, they are quite unique and they are very successful. As a matter of interest, 39 of the 44 are now in Labour-held seats, so on the whole we do not do schools for the leafy suburbs; we do them for towns and cities where unemployment is very high. Unemployment in our colleges is now 3%. Nationally it is 12%, while in the West Midlands and Newcastle it is as high as 20%, so we have to inject education and cultural studies into our schools as quickly as possible. I see the bishops nodding at that, and lots of other people are nodding as well.

Could I just say one thing? The last of those seven reports was a report by the noble Lord, Lord Johnson, on 11 to 16 education. We recommended fundamental change and I am glad to see that it had all-party support, particularly as one of the members of that committee had been the head of a teachers' union. I welcome that—the noble Baroness is nodding. She is a good egg. It really is very welcome that she was on the committee.

What we need are employability skills. We have 44 UTCs and two have been added. To build a new UTC is £20 million, like the cost of any school. Frankly, very few schools are going to be built in the next 10 years because we have student decline and the money that the Government have will need to be spent on repairing the actual schools, many in appalling conditions. We have produced an idea—which the previous Government were about to approve, I hope—of introducing into an ordinary 11 to 18 school a UTC sleeve from 14 to 18. There would be separate classrooms, workshops and specialist teachers, with a separate board for them of the local employers. They would do the curriculum of the UTC. It would mean that a 14 year-old starting it, for example, spends two days a

week in a workshop or a computer room learning with his hands, or working on a project with a local company that is brought in.

This is all the expertise we have and I want to make all that available to the Government and to help them in what they are going to do. This is something the Government have to do to be successful. They will not win the next election if they do not get economic growth—they really will not; I can see they are nodding—so they have to change education effectively and make it suitable for this day and age.

11.01 am

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock (CB): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Baker, who enabled the development of the University of Plymouth's technical school when I was deputy vice-chancellor there. I also want to acknowledge the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, who has been so supportive to me since my appointment here. She will further reduce the representation of the far south-west by her move, but I wish her well.

It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate and to congratulate the newly appointed Government Ministers, who, I am aware, are committed to reducing child poverty, enhancing educational opportunity for young people and making access to healthcare, including dentistry, more timely as quickly as possible for our population. I draw attention to my interests in the register, particularly as a non-executive director of NHS England.

It is intended to ensure that free breakfast clubs are set up in primary schools, so that every child can start the day ready to learn. Could the Government consider providing breakfasts for an accompanying adult at least once a week as part of this initiative? This would enable interactions between those caring for children at home with each other at school and model the benefits of a good breakfast, which many disadvantaged adults often do without. Parents would meet each other and form networks that could be advantageous for local communities. It would also enable regular contact with school staff, including mental health specialists. I would be pleased to explore this concept further, as a form of early years support for families, consistent with the agenda of cross-government action to enhance young families' lives through investment in prevention and early intervention in the NHS.

I particularly welcome reform of the Mental Health Act, which is long overdue. The reform should result in a reduction in the inequalities in the current disproportionate use of detention which first emerge in childhood. An article in the *Independent* recently reported estimates that black and mixed-race children account for 36% of young people detained in acute mental health services, despite making up only 11% of the population. The Bill needs to prioritise fast access to community-based services as a right. This will involve significant investment in training staff to work in emergency situations to keep patients and service users safe, while maintaining their rights to independent advocates to assist in negotiating appropriate person-based treatment plans. Can the Minister confirm that it is the Government's intention to ensure workforce planning

in this domain as a matter of urgency, so that once the revised Act come into force there is no delay in implementation due to a lack of well-prepared community-based mental health workers?

I cannot overemphasise the need to ensure safe staffing in health and social care if the ambition to reduce NHS waiting lists and assist many people back into paid employment is to be achieved. The RCN reminds us in its excellent briefing that Ministers should have due regard to

“having enough staff to meet the health needs of the population” and that numbers should be

“based on transparent assessments which address inequalities”

UCAS reports that applications to study nursing at university have fallen by 27% since 2021. We are also increasingly reliant on agency and bank nursing. A redirection of funds from, for example, agency nursing to uplift training bursaries and increase apprenticeship opportunities, and loan forgiveness for university fees following periods of NHS-funded care service work would assist significantly in retention and recruitment.

Central to the health of the nation is adequate housing for all, as recognised in the King's Speech. It is impossible to study when living in a hotel room, perhaps with two younger siblings. It is also difficult to prepare adequate nutritious food in such circumstances. Can the Minister explain whether priority will continue to be given to families living in temporary accommodation as new homes are built for social rent? If so, what timetable are the Government setting for ensuring that no child in Britain today is uprooted in the middle of the school term and moved from one hotel or hostel to another, due to councils having such a dearth of available homes to place such families in?

There is much in the King's Speech that is so positive about health and social care. However, time is of the essence. I urge that while there must be a focus on reducing waiting lists for NHS care, an equal regard should be given to promoting the nation's health and preventing avoidable illness. For this reason, I end my contribution by congratulating the Government on their willingness to take forward public health interventions relating to smoking, vaping, junk food and energy drinks. The legislation proposed will result in a healthier population and an associated reduction in NHS costs in treating preventable disease. It will be a pleasure to contribute when the new legislation comes to the House.

11.07 am

Baroness Morris of Yardley (Lab): My Lords, I am delighted to be able to welcome my noble friend Lady Smith to our Bench and to say how pleased I am that I will be working with her again. It is more years than I would like to count since that last happened, but I am very pleased with the skills and experience she brings with her and optimistic about what she will contribute. I have got to know the Minister sitting next to her, my noble friend Lady Merron, better almost in the Lords than in the Commons. I congratulate her on her appointment and look forward to hearing about the changes that she is going to make.

I want to add my thanks to the noble Baroness, Lady Barran. I feel that I have spent a lot of my life over the last few years debating education with her in this Chamber on our opposite Benches. We have agreed quite a bit but when we have not, I have never doubted the noble Baroness's commitment to children or their education for a better future. I thank her for the way in which she conducted herself in the role and look forward to further debates. I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, as well and give my best wishes to her for her future.

This is a huge debate today and it is a huge King's Speech, so I want to make a few comments on the schools aspect of this work. Two weeks in, I have nothing to complain about yet, so this is very good. I am very used to making speeches criticising Governments, so I am at a bit of a loss as to what to say. By way of transition, I want to welcome some things but ask some questions about what we might expect in future.

It seems to me that the early announcements fall into two groups. One is about trying to deal quickly with the immediate challenges facing schools; the second is to sow some seeds for more substantial change in the future. One of the main points I want to make is that there is a contradiction in describing what is happening in schools at the moment. I worry that there is a feeling within government broadly, and among society, that all is quite well in schools and not much needs to be done. If that is true, they will go to the bottom of the Government's list of priorities and I do not want that to happen.

I do not think there is a crisis in schools; I think that schools are doing well and are better than they have ever been, partly because there have been 30 years of continuity in pedagogy and policy on the key issues of literacy and numeracy. When I go into schools, they are safe places. Children seem happy and many of them do well, although we are all aware of the gaps. But I am very conscious that the social context in which schools are working means that there is paddling below the surface.

Although children are doing well, there is a price to be paid in the system. That price is being paid by some vulnerable children who are pushed in the wrong direction, and by the workforce, to whom we owe a great deal because they keep the system going. If we are not careful, they will not be able to do that for much longer. I never want to use the language of “schools in crisis”, because I do not believe that is the case. They need attention, resources and ministerial interest, just as much as some of our public services that have been described as being in crisis. I am sure the Minister will appreciate that, and I would welcome some comments. So I welcome breakfast clubs, mental health checks and the 6,500 extra teachers as things that can happen now.

Will the Minister say something about special educational needs and disabilities—on both the immediate action needed, because it is difficult, and sowing seeds for long-term change? I have not heard a great deal yet on how we can support local authorities and schools to deal with the immediate problems of SEND. Some words on that might be welcome.

[BARONESS MORRIS OF YARDLEY]

I want to raise a couple of issues on the seeds that have been sown for long-term change. I very much welcome the curriculum review announced today. My worry is that we have to decide whether we want a big or a little curriculum change. If we say that we just want more arts, creativity and life skills, I cannot see how that fits in to the existing curriculum model.

We also talk about evolution, not revolution. Our politics have never been revolutionary; they have always been evolutionary. But I worry that we will say to teachers, "You have to do art; you have to do this, that and the other", without fundamentally looking at the curriculum model we have and seeing if that needs to be changed. I hope that the review has permission to say what it thinks needs doing and is not limited by the phrase "evolutionary, not revolutionary".

My last point is on assessment. If I heard it right—I heard it this morning and have not read it, so I may be wrong—assurances have been given about the future of GCSEs, A-levels and T-levels. I wonder how that can happen when we have not done the curriculum review, because assessment follows curriculum. However, no comparable assurance has been given about BTECs. If we go into this review with a cast-iron guarantee that nothing will happen to T-levels, GCSEs and A-levels, but BTECs are still floating around, we will not solve the assessment problem we face. Maybe some assurances could be given on that.

On the whole, I am very excited about the optimism and energy, and I look forward to working with the team in the future.

11.12 am

Lord Vaizey of Didcot (Con): My Lords, it is a pleasure to respond to the gracious Speech. I refer to my registered interest as a trustee of the Tate gallery. I welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, to her place as a Minister; she is an occasional sparring partner of mine on "Good Morning Britain". She is a really welcome addition to the House, and I am sure she will do a fantastic job as a Minister. It is a huge privilege to be in the Chamber to mark the retirement of the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, who is part of the Lib Dem team that makes such a unique contribution to our Chamber, and to mark the service of my noble friend Lady Barran, who was such a distinguished education and arts Minister.

I crave the House's indulgence, as today also marks the retirement of my father from this House 40 years ago. Unfortunately, on 19 July 1984 he died. He did not get a chance to make a retirement speech, but his last speech in this House was about the arts and the reform of the Arts Council. I am very pleased to say that he is with us here today because I have got a tattoo in his honour, so he will always be in this Chamber every time I speak. It is in a perfectly normal place, and I am willing to show any interested Peer in the Bishops' Bar later what I have done to mark this important anniversary. I hope no one has a fit of the vapours at this extraordinary announcement; let us keep it between ourselves.

I want to use this opportunity to talk about the arts. I was not sure when the arts would get a run-out during the debates on the King's Speech, but education

seemed to be the obvious opportunity. It does upset me occasionally that the Conservatives get a very bad rap for their support for the arts. It is worth reminding noble Lords that the Conservatives brought in the National Lottery, which transformed the landscape for the arts, and most recently brought in tax credits for museums, exhibitions, orchestras and theatres, which have also provided huge support for the arts.

Nevertheless, arts policy is not particularly complex. There are very simple things that this Government and future Governments can do to secure the arts. First, it is worth remembering that we are very good at the arts. We do not spend enough time in this country recognising that. We are recognised for it all over the world, but not in the UK. It is very important that Ministers pay attention to the arts. I welcome the new Secretary of State, who seems to be leaning into her new role and responsibilities.

Secondly—this is obviously completely the wrong time to mention this—secure funding for the arts is also extremely important. The more I reflect on this, the more I realise it is a very straightforward matter of giving our national, and indeed our regional, museums and performing arts organisations secure funding from the centre going forward. It is simply a rounding error on a government budget, and it would make such a transformative difference.

My third point about the arts, and where it fits into this debate, is that the arts play a role in every sector of policy and society. They are not going to cure prison overcrowding, but they will make a difference to prisoner rehabilitation. Indeed, the new prisons Minister was a trustee with me at the Tate, and he recognises that. They make a huge difference to our soft power. They are not going to cure cancer, but the National Academy for Social Prescribing is a very welcome recognition that the arts can play a key role, particularly in mental health, an issue mentioned by the Minister.

It goes without saying that the arts play a crucial role in education. In the last Administration we were good in parts. I worked with Michael Gove to secure music funding for local authorities. It is administered by the Arts Council but comes out of the Department for Education's budget. I urge Ministers to go and see schemes such as In Harmony, which makes such a huge difference to Children's self-confidence by helping people transform their education experience, and to listen to the calls—which may sound frivolous—to bring in a national singing strategy for schools.

The arts also have to be accessible to everyone. That includes, obviously, engaging young people and children in the arts as early as possible in a variety of ways. The arts sit at the centre of and are an important element of our education policy. When we came to power in 2010, we abandoned the previous Government's scheme, Creative Partnerships, which used the arts to enhance learning. On reflection, that was probably a mistake, but we did do good things in securing music education. I hope this Government will look very carefully—I heard what the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, said earlier—at how we can reintegrate arts and cultural education into our schools' curriculum.

11.17 am

Baroness Bull (CB): My Lords, I join the rest of the House in welcoming the Minister, congratulating the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, and noting the contribution of the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, over the last Parliament. I also declare my registered interests.

Wicked problems required joined-up thinking, so it is encouraging to see cross-departmental working underpinning delivery of the mission to break down barriers to opportunity. The poverty strategy is one example of this; the children's well-being Bill is another. Children born into poverty have the odds stacked against them from the start, with early disadvantage impacting through the years on educational outcomes, employment prospects, career progression and earnings potential. Measures to tackle this, such as early years investment, free breakfast clubs and "not in school" registers, are very welcome.

Education should be the great equaliser, but when 6% of children attend schools where the spend on education is three times higher than for the other 94%, it can have the opposite effect. I therefore support the Government's intention to rebalance investment through measures on VAT, but I hope there will be nuance in implementation. SEND provision has already been raised. I ask the Minister: what assessment has been made of the impact on specialist performing arts schools and, by extension, on the future diversity of the workforce?

Success in the performing arts requires 10 years of daily practice under expert tuition—10 years that take place before puberty sets in if you are to develop the extreme flexibility, speed and accuracy that characterise the world-class skills of a Kanneh-Mason or a Darcey Bussell. This type of professional training is not available in the state sector, so parents like mine have no choice but to enter a fee-paying school. Further cost increases for specialist performing arts schools will have the opposite effect to that which government intends, reducing access to talent for less affluent families. Unless talent has access to the best training at the right age, it will not be competitive in a global marketplace—as the noble Lord, Lord Vaizey, said, we are very good at the arts; let us make sure we continue.

I turn to curriculum reform. Speaking in March, the now Prime Minister promised to undo

"14 years of arts subjects being diminished and devalued",

and so the curriculum review announced today is warmly welcome, as is the expert leadership of Becky Francis. However, cultural and creative education does not happen only in the curriculum. It takes place in theatres, galleries, museums and libraries, in partnership with arts, heritage and youth organisations, charities, local authorities, trusts and foundations, and faith bodies.

This networked delivery model has benefits, in that it enables local and culturally relevant experiences and encourages place-based partnerships across multiple agencies. Sunderland's Culture Start is one example, aiming through culture to mitigate the impacts of growing up in poverty—Ministers should note this in relation to the poverty strategy. However, networked

delivery also presents challenges. First and foremost, the disintegration of structures such as creative partnerships for join-up over the last decade makes it difficult for commissioners to know what is available and providers to know what is needed. Music education has a series of hubs to do this connecting, funded to the tune of £101 million in 2024-25. The other art forms share nothing. Government has announced an additional national music education network, but I ask the Minister whether her department will fund similar services for dance, drama and other art forms.

There is also lack of clarity on the aims for cultural education, making it difficult for multiple providers to target programmes towards agreed outcomes. Different regimes have espoused different reasons: pathways to creative careers; understanding cultural heritage; or a lifelong love for the arts.

With this Government comes a welcome return of the core justification for universal provision of cultural and creative learning: the well-evidenced personal, social, learning and employability skills it engenders—problem solving, curiosity, communication and confidence. I hope this review will articulate a clear set of outcomes for cultural learning that shifts ambition from a tick-box list of things pupils should do or see towards measurable change in the child—change that might equally be achieved through engagement with dance, drama, literature or music. I look forward to this review and its recommendations. I hope it will take account of the contribution of these multiple partners, as well as the needs of the army of freelancers vital to the delivery jigsaw.

The Prime Minister has put his personal commitment behind creative and cultural learning, promising "from day one ... to make sure arts count".

If this Government turn promise into policy, they will have my full support.

11.23 am

Lord Knight of Weymouth (Lab): My Lords, let me start by congratulating my noble friend Lady Smith on her maiden speech. It was great, and I am absolutely delighted that she is back; we have missed her. I am also excited to see my great and noble friend Lady Merron in office, and look forward to supporting her on the mental health Bill. I want to take a moment also to pay tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, for her diligent work as a Minister. She modelled the behaviours of public service that we now want to see across the new Government.

I should remind the House of my education interests in the register: in the context of this debate, my membership of the Pearson qualifications committee and chairing the board of STEM Learning are particularly relevant. I want to focus today on skills more than schools.

I am excited, if a little daunted, by the scale and ambition of this legislative programme in the King's Speech, particularly in the context of the opportunity mission. Some believe that we create opportunity by keeping government out of people's way. We now have a Government with a lived experience who know that swathes of people are denied opportunity by obstacles

[LORD KNIGHT OF WEYMOUTH]

that government must actively address and then support people to get on. This is government more as a gardener planting seeds and supporting growth rather than as an absentee landlord.

This is how I see Skills England. Economic growth is dependent on more private enterprise, investors, products and consumers, but we cannot just leave them to it and hope that something turns up. The volume of skills-shortage vacancies doubled in the five years to 2022. We need a new, powerful organisation that brings together employers and unions, combined authorities and national government to ensure that the economy has the skills we need to grow, and in the places and sectors we most need, using the new, more flexible growth and skills levy.

How else, for example, will we develop the skills to fuel green growth? Young people, especially girls, care deeply about green issues, but, according to Prince's Trust research, are turned off by green jobs, so we need to start in schools with shifting perception and experience of STEM subjects and skills, and then creating coherent pathways from there.

Thirty years ago, 90% of children studied design and technology to 16. This is the subject in the national curriculum to excite young people about applied learning from science and maths, yet we now have less than a fifth studying it in key stage 4. Many schools no longer have the teachers or the facilities for D&T. This has to change if we are to give young people opportunities in the future economy.

I urge my noble friend the Minister to urgently review both T-levels and apprenticeships, and in the meantime fund current qualifications such as BTECs, which more than 150,000 young people are studying with success. My noble friend started the development of 14-19 diplomas. I took over from her and was appalled that they were then cancelled in 2010. We should not do the same to T-levels, but, at present, they are bloated to study and assess, and need trimming before they will be taken up at scale.

For adults, we must build on the delegation of skills funding to combined mayoral authorities so that they can work on their more local industrial strategies with confidence. But that must all be in the context of national standards, growth plans and qualifications set by Skills England.

Finally, I want briefly to touch on issues of workforce and technology. In both health and education, we have systems that are broken but have been sustained by the commitment and dedication of wonderful professional staff. On Monday, I checked with my wife's oncologist on how she felt when the Secretary of State was quoted as saying the NHS was broken. She replied that it was difficult. We must ensure that the change that people voted for on 4 July reflects the values of the public sector workforce, carries them with us and is at a manageable pace.

Staff can also be helped by technology—despite what is going on today with the Windows update. My wife is through the curative and now in the preventive treatment for breast cancer. Her whole patient experience is shared on an app, but while the data is shared with us, it is not shared with her GP or the local A&E at

Lewisham. Our experience at the local hospital when my wife had sepsis was the most scared I have ever been. The danger she was in could have been largely prevented if our NHS systems talked to each other at a basic level of data sharing.

The same is true in education. The measures in the children's well-being Bill will help, but so will the measures in the digital information and smart data Bill to allow better integration of public service data so that teachers can get a clearer picture of the complexity of the lives of the children they serve.

I am excited by the new Government, who face a daunting task. This legislative programme is ambitious, but I am excited for us to get stuck into it and help rebuild our public services, funded by a growing economy.

11.28 am

Baroness Berridge (Con): My Lords, before I offer congratulations, I am sure that I speak for all noble Lords in wishing Lady Knight a swift recovery from her treatment.

I wish to congratulate the noble Baronesses on their appointments to their ministerial roles and to recognise the amazing contribution of my noble friend Lady Barran—if you are going to get reshuffled, you should get reshuffled to a friend who does a wonderful job.

I am pleased to note that the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, has within her specific responsibilities mental health reform. As a member of the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill in the last Parliament, I was pleased to see the Bill in the King's Speech.

In 1983, the Act was probably envisaged to apply only to children within the criminal justice system, but it is needed more and more to detain children to treat them for mental health illnesses. Many families with children with eating disorders, mainly girls, are actually desperate to have them detained—it is a lifesaver. In 2022-23, according to NHS Digital, there were 997 detentions of children and young people.

As the report of the Joint Committee advised, it is vital that the interplay between any reformed mental health legislation and parental responsibility under the Children Act is fully understood. While I had the pleasure of working with excellent officials at the DfE, it seemed that the implications for the Children Act of immigration changes and mental health reform had not been grasped. I am not sure that we got to the bottom of who had parental responsibility for young people accommodated by the Home Office.

In addition to a report, being on a committee gives you a sense of the relative strengths and weaknesses of civil society groups regarding the issues before you. This reform was instituted by the former Prime Minister, the right honourable Theresa May, because of racial disproportionality in the use of the Mental Health Act. The bold recommendation of the committee to abolish community treatment orders—the right reverend Prelate related the statistics on those—hardly registered. I know that the noble Baroness is an experienced Minister, but I would be grateful if she would not only meet with the members of the Joint Committee but ensure that those whose resources do not match the

wonderful work of the National Autistic Society are also heard. Realising who is not in the room is as important as those who are before you.

I also note the return of the register of children not in school. I hope that the doughty campaigner on this issue, the noble Lord, Lord Soley, who retired from your Lordships' House last year, has seen this. I wonder whether it will be successful even with a thumping majority in the other place, as it has been a Private Member's Bill in the Commons, a Private Member's Bill more than once in your Lordships' House and government legislation—but I do wish it well. With many parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities resorting to home education not out of choice, a light-touch approach to the requirements for such families will be essential. I hope that the Bill will mean there is a standard offering of tutoring hours, regardless of your postcode in England, to children who have fallen outside mainstream schooling—hopefully only for a period of time—due to their special educational needs and disabilities not being accommodated in the mainstream system.

I conclude—on time, according to the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy—with the excellent work that Ofsted does in ensuring that children are educated or accommodated in places such as children's homes with proper safeguarding processes and cultures in place. The enormous number of institutions that Ofsted inspects for safeguarding purposes means that it is the expert. Yes, I am saying an unfashionable thing. Inappropriate people seeking to gain access to children is not historic. Evil is wily and hard to spot. People do not come to an interview in a Halloween costume. More than 80,000 adults are currently on the DBS barred from working with children list. While the unions, quite properly, in their role represent teachers, Ofsted is there for parents and children.

Last week saw a report issued—seven years late—by the Charity Commission into a prestigious public school, Ampleforth. Despite the Charity Commission taking over safeguarding functions, despite a lengthy report by the child sex abuse inquiry into the school, and despite numerous ISI inspections, they now have a safe school where the board of governors is acting appropriately. Ofsted inspectors' safeguarding expertise, sent in on a no-notice basis by former Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson, means that it is now a safe school—I recognise that this is another unfashionable commendation.

I am not immune to Ofsted's problems since the sad death of head teacher Ruth Perry and the training that has needed to take place, but we need to ensure that the professional accountability of Ofsted remains rigorous with regard to safeguarding. I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, for her positive tone in relation to the expansion of its powers. I have no vested interest, save that when I was a Minister, knowing that we had in our pocket the ability to inspect a school at no notice was vital to keeping our children safe in school.

11.34 am

The Lord Bishop of Oxford: My Lords, it is a privilege to contribute to this debate. I congratulate the new Ministers and express appreciation to the

noble Baroness, Lady Barran, and to the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, for her valedictory speech. There is much to commend in the gracious Speech.

A few weeks ago, Pope Francis addressed the leaders of the G7 on the risks and opportunities of artificial intelligence. Francis spoke of the way in which AI arises from God-given human potential. He spoke of the excitement at the possibilities that these powerful tools bring, of the risks of greater inequalities and impersonation, and of the need for deep and humane wisdom and ethics and the right political leadership. I encourage noble Lords to read his address but also, if they have a moment, to watch the 10 minutes before his address. Pope Francis demonstrated a deep humanity, not only in his words but in the way he went right around the room, embracing each of the G7 leaders and lightening for a moment the heavy burdens that each carried.

My encouragement to the Government is to hold together these very significant developments in technology with deep insights into our humanity: what it means to live well, to build flourishing societies and to enable the well-being of all. We must equip our young people to be masters of technology, not slaves to algorithms—able to put the science to good use but not allow its creations to distort our humanity or society. The deep ethical questions raised by the sciences will run across every part of this Government's legislative programme, but I will focus on three themes.

The first is the intersection of work and technology. An increasing number of people now work for and with algorithms. The quantity and quality of work is changing. Work is not just economic productivity; it is fundamental to human flourishing. The new skills and employment Bills must have regard to the question of satisfying and rewarding work in respect of not simply income but agency, autonomy and creativity and the ability to create safe and humane workplaces for the flourishing of all.

The second theme is the opportunity and risks of data: the need to ensure that every citizen derives maximum benefit from the secure use of data—as the noble Lord, Lord Knight, powerfully underlined—and that every citizen is protected from exploitation by individuals or corporations, whether in health or education and skills. What will be the Government's approach to risk in terms of the deployment of untried technologies that have the capacity to cause harm? Will security extend to the security of data? This seems a vital question given global events today.

The third theme is to urge that the well-being of children and the vulnerable remains at the heart of the Government's approach to technology. Any society will be judged by its care for the young. We have seen two decades of unregulated exploitation of children for commercial gain by social media companies. I welcome very much the resolve of the Secretary of State to further strengthen and enhance the Online Safety Act. We do not yet fully understand what makes for a good digital childhood. It seems that many children's lives are being ruined through overexposure to technology, with a consequent effect on mental health. I urge the Government to be bold when it comes to the protection of children online.

[THE LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD]

Every development in science and technology reveals a little more clearly the wonder of what it is to be human and invites us to mine the deep treasures of wisdom in faith and our common humanity. Will the Government, across their programme, dare to hold in tension both knowledge and deep wisdom for the sake of the flourishing of all?

11.39 am

Lord Sharkey (LD): My Lords, I join others in warmly welcoming the noble Baronesses, Lady Smith and Lady Merron, to the Government Front Bench. As the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, said in her excellent maiden speech, if the UK economy is to grow, productivity must significantly improve. As she noted, a major engine in this will be our higher education institutions. I declare an interest as a member of council at University College London.

Our universities make a huge contribution to life in the UK. The 2023 London Economics report estimated that their activities contributed well over £100 billion to the economy. They not only educate and train many thousands of young and not so young people but do so across many sectors and all regions. In many places, our universities are critical to the local economy. They play a huge role in supporting SMEs, which are vital to employment in all regions. Our universities are a great and successful national asset. We have 20 in the world top 50 and three in the world top 10.

Our universities now face very severe financial problems, however. The Labour Government are well aware of this; the *FT* reported in May that “universities going under” was fourth on Sue Gray’s alleged list of key problems. It is not hard to see why. PwC published earlier this year a report on the financial stability of UK higher education, which pointed out that fee income from domestic students had lost a third of its value since 2012 and that by the academic year of 2026-27 international student fees are forecast to become two-thirds of all course fee income. Many of these international students are currently and are predicted to be from China, with the obvious geopolitical uncertainties involved. Disturbingly, 40% of UUK members forecast a deficit in 2023-24, the academic year just ending. There may also be signs of a slowdown in overseas students generally.

In response to all this, more than 50 universities are already making job and budget cuts. Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute think tank, was quoted in last Saturday’s *Guardian* as saying:

“When this many universities are projected to be in deficit, you can’t say: ‘This is a market and some institutions will have to go,’ because there is a serious risk of a domino effect”.

The funding model for our universities is not fit for purpose, is getting worse and needs urgent revision. The Labour Party manifesto explicitly recognises this:

“The current higher education funding settlement does not work for the taxpayer, universities, staff, or students. Labour will act to create a secure future for higher education and the opportunities it creates across the UK. We will work with universities to deliver for students and our economy”.

We need to know rather urgently how that will be done. We welcome the Minister’s invitation to input to that.

While we wait for a plan to deal with the funding settlement, some immediate measures could significantly help the sector. The first is to be more supportive of international students, particularly through the graduate visa route. We should correct any impression created by the previous Government that the UK is not welcoming to overseas students and their families and we should, as Members of this House have frequently proposed, disaggregate student numbers from the total immigration figures and report them separately. We could also look at the full economic cost of government research grants, which has now declined to about 70%. We also need a plan in place for emergency support should institutions encounter even graver financial difficulties.

There is one other thing. The Minister may know that I have been campaigning for 10 years for the introduction of sharia-compliant student finance. Progress on this had been glacially slow until the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, the Minister’s predecessor, took charge; I am glad to see her in her place, as it gives me the opportunity to thank her for all her hard work in driving forward alternative student finance. Will the Minister agree to meet our campaign group to discuss progress? We would be grateful if we could resume our helpful conversations about this long-delayed and critical reform.

11.44 am

Baroness Wolf of Dulwich (CB): My Lords, I add my congratulations to the Ministers on their appointments. I agree strongly with the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, in her maiden speech, that skills are central to economic growth. Skills are also central to opportunity, not just for young people but, critically, for adults. People should find it easy throughout their lives to learn and to update their skills. We are pretty good already at identifying skill needs and shortages, but if we do not improve opportunities and access then nothing good will happen to supply.

I emphasise to the Minister and the House the enormous importance of further education colleges, which did not figure in the King’s Speech—although I grant that he had only so much time. Their funding has suffered very badly recently, falling further and further behind schools on a per-head basis. This means that they are increasingly unable to provide the training we need for core shortage areas such as engineering and construction—we cannot build without builders. More generally, we are failing to realise colleges’ potential as a core part of any tertiary and higher education system geared to growth and opportunity.

North America has a lot to teach us here. In the United States, community colleges make part-time advanced adult study available across the country. Meanwhile in the UK—not just England—this has gone into disastrous decline, with ongoing falls in college-based higher education courses. In Canada, colleges supply an increasing amount of short, specific and high-level vocational training, often to recent graduates. Here, bizarrely, our higher education funding policy intentionally prevented this for decades.

Arrangements for the lifelong learning entitlement, passed into English law last year with, happily, cross-party support—I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Barran,

for her valiant work in this House, which was not at all confined to this area—give us an opportunity to build far more flexibility and adult participation into our skills system and get rid of our crazy barriers to upskilling. It was also always intended to bring colleges and universities much closer together, in something approaching a single system. When does the Department for Education expect to reschedule and restart its consultative roadshows with the sector on the LLE? Will the Government ensure that colleges and college-based courses are fully incorporated into their planning and development?

I recommend to the Minister's attention the Open University's current collaboration with colleges in education cold spots. She will be aware that the creation of the Open University was one of the finest achievements—perhaps the finest—of the first Wilson Government, but she may not be aware that its original remit covered technical and refresher courses, not just degrees. If this country is serious about skills, it must look seriously beyond full degrees and not just pay lip service to a more nuanced system.

Finally, the Government have very good reason to reform the apprenticeship levy. Anyone involved with apprenticeship policy knows that the current funding system has had major unintended and undesirable consequences. Opportunities for young people have plummeted, especially in more deprived areas. Many young people who would like an apprenticeship cannot obtain one. We have been doing some research at King's—I declare an interest as a member of its academic staff—on the way in which lower-achieving young people transition into the workplace. We are talking not about the bottom 20%, but about the 50% or 60% who do not go straight into university. We find that, for every one who gets an apprenticeship, three have tried very hard and failed to find one. The Government's own figures show that only 20% of apprenticeship starts are in skill-shortage occupations.

I hope that the Minister can reassure the House that the review will be thorough and incorporate the needs of SMEs, young people and the entire country, and not just the desire of levy-paying employers for more ways to spend their levy.

11.49 am

Baroness Pitkeathley (Lab): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to speak again from the Government Benches in this debate, as I did in my first 13 years in your Lordships' House. I warmly welcome the new Ministers to their posts. However, in the spirit of graciousness which distinguishes our politics, I also want to thank the previous government Ministers, including the noble Lords, Lord Evans, Lord Kamall and Lord Markham, and the noble Viscount, Lord Younger, with whom I worked—especially on issues concerning unpaid carers. They did not always give me what I wanted, but they were always courteous and sympathetic. I too will miss the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly.

First, as others have noticed, there was a big omission in the King's Speech: anything to do with social care. I know that Ministers understand the urgency of tackling it, and that no reform of health services can be truly effective unless linked with reform of social care, as

the Covid inquiry this week has reminded us. It is, though, very welcome news that there is to be an important Bill on mental health, and the mention of prevention in the gracious Speech when it comes to the NHS will be greeted with relief and pleasure. We cannot tackle the ongoing problems of ill health caused by lifestyle unless we address those challenges robustly. The restrictions on smoking and the attacks on fast and ultra-processed foods, especially advertising to children, will be most welcome to those of us serving on the Select Committee on diet and obesity, so ably chaired by the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley. In a visit to Blackpool, we were shocked to discover that two-thirds of children starting secondary school there are already clinically obese.

As well as prevention, our reforms of the NHS must also focus on integration. I was privileged to chair one of your Lordships' House's special inquiries into integration last year, and it was not a comforting picture. Clearly, people are not getting the right care in the right place at the right time. Our recommendations focused on improving structures and organisation which currently limit integration, on revising contracts and funding which limit, or even disincentivise, integration and on devolving far more money away from hospitals towards community-based care. The inadequacy of digital connectivity was a huge source of frustration for our witnesses, and guidance is needed to clarify responsibilities. We saw, for example, people putting the same data into three separate computers because the computers did not talk to each other.

A major barrier to integration is staff shortages and professional divides which indicate that one set of workers, like those from a local authority, are somehow of less value than another, like those from the NHS. I am hopeful that measures in the planned employment rights Bill to increase social care pay and scrap exploitative zero-hours contracts will help retain and attract more staff. It is possible. On Monday this week, I was in Southampton with my 104 year-old aunt. While I was there, four different people visited her: a local authority worker, an OT, a district nurse and a private care company. All of them knew about each other, they all had the same data regarding my aunt and they were all working to the same end. I could not see the joins between them. They were helping a 104 year-old lady to live peacefully, and probably die peacefully, in her own home. We should take these examples and learn from them.

I have not thus far mentioned unpaid carers, which is so often the subject of my interventions in your Lordships' House. I hope the employment rights Bill, however, will encourage the Government to move more quickly to deliver their review of the Carer's Leave Act 2023 and to introduce enabling provisions to ensure a right to paid carer's leave can be introduced during the passage of the Bill. Of course, a commitment by the Government to a national strategy for carers would be welcomed by 6 million people.

In conclusion, I repeat my disappointment thus far that nothing in the gracious Speech will lead us to a reform of social care, but I know that Ministers and

[BARONESS PITKEATHLEY]

others are extremely aware of the urgency of the need and that we shall hear announcements as soon as possible.

11.54 am

Lord Lexden (Con): My Lords, I declare my interest as a former general secretary to the Independent Schools Council, and the current president of the Independent Schools Association, one of the council's constituent bodies whose 670 member schools make up a substantial proportion of the council's total of 1,400 schools.

From that declaration stems my principal purpose in this debate: to impress on the Government the deep concern that has been created by its proposal to slap VAT on independent school fees. The concern is not confined to families who have children in independent schools or those who run the schools. There is great apprehension everywhere about the inevitable consequence: the need for additional places in the state sector for pupils whose independent schools will be unable to remain in existence.

It seems to be the Labour Party's contention that independent schools will not need to pass the VAT charge on to parents; they will be able to absorb it. This is not so. Only a handful have the endowments or reserves that would enable them to pay it themselves. The overwhelming majority of independent schools are small schools, with some 300 pupils on average, which rely on each year's income to meet their costs. They will, with great reluctance, have to pass on the new VAT burden to parents—and in many cases parents will be unable to pay the increased fees.

The new Government have the wholly laudable aim of recruiting the additional teachers we need so badly. It is far from certain, however, that the imposition of VAT on fees will assist them significantly, if at all, in meeting that objective. The additional resources that state schools will need to teach more pupils could absorb much of the revenue gained from the VAT charge, and perhaps even exceed it.

It is on this absolutely central point that we need the independent assessment that the Office for Budget Responsibility will be providing. I hope the Government will publish the OBR's advice in full at the earliest opportunity. It should form a key part of the discussions that they will need to have with the Independent Schools Council on the implications of the policy, particularly where special needs pupils are concerned. Some 90,000 of them could be forced out of independent schools, which teach them so well.

Make no mistake: the council will want to work with the Government to help raise standards, train teachers, extend opportunities for our young people. How vividly I remember my years at the council at the start of the last Labour Government when so much invaluable co-operation developed with the education department, particularly when the noble Baroness, Lady Morris of Yardley, was a Minister, and how much I enjoyed our association. One enduring result was the creation of joint state and independent school partnership projects. They have grown and grown over the years. Music, drama, arts and the teaching of shortage subjects are just some of the many beneficiaries

of the great work that state and independent schools are doing together to their mutual benefit—I stress mutual benefit. It must not be jeopardised.

One of the consistent themes of health debates in the last Parliament was the Government's lamentable failure to make the extremely modest investment necessary to ensure universal access to fracture liaison services in England. It is vital to tackle the scourge of late-diagnosed osteoporosis, the fourth leading cause of disability and premature death, as my noble friend Lord Black of Brentwood, who cannot be in his place today, has frequently pointed out, as has the noble Baroness, Lady Donaghy.

The heavy price of that failure was thousands of lives lost, innumerable people living in unnecessary pain and countless numbers of both sufferers and their carers taken out of the workforce at a time when they are badly needed. Thanks to the success of the Better Bones campaign, spearheaded by the Royal Osteoporosis Society, we now have a commitment from the new Government to achieve full coverage of FLS across England by 2030.

To ensure that government action in this area is as effective as possible, two initiatives are needed. The first is a transformation fund, foreshadowed under the last Government but never delivered, to pump-prime new and improved FLS until they break even within two years. Could the Minister confirm that the work undertaken by officials in the last Parliament will be taken forward to establish such a fund? The second initiative is the appointment of a national specialty adviser to ensure strong, specialist leadership across departments and agencies, and to spread best practice. Could the Minister tell us when we might see such a vital appointment, which will be crucial in turning well-intentioned commitments into tangible results to the great benefit of our country?

I end by wishing the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, well and of course, the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, too.

Noon

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff (CB): My Lords, I warmly congratulate the Ministers, the noble Baronesses, Lady Smith of Malvern and Lady Merron, on their appointments. We will all miss the wisdom, experience and kindness of the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly. I declare that I chair the Bevan Commission in Wales, was a governor of Howell's School, Llandaff, and president of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, and my palliative care roles.

I welcome the focus in the gracious Speech on prevention in healthcare, its crossover to the well-being of children, and how rehabilitation can prevent further problems when disease or injury strikes. Our previous tobacco control legislation did not go far enough; we never anticipated the advent of addictive vapes. Last year, one in five children used a vape. More than 7.5% of children are current users, mostly of disposable vapes from shops, so new controls are welcome and long overdue.

Some 2.5 million children in England are overweight or obese, setting a lifetime of problems. Good nutrition starts with breastfeeding and support to new mothers

in the early years, but despite tackling junk food the gracious Speech failed to mention the addictive calorie-laden product, alcohol, which is closely linked to violence and anti-social behaviours. Will the Government support my Private Member's Bill on alcoholic beverage labelling?

Yes, the NHS needs transformation. Only yesterday, I encountered an ICB whose risk-averse policies are inhibiting community hospice carers from meeting patients' analgesic needs. We must shed silly rules and wasted duplication of effort, free staff to care with initiative, and support innovation. A funding formula for palliative care is long overdue.

Rehabilitation is critical to prevention. It reduces pressure on acute and emergency services, reduces social care need, and supports those who want to and can go back into work. Today, one in three people's health conditions would benefit from rehabilitation, and more than a million emergency department attendances a year could be avoided. Improving cardiac rehabilitation from its current 50% level to 85% could prevent 50,000 admissions in England alone. Each year, 120,000 patients survive critical illness, but 98% of those develop post-intensive care syndrome, with impaired physical, cognitive and psychological functioning and loss of independence, and a third remain care-dependent with major impacts on their families, especially their children.

Specialist rehabilitation programmes starting in ICU are cost effective. There is, for example, a lifetime saving of about £700,000 per patient with traumatic brain injury. Patients can even get back to work, but sadly few such programmes exist. For those who do not survive and who are dying, integrated palliative care can be transformative. Reliance on charity donations is invidious.

For children with serious conditions, rapid early diagnosis and intervention can move them from a life of dependency to a life of independence, yet more than a quarter of a million children are waiting for community health services, with 22% of them waiting over a year. Some 21% of A&E attendances overall are in children from nought to 14 years, and for 40% of those continuity would be better had they been seen in the community.

Finally, I turn to schooling for children with difficulties. Overall, there are 90,000 children with special educational needs in private schools, as well as children who have been seriously bullied, are refusing school, and whose parents or grandparents do without for the child's supported education. Independent schools estimate that they save £4.4 billion from the education budget. I wonder what will happen to service families whose children have to board. Will we risk the income to the country, already experienced by universities, if we lose many of our 63,000 international schoolchildren? In Wales, if 19 of the 69 independent schools have to close, the Welsh Government will face an £80 million funding gap. Can the Minister reassure us that Wales will receive its proportion of the estimated increased revenue from VAT, in line with Barnett differentials? I hope so.

12.04 pm

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall (Lab): My Lords, it is a pleasure and privilege to be speaking from these Benches again. In doing so, I remind the House of my relevant interests as a member of Middlesex Learning Trust, a patron of the Artis Foundation, and an adviser to the Backstage Trust.

I congratulate my noble friends on the Front Bench today, and all their colleagues, on their new appointments, and I wish them well as they take forward the ambitious programme outlined in the gracious Speech. I particularly congratulate my noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern on her excellent maiden speech. Like others, I am sad that we are losing the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly—this was all unexpected—but I am very glad that we have not lost the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, whose work in office has been so deservedly praised. I hope she is glowing from that praise as this debate continues.

Concision is the order of the day, so I will make my points concisely. First, as another member of the pre-legislative committee that looked at the previous Government's draft mental health Bill in 2022-23, I am glad to see that a new Bill is planned that will incorporate a lot of what that committee recommended. It will be challenging to find the necessary resources, financial and human, but the proposed changes to current legislation are long overdue and much needed.

I welcome the inclusion of the children's well-being Bill. In taking forward the proposed review of curriculum and assessment, I hope that despite warnings from my noble friend Lady Morris the Government will make good on their declared intention to restore arts subjects to their proper place in the curriculum. I also support everything said by the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, on how engagement with the arts outside the formal curriculum can contribute to the well-being of all students from early years to A-level.

Much of the arts sector is already extensively involved with education—just look at what is being achieved by the RSC and many other organisations, large and small—but it is doing so in an increasingly precarious funding environment. The recent successful championing by the noble Lord, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay—he is not in his place today—of tax reliefs for the performing arts is one of the few bright spots on a darkening horizon for the sector, and I hope my noble friend can confirm that they will be maintained. However, the current crisis in many local authorities, and the reduction in support for Arts Council England over the past decade, has already done serious damage. This is another problem that will not be easy to solve when there are so many calls on scarce resources, but we ignore it at our peril.

The plan to increase teacher numbers is also welcome. Recruitment and retention remain critical issues, but there is also huge pressure on school budgets, partly as a result of the underfunding, or non-funding, of recent pay awards, which is resulting in staff reductions in some schools. This needs urgent attention, which I hope it will get from my noble friends.

Finally, I hope that we can now look forward to a less adversarial relationship between government and the education sector. Over the past few years there has

[BARONESS McINTOSH OF HUDNALL]

been too much hostile rhetoric, although never, I hasten to add, from the noble Baroness, Lady Barran. We should, of course, have high expectations of our schools and their leaders, and they must be held to account. But let us also trust them, support them and acknowledge what it takes to do what they do.

In the gracious Speech, the Government have set out a bold programme that I am proud to support. Delivering it will require courage and determination, because, despite recent appearances to the contrary, politics is not actually a branch of the entertainment industry, entertaining though it can sometimes be. It is a complex, contradictory, unpredictable and deeply serious business within which setbacks and even occasional failures are inevitable. However, in the words of that great master of concision, the playwright Samuel Beckett:

“No matter. Fail again. Fail better.”

Onwards and upwards, my Lords.

12.09 pm

Baroness Monckton of Dallington Forest (Con) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to participate in this debate on His Majesty's gracious Speech. I declare my interests as set out in the register.

Public speaking and debating are not my natural territories. My career has been in retail, not politics—although, as my husband pointed out, there are similarities: the voter, like the customer, is always right. This is an overwhelming honour. What has struck me in my short time in this House has been the courtesy and kindness on both sides. I have been made to feel welcome, and my vast areas of ignorance on the workings of this place, and many other things besides, have been tactfully dealt with.

I thank my supporters, the noble Lords, Lord Altrincham and Lord Laming—who has given me so much wise advice over the years—as well as my noble friend Lady Fraser of Craigmaddie for her encouragement and support, and Black Rod for her pertinent advice. I thank also the clerks and doorkeepers, not just for all they have done for me—instructions on protocol and dealing with my lamentable lack of direction—but for their warm welcome to my daughter, Domenica, who has Down's syndrome, when she came to this House for my introduction. She, or rather the charity that I started in her name, is one of the reasons that I am in this House.

My father, a hereditary Peer, was a proud Member of this place. He was a career soldier, and his last posting was as chief of staff of the British Army of the Rhine. He was also an Arabist, and he brought this expertise to the relevant committees and sat as a Cross-Bencher. However, his manifesto, in a bid to stay in this House, was not successful—“all cats to be muzzled outside to stop the agonising torture of mice and small birds” did not quite cut it. His sister, my aunt, Valerie Goulding, was an inspiration to me. She started the Central Remedial Clinic in Ireland, which devotes itself to children and adults with cerebral palsy, spina bifida and muscular dystrophy. She was made a member of the Senate by the Taoiseach for her charitable work. The author of *Under the Eye of the Clock*, Christopher Nolan, was one of Valerie's

patients, and it was her fierce commitment to his potential that enabled him to become an author. He wrote that he owed his success

“to Lady Goulding and her harbour of hope”.

In his gracious Speech, His Majesty made reference to breaking down barriers to opportunities. That is exactly what we do at Team Domenica for young adults with learning disabilities. Our aim is to get them into paid employment, and we have an 81% paid employment rate, against a national average of 4.8%. People with learning disabilities are the most forgotten in our society, and I feel passionately that they should have the same chances as everyone else. The world is theirs just as much as it is ours.

However, in education, the mainstreaming of children with learning disabilities is not always appropriate. My daughter spent several hours sitting in a corridor because “it was maths” or because “it was science”. What is was actually was isolating, and the silence of Domenica's loneliness was deafening. I suggest to the Minister that the remaining schools for those with moderate learning difficulties are vital for families whose children are not confident enough to cope with mainstream education. We must not become so blinded by ideology that we no longer see or understand the individual needs of the vulnerable people in our care.

In concentrating on education and in building self-confidence, we can make a life-changing difference. If someone believes in you, you start to believe in yourself. I have seen this time and again with our young adults at Team Domenica, who have got paid jobs with the wonderful businesses in Brighton and Hove which support us so well. I have seen the transformation in Domenica's confidence too, through belonging and being more like her sister—although she has some way to go before matching the supreme self-confidence of her late grandfather, known to his children as Jampa, but probably more familiar to your Lordships' House as Lord Lawson of Blaby.

We need to remember that a lifelong learning disability is exactly that: lifelong. Education and support need to continue, and the process of getting an education, health and care plan needs to be much less stressful. Like others who have spoken before me today, I worry about what the effect would be of a 20% education tax on the parents of the almost 100,000 children in the independent sector who do not have an EHCP but who have special needs. Will the unintended consequence be many more parents trying to get an EHCP in a system that is already at breaking point?

I look forward to raising my voice with others in your Lordships' House to speak up for the voiceless, and to standing up for parents, siblings and carers. No one can know where the limits of love lie—nor should we ever judge those who are sometimes struggling to cope; I have been there myself—but we need to know where the limits of state responsibility begin and end. We must ensure, at least, that it does not make the lives of parents and their children more difficult than they already are.

12.15 pm

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie (Con): My Lords, it is an honour and pleasure to follow the wonderful maiden speech of my noble friend Lady Monckton.

With her sparkling business experience—bringing Tiffany's to the UK and her continued involvement in fine jewellery—we are fortunate indeed to have such a gem of a Baroness on our Benches. Much more important and pertinent to our debate today is her experience with Team Domenica and her passion to enable people with learning disabilities to thrive in life and feel included in society, which I know will make such a difference to this House. I know that, like me, noble Lords will look forward to many future contributions from my noble friend.

I add my voice to the congratulations to the new Government, and welcome the new Ministers to their place on the Benches opposite. I sincerely wish them well and will support them if the measures they introduce are

“based upon the principles of security, fairness and opportunity for all”.

I also add my thanks to the noble Baroness, Lady Barran—who has been at the end of a query or a WhatsApp message whenever—for her openness, diligence and service.

However, I must confess my disappointment that there was not much on adult social care in the gracious Speech. I was on the Adult Social Care Committee of your Lordship's House, so wonderfully chaired by the noble Baroness, Lady Andrews. One of our fellow members was the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, who I did not realise was retiring—I wish her a very happy and long retirement. I commend the committee's report to Ministers. Can they give some serious consideration to how they can support some of the recommendations that do not really need more Bills—for example, by reinforcing the provisions of the Care Act 2014?

I too am concerned by the blanket statement in the gracious Speech about measures being brought forward to remove the exemption from VAT for private school fees. Following on from my noble friend's speech, can the Minister clarify today that this will not apply to fees that are paid to independent schools for pupils with EHC plans? Even if they are exempt, as my noble friend said, those plans can take many years to be put in place, leaving out children with recognised special educational needs whom the state system cannot support and who currently rely on independent schools. Many of these schools are registered charities, and for generations the provision of education has sat firmly in the definition of “public benefit” for charities. Schools are subject to increased staff costs, pensions, utilities and other inflationary pressures. Even when placements are funded largely by local authorities, significant additional fundraising for these organisations is required to subsidise services—there is no fat in the model.

In Scotland—which I always like to mention— independent schools have been subject to more scrutiny than any other part of the charitable sector. In 2022, the Scottish Government removed business rates tax relief for schools with charitable status. Significantly, they excluded specialist schools for children with educational needs.

Like the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, I am really concerned about the devastating impact this policy is having on specialist performing arts schools at this very moment. The Labour Party manifesto committed to

“support children to study a creative or vocational subject”

up to the age of 16. The essential requirement outlined by the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, for early specialist performing arts training has been recognised by successive Governments through the Department for Education Music and Dance Scheme for school pupils and the Dance and Drama Award for students. These are means-tested grants that enable talented students to access the best music and dance training at the best specialist schools—I declare an interest as an alumnus of Tring Park, one of the schools on the dance scheme. The majority of pupils at schools such as Tring Park, or the Royal Ballet School, would not otherwise attend an independent school. Yet the Department for Education cannot guarantee the future of any bursaries in either scheme for the next academic year, this September. This uncertainty, together with the fear of being asked to pay VAT on fees, is causing potential pupils to not even take up places, which is an immediate threat to the sustainability of the training pipeline for our world-class performing arts sector.

The Government's blanket announcement threatens future Darcey Bussells—or indeed Baroness Bulls—and it could force these schools to accept only the children of the very wealthy. Fundraising and full-fee-paying students subsidise bursaries and make it possible to offer talented young people places. Given the Government's proudly expressed support for the performing arts, I can surmise only that this is an unintended consequence, and I just hope it is something that can be rectified before these schools are forced to take drastic measures.

12.21 pm

Lord Watson of Invergowrie (Lab): My Lords, it is a pleasure not just to be back on the Government Benches but to welcome my noble friend Lady Smith—another one—to our team and to congratulate both her and my noble friend Lady Merron on their appointment as Ministers. It is also a pleasure to be able to refer to “the last Labour Government”—although I will not do so today—without fearing that it might have a double meaning.

The noble Baroness, Lady Barran, and I had many exchanges across the Dispatch Boxes. We rarely agreed, but I think that we did so in good humour. It is not easy to go from the Government Benches in that direction; I commend her for doing so and I look forward to seeing how she adopts the persona of poacher rather than gamekeeper.

Early years and education is a vital area in which the Government can shift the dial. The lack of proper investment by their predecessors, which shifted the sector's focus away from early education and towards childcare, was driven by the imperative of getting women back into the workforce. Of course, that is important, but it is not as important as ensuring that

[LORD WATSON OF INVERGOWRIE]
every child's first 1,000 days contain high-quality early years education and development, particularly for those from a disadvantaged background.

I welcome the introduction of Skills England because providing our young people with the skills that both they and the economy will need in the years ahead is essential. It was the skills Act that saw many a robust debate in your Lordships' House on the effects of introducing T-levels, a qualification that I want to see become embedded and succeed. However, that has not yet happened, and I very much share the concerns expressed by my noble friends Lady Morris and Lord Knight following today's announcement of the curriculum review and what that might mean for the defunding of many applied general qualifications, including BTECs, which would leave young people who are not academically able to complete a T-level without any suitable alternative. That cannot be allowed to happen. So can my noble friend confirm that the pause and review of this rushed plan promised by the new Secretary of State when she was in opposition will indeed be undertaken, and within what timescale?

With kickstarting economic growth the central mission of the new Government, skills development is about much more than school leavers. Flexible ways to support people to upskill or reskill will be needed now more than ever, and it is essential that the skills offer is inclusive—for all ages and at all levels of post-18 education. The Open University's model, for instance, enables people to earn while they learn—over 70% of its students are in work. Can my noble friend say what funding and policy levers the Government intend to prioritise to support more flexible and lifelong learning? Will we see the lifelong learning entitlement, as previously debated at length in your Lordships' House, built on and soon?

The mantra of our election campaign was “change”, and already it is being translated into delivery. One area where I particularly hope to see change concerns our schools. The 6,500 new teachers will have a dramatic effect, although of course that will take time. For the past 14 years there has been a ministerial obsession with academisation, rather too enthusiastically implemented by DfE officials. Yet, despite a flat-out effort to drive academisation—at the expense of the maintained sector—the DfE's own figures published as recently as May show that after almost a decade and a half, just 50.1% of all state-funded schools in England are now academies.

A feature of academisation has been the double standards that have developed; for example, on the need to follow the national curriculum, for which you would think the clue was in the title, the requirement to employ qualified teachers—should we really expect our children to be taught by well-meaning amateurs?—or on academies' right to be their own admission authorities. Thankfully, the children's well-being Bill will end all those anomalies.

However, how will that be achieved? Falling school rolls are forcing local authorities to close schools but they lack the power to close academies. The supporting document to the King's Speech says, in relation to the children's well-being Bill, that all schools will be required

“to cooperate with the local authority on school admissions, SEND inclusion, and place planning, by giving local authorities greater powers to ... ensure admissions decisions account for the needs of communities”.

Can my noble friend say whether this means that the local authority would be the admission authority for all schools in its area, or at least that it will be able to require changes to individual school admission criteria? Equally, will local authorities have the same powers to place individual vulnerable pupils in academies as in maintained schools, and to enforce adherence to fair access protocols?

I apologise for presenting my noble friend with so many questions just two weeks into her role. I would be happy to receive a response in writing if that is more convenient, but I very much look forward to working with her in the weeks and months ahead.

12.26 pm

The Earl of Leicester (Con): My Lords, I welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, to this House and congratulate her on her excellent maiden speech—likewise, my noble friend Lady Monckton of Dallington Forest. Both clearly bring great and valuable experience to this debate and to your Lordships' House.

I take this opportunity to express deep concern at the proposal in His Majesty's gracious Speech for a Bill to ban conversion therapy. I should make it clear that, of course, no one should be subject to abuse or coercion. But if independent lawyers have concluded that there really are gaps in the law against abuse and coercion, we should be shown their advice and those gaps should be filled. But that seems doubtful. Research commissioned by the previous Government showed that the evidence base for a new law is weak.

My main fear is that a criminal law against conversion therapy would have unintended consequences for children and young people expressing distress over what gets called gender identity but which in reality is gender dysphoria. The Cass review made it very clear that children should be able to access help to explore in a genuinely open way their experiences of gender dysphoria, and that this is not conversion practice. But banning conversion practices risks scaring into silence precisely those professionals who have young people's best interests at heart.

Dr Cass has spoken about how clinicians who work in child gender services have told her that they are already afraid of being accused of “conversion therapy” if they follow a questioning or—in the proper professional sense of the word—critical approach. She is also clear that such an approach is absolutely the right one to take for anyone who looks after children. Actually, she says in her report that a mere

“‘informed consent’ model of care”

is incompatible with good safeguarding of children and young people. Professionals have to do much better than simply giving young people the medical interventions they think they want, especially if they think they want them only because they have spent too much time watching YouTube videos telling them that transitioning is some kind of magic solution to all their problems.

As I have said in this Chamber before, there are increasing numbers of detransitioners such as Keira Bell, who I have met and spoken to, who heavily regret their decision to transition, and for whom the only advice they received from so-called health professionals when they were young was one of affirmation of their early and ill-informed wish to change their gender.

Clinicians and others are right not just to take a young person's word for it when they say that they are another gender; there can be serious safeguarding issues that need to be investigated. A doctor might believe that a young person's desire to be another gender stems from trauma. They might believe that they do not comprehend the risks and consequences well enough to make an informed decision.

If a doctor recommends a watchful waiting approach to a child, but that young person disagrees and insists that they need medical intervention, is that doctor guilty of conversion therapy? Would they be guilty, in the language of conversion therapy laws that we have seen, of "supressing" or "inhibiting" that young person's gender identity? Even if they are ultimately found not guilty, finding themselves on the wrong end of a police investigation for conversion therapy as a result of the child making a complaint would exert a massive chilling effect on good medical practice.

The pledge in the Labour manifesto was to protect an individual's ability to

"explore their sexual orientation and gender identity",

but that is not good enough. Any law on conversion therapy must comprehensively protect the professional integrity of doctors, teachers and others who work with children—people who put those children's best interests first—even if that means not giving them what they think they want. They must not be chilled into silence.

Those who truly and deeply care about the well-being of the children and young people in their care should not be at risk of criminalisation. The Government must take heed of Dr Cass's exhortation to "take inordinate care"—that is the phrase she used— with this. We need to slow down and engage in serious consultation with a full range of stakeholders, not just those who want the Bill.

12.31 pm

Lord Aberdare (CB): My Lords, the theme of today's debate is about creating opportunities. Nothing could be more important for that than education and skills policies. As the noble Lord, Lord Baker, made clear, none of the aims set out in the King's Speech and in the Labour manifesto can be achieved without the right skills, and education has an essential role in developing those skills.

I welcome what we know so far about the Government's plans, and what we heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, in her fine maiden speech. I also take the opportunity to echo the appreciation expressed to the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, for her work and commitment over the years, including giving me occasional help with my mathematics.

Many of the plans we know about are encouraging, if as yet somewhat incomplete—as might be expected, given the difficulty of adjusting the course of the tanker that is education policy, especially during these cash-strapped times.

The need to recruit, train and retain good teachers is rightly recognised with the commitment to recruit 6,500 new teachers, funded by ending the current VAT exemption for private school fees. While I recognise the difficulty of finding new sources of funds, I share the concerns expressed by the noble Lord, Lord Lexden, and others, including the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton of Dallington Forest, in her excellent maiden speech, that this may produce unintended and undesirable consequences, and may generate less net income than the Government expect or hope for.

There is anyway, as the noble Lord, Lord Storey pointed out, the much wider challenge of reinvigorating and remotivating teachers, many of whom feel not just underpaid and underappreciated but unduly constrained by an overprescriptive, over-rigid and overdemanding curriculum and assessment system. In passing, I wonder whether this Government might consider restoring the funding recently withdrawn from Now Teach, which does such excellent work bringing successful and committed late-career people into teaching.

The current system is failing to deliver consistently the broad and balanced curriculum to which it aspires. There is an imbalance between knowledge-based learning and the acquisition of practical life skills, such as listening, speaking, problem-solving, creativity and teamwork. The needs of many young people who do not aspire to university but whose goals are more work-centred, leading to careers as technicians or tradespeople or entrepreneurs, are not adequately met. I am delighted and encouraged that the promised review of curriculum and assessment was launched yesterday under the leadership of Professor Becky Francis, and I hope that it will come up with a plan to improve the balance of the curriculum and enhance the motivation of both students and teachers.

The manifesto recognises the importance of access to arts, music and sport, and specifically promises a new national music education network. How do the Government see this as helping to narrow the shocking gap between state and private schools in the quality of music, arts and cultural education that they offer?

The manifesto makes no mention of building on recent improvements in careers education so that all young people receive high-quality personal guidance. The engagement of employers, including smaller and more local employers, is another key to opening young people's eyes to world of work in all its range and variety. I hope the Government will seek to encourage more employers to be involved in this way.

A central proposal for skills policy is to establish Skills England, with a remit to create a long-overdue skills strategy, aligned with the proposed industrial strategy, which will hopefully bring together skills policy activities across the UK to produce a coherent understanding of current and future skills needs and shortages, and ways of addressing them locally, regionally, nationally and sectorally. I look forward to hearing more about how Skills England will work, and I hope

[LORD ABERDARE]

that its membership will include proper representation of independent training providers, which deliver two-thirds of all apprenticeships.

On that subject, the idea of turning the apprenticeship levy into a more flexible growth and skills levy will be welcomed by the many employers who complain about the inflexibility of the current system. I will be interested to hear what form this will take, how it will work and how it will be funded.

I am conscious that transforming education and skills policies, as the manifesto aims, is a long-term incremental process, so it would be wrong to express any impatience at this stage that the many promising measures proposed in the Speech and the manifesto may seem smaller than the high ambition of the goals that the Government have set themselves. I hope that as the initiatives get under way we will be able to discern a clearer vision of where policy is heading—a vision ambitious enough to motivate and inspire teachers, students, parents, training providers, employers and all of us whose future depends on an education and skills system that truly creates opportunities for all.

12.37 pm

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port (Lab): My Lords, I add my voice of congratulation to my noble friend the Minister not only on her appointment but on the fact that she has made her maiden speech. I look forward to the punchy and forthright way in which policies that have been delivered and proposals that have been fleshed out in the King's Speech turn themselves into pieces of law that will give us a different sense of direction, and possibly, when implemented, a sense of accomplishment too. So congratulations and thank you for that good start.

I refer to the mention in the King's Speech of a general term, "raise educational standards", and to "children's wellbeing", and I wish to focus my little intervention there. I look forward to seeing how those things spell out.

I have been reading the recent *Better Schools—The Future of the Country* report by an educationalist called Tim Clark, in which he focuses down on pupils with SEND—specialist educational needs and disabilities. He writes as follows:

"Particularly concerning is that pupils with SEND are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds and 'that the discrepancies between and advantaged backgrounds have increased 2010-2020'".

A variant of that remark, regretting the gap between the haves and the have-nots, appears again and again in one report after another, and has indeed been part of a speech before mine in this debate. There is a bigger battle to be fought than we have time for here today about what to do about the social tendencies that are forcing people away from each other and dividing our communities, and causing those who are disadvantaged to suffer disproportionately. I thought that was worth mentioning, although it is a little tangential to the thrust of the debate.

This debate is taking place while the first report from the Covid inquiry is filling our newspapers. In that report, it is correctly pointed out that 235,000

people died from Covid. All of us regret the particularly high number of people whose deaths occurred in care homes and in the care sector, but we simply have to mention alongside that—as future reports certainly will—the effect of the pandemic on those who lost so much in our schools throughout that period.

I was involved for 20 years with two high schools in inner London, one in Islington and the other in Tower Hamlets, and I spent 12 years as chair of the trustees for those two schools. We noted with great regret how teachers left because Covid had so struck the atmosphere and the possibilities. Ever since, levels of truancy have risen, as the noble Lord on the Lib Dem Benches said, and we continue to witness higher levels of bad behaviour in our classrooms. My question simply has to be this: how do we keep that in focus and not simply think that that was then? There are young people who will be blighted by those years for the rest of their lives and who deserve our attention.

How is it that the charitable foundation that underwrites some of the costs of the schools with which I have been involved spends 12.5% of its distributable income on schools in the state sector, and 65% on the three prestigious public schools that are part of the same foundation? I think it proper to note the economic consequences of some of this Government's proposals on those in the private sector, but we must not forget that there is tons of charitable money out there that is simply not getting to the poorest people, even when the charities were set up to focus on the poorest people in their own age.

So, with 14 seconds left and the good will of my Chief Whip, which it is very necessary for me to retain, I draw my remarks to a close. There were other things I wanted to say—there were rich things I wanted to say—but, at this stage, the smile on the Minister's face suffices for my present needs.

12.42 pm

Baroness Garden of Frognal (LD): It is always a pleasure to follow the noble Lord. I join in the welcome to the Minister and wish her success in this role. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, for being a listening Minister and congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, on an excellent and moving maiden speech.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to my noble friend Lady Jolly. We served together as Government Whips and Ministers in those heady days of the coalition Government. I pay tribute to her skills, knowledge and camaraderie. She deserves a break from the commute from Cornwall, but she will be much missed, particularly on these Benches.

At this stage of the debate, much of what I would have said has been said. I shall try not to be repetitive and try to stick to my five minutes, even if I have to speak very quickly.

Reference has already been made to our committee report on 11-to-16 education, which requires improvement. The previous Government rejected nearly all our findings, which came from evidence from all parts of the school sector: teachers; headteachers; students; Ofsted; unions; think tanks; and awarding bodies. They all told us that

GCSEs were not fit for purpose and did not equip young people for life and work. The knowledge-rich syllabus bashes facts into young minds for them to regurgitate—then promptly forget. Our recommendations were based on promoting skills, practical achievement and preparation for the future. My mantra, as a one-time teacher, was that learning should be fun. Young people should enjoy what they are learning. We look forward to the review and hope that our committee will feed into it.

Like the noble Lord, Lord Lexden, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Monckton and Lady Fraser, we Lib Dems do not believe that taxing education is right. The imposition of VAT on independent schools will not affect the Etons and Winchesters of this world but will, as has already been said, affect the many small independent schools where parents of limited means try to do their best for children who struggle in state schools. If this is the straw that breaks the camel's back and forces them to move their children into the state sector, it will be an added cost to the state and will certainly not release the amount of money that the Government hope for state teachers. This seems to be the politics of envy rather than clear thinking.

Can the Minister say whether there will there be an impact assessment on SEND children, on the arts, as was referenced by the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, on small faith schools and on military families? My own children, with an RAF father, faced multiple schools until they had continuity with a boarding school.

We all wish to see the 7% of independent students not taking so many top posts and more state-educated students breaking through possible nepotism to become leaders in worlds that they may understand rather better than the perceived cosseted minority. However, as the product of an independent school myself, I assure noble Lords that I never felt cosseted, that it was not all fun and that many, particularly of my generation, have the scars to prove it.

The answer is surely to improve the state sector, as our committee recommended, to ensure that state pupils have the chance to achieve across the board and to learn public speaking and presentation, creativity—as set out by the noble Lord, Lord Vaizey—leadership skills and self-confidence. They must be given opportunities to achieve wherever their talents take them. These are features of the best independent schools and should be the benchmarks of good state schools, too.

My final ask of the noble Baroness is in connection with my personal passion—vocational education. We must, as the noble Baroness, Lady Wolf, set out, support further education colleges in the wide-ranging transformative work that they do. But T-levels are a new and untested product; BTECs have a track record of encouraging young people into work-based paths, but with respect from universities to study for degrees, too. It would be irresponsible in the extreme to stop funding BTECs in the forlorn hope that T-levels will provide answers to prayers. I entirely agree with the noble Lords, Lord Knight and Lord Watson, and the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, on their appeal not to defund BTECs.

I worked for City & Guilds for 20 years and have many more years' experience of the value of work-based qualifications, which are needed more than ever as we seek industrial growth for our economy. Please do not cut off proven qualifications in the forlorn search for something better. We need to strive for esteem for practical qualifications equal to the academic qualifications that the last Government prized so heavily.

If the ambitious industrial strategy is to stand a chance, it will need the practical skills and commitments of our young people. Giving their success the kitemark of valued qualifications will be an essential part of that. I wish the Government every success in their ambitions. We are very happy to support where we can and to offer advice where we are unable to agree on their proposals.

12.47 pm

Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne (Con): My Lords, it gives me great pleasure to follow the noble Baroness in commenting on the gracious Speech. I pay tribute to the noble Baroness the Minister, whose maiden speech was wonderful and enthralling. I thoroughly enjoyed it, thank her and ask her to pass on my congratulations.

The Minister remarked on the need to reduce inequality of provision in the Mental Health Act, for example. I wonder whether she might like my thoughts and those of my colleagues outside this Chamber on the need to reduce the need for mental health services at all. In other words, we have a rising number of mental health requirements and I believe that that could be tackled before anything else. Reducing inequalities is imperative, but it is more important to reduce the need for mental health provision—in other words, to strengthen the mental health of our total population.

This is particularly important for children, and perhaps that is where I might be able to offer something. We now know that musical training affects cognitive development quite dramatically. There are now studies, which some of my team have participated in internationally, as part of their charitable work. They make it very clear that the plasticity and growth of the brain are affected by music studies. Such evidence has not been available before.

The charity I chair, the AMAR International Charitable Foundation, has access to such evidence because we have been working with the neediest of the needy: victims of genocide. The cultural group in this case is the Yazidis, but it does not really matter which one it is, simply because the musical training we have offered has very clearly had an impact on the brain. By “the brain” I mean, in this context, the mental health of those who have suffered what the United Nations says is the worst crime against humanity of all. After a decade of training, which is imperative inside the camps themselves and with the victims, we have firm proof of the difference that it makes to mental health. Indeed, we have had a tour of the Yazidi choir we formed in Oxford University and in the Jerusalem Chamber, and also in other places in Windsor and Oxford. I hope to bring it back another time before

[BARONESS NICHOLSON OF WINTERBOURNE]

too long, if I can find some funding, because the mental health impact of coming here has been dramatic as well.

Of course, that is not the only example I can offer. As a former student of the Royal Academy and of the Royal College of Music and a graduate in teaching there, I was an early board member of the Nordoff and Robbins charity, which, as your Lordships may know, is one of the most powerful and important international music therapy charities of all. I was lucky enough to be on its board in the very early days. I had to stop after a while because I moved into computer programming, which was non-conducive to the timing of the charity's board meetings. None the less, I will give your Lordships one example of how music training can impact on physically badly developed people.

A small boy who was a long-term patient in a hospital had only one movement, which was his right arm. He could not control it. It was the only piece of his body that moved at all. It went up and down erratically, all day and all night. The lead music therapist, who was an ancient lady at the time and was very experienced indeed, was asked to have a look. She went into the hospital and sat at the far end of the ward—at that time it was in wards—so the boy did not notice her, and she watched his arm. After a week or two, she steadily moved nearer and nearer to his bed. By the time she was sitting beside him, he did not realise that he was being scrutinised, because she was then a familiar figure on the ward. Her instrument was a very small drum, which she used with her fingers. Sitting by the bed, she watched this erratic arm. After a little while she started tapping the drum in line, as far as she possibly could, with his erratic movements. After about a week, she felt she had mastered the erratic movements and then, the week after that, she taught him to follow her. Six months later, for the first time in his life, this teenage boy was feeding himself.

I say again that the plasticity of the brain is impacted by music training. We now have this information. I therefore ask the Minister to think hard about music in all schools—not music hubs but actual practical music in schools—and about looking at music as a therapy and health tool rather than just as something enjoyable.

12.53 pm

The Lord Bishop of Lincoln: My Lords, I share your Lordships' appreciation of the noble Baronesses, Lady Barran and Lady Jolly, and I welcome the appointment of our new Ministers. The noble Baroness, Lady Merron, will know as much as I do about Lincolnshire and that, particularly in its coastal towns and rural areas, Lincolnshire suffers from intergenerational poverty, which has a very direct impact on children. I think your Lordships' House has received two reports in the last 15 years about the poverty in our coastal towns, but nothing much has changed. If I have heard the Government correctly, I am glad to hear them express their intention to pay more attention to rural and coastal poverty, which is often hidden away when it is not in our big cities.

Therefore, I also particularly look forward to the progress of the children's well-being Bill and the work of the newly announced child poverty unit. In moving forward in this area, how do His Majesty's Government plan to involve faith communities in addressing these needs, particularly considering the concentration of faith communities in areas of poverty and deprivation, as my right reverend friend the Bishop of London referred to earlier?

I follow other Members of this House, particularly the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, and the noble Lord, Lord Griffiths, in drawing attention to children with special educational needs and the Government's intention in relation to what has already been said in the gracious Speech, requiring all schools to co-operate with the local authority on school admissions, SEND inclusion and place planning by giving local authorities greater powers to help them deliver their functions on school admissions and ensure that those admissions account for the needs of communities. The challenges facing provision for children and young people with special needs cross all sectors, and the Government can assist by tackling the long delays and ongoing bottleneck in assessments, and by increasing the support offered to schools. The current system has created a shortage of school places in specialist schools, as has been said, and insufficient resources are provided in mainstream schools to offer support for children's needs.

This all has a real impact on children's mental health, especially in relation to poverty as an additional burden. I applaud the work and ambition of the Children's Society, which intends to create a whole series of mental health hubs for children and young people in Newham and the rest of the country.

I hope that we will continue to tackle poverty by joining up all sorts of agencies and bodies within government and beyond, as expressed in the letter recently issued to all Members of this House. On the bus to school when I was a teenager, the conductor regularly told the passengers to hurry up and take our time. I know the Minister will agree that there is a real urgency to the task group's work, the fruits of which will need to be seen in sustained investment and action to support schools, children and young people in the long term. We need justice for each one of those 700,000 children who need to be lifted out of poverty.

12.56 pm

Lord Bird (CB): I welcome the new Government. It is a great relief, I have to say. We all need a change, and we hope the change will lead to the kind of delivery that we need socially in this country.

But I have a problem. My problem is that over the years I have dealt with many Governments who have come in with many promises, and most of them leave not as new brooms but as old brooms. Therefore, I worry and will really engage in trying to guide the new Government into doing things that people do not normally do when there is a crisis.

In 1940 we had a crisis. We did not know whether Great Britain was going to survive, but at that very moment in the beginning and the middle of the crisis, Beveridge was dug out of retirement and laid the foundations for the 1942 report that led to the creation

of the welfare state in 1948. While we were in a crisis, we did not just work on the basis of responding to the crisis.

There is a crisis around children. We know that many children are in poverty and are inheriting poverty from their family. There is the crisis of our prisons. On Monday this week the *Guardian* announced this enormous crisis in prisons, and the new Government did not know it was going to be so bad. I do not blame them, but that crisis in the prisons is largely because 90% of those people in prisons failed at school and 90% of them inherited poverty. So when are we going to address poverty? When will we move away from a situation in which the NHS spends 50% of its money on people suffering from food poverty? When will we stop leaving police officers to sort out poverty, because they largely deal with people who come from poverty? When will we move away from teachers having to cope with poverty? All we are doing is weighing down government departments that have no skills or ability to tackle poverty.

I do not think anybody in government really knows. It is not just this Government; it is the previous Government and the Government before. They do not know because they do not converge their energies around poverty. They do not concatenate and bring together. Eight government departments deal with poverty. That is why the NHS, the DWP and the Prison Service all suffer from the weight of poverty which they are not trained to address. If you go to a doctor and say, "I'm very ill", the doctor is not going to say, "You're suffering from poverty, so I'm going to get you out of poverty". That is not the doctor's job. I hope that the Government will look carefully at my Private Member's Bill, which is about a ministry of poverty prevention. Let us bring together all the examples of people who have broken through poverty and the government departments that actually do some interesting work. Let us have an audit of what works. Let us have a government department that will help us dismantle poverty in the same way as in 1940 we said, "We are in the middle of a crisis, but we are not going to simply keep dealing with the effects. We are not going to deal with the crisis continuously; we are going to try to turn the tap off". In my opinion, that is the best thing that this Government could do. It may mean standing back and saying, "We're not quite sure what to do", but that is not a bad place to be because then they can start to create the thinking that will bring about change.

1.01 pm

Baroness Lister of Burtersett (Lab): My Lords, I welcome my noble friends to their important new ministerial roles, and our Government's mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. A fundamental barrier, as recognised, is poverty, especially child poverty. That is closely linked to women's poverty and is part of the intersecting inequalities which, as the Fairness Foundation argues convincingly, will if untackled prevent the achievement of the Government's missions generally. It is clear from a growing body of research that progress on education and health requires progress on child poverty, the risk and depth of which grew to shocking levels under the previous Government. I

thus applaud the promise of free breakfast clubs in primary schools and the regulation of school uniforms in the wonderfully titled children's well-being Bill, although I hope we can in time look also to the extension of free school meals.

The manifesto commitment to an ambitious child poverty strategy is crucial to the achievement of the opportunity and other missions. The swift establishment of a child poverty task force and a new child poverty unit was music to my ears. The task force will rightly work with a range of stakeholders, which I hope will include the voices of those experiencing poverty. We can learn from the strengths and weaknesses of the Scottish and Welsh strategies, including the need for a clear action plan with targets. The targets set by the previous Labour Government, subsequently scrapped, helped to galvanise action at national and local levels. I also emphasise the need for the strategy to include children in migrant families, highlighted by the recent joint inquiry of the APPGs on poverty and migration into the effects on poverty of immigration, asylum and refugee policies, in which I was involved. A cross-government strategy will of course include the early years and good work, but repair of the social security system, badly damaged since 2010, has to be a central plank, as argued by charities in the field that see the impact of social security cuts on children and their families.

The opportunities mission plan states that it will:

"Make security the foundation of opportunity".

It is therefore puzzling that it makes no mention of social security, the primary purpose of which is to guarantee financial security through social means. Shredded by post-2010 Governments, it no longer fulfils that purpose, so now is the time to put the security back into social security, to provide the foundation for opportunity. As the manifesto states:

"Delivering opportunities for all means that everyone should be treated with respect and dignity".

That includes social security recipients and the language used when talking about them. Please let there be no talk of handouts. Social security is a human right.

Inevitably it will take time to repair the damage done but, following the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury and many others, I urge the immediate abolition of the two-child limit, which currently affects 1.6 million children, otherwise I am afraid we will be developing a child poverty strategy with one hand tied behind our back. Together with the benefit cap, which also needs reviewing, it most hurts larger families, including some minority-ethnic families.

The implications for the opportunities mission of retaining the limit were brought out in a recent study by the CPAG—of which I am honorary president—the Church of England and others. Here is an example: a lone parent with three children told how her 12 year-old son had been off school for over one and a half weeks because she could not afford to replace his ripped school shoes, and the school threatened isolation all day if he wore black trainers. She said:

"My son is embarrassed for not being able to go to school and wasn't even able to tell his friends why".

Can we really not find the necessary money and investment in children? As Gordon Brown points out,

[BARONESS LISTER OF BURTERSETT]

we need to factor in the cost of not acting—for instance, in terms of children taken into care and the NHS.

Alongside the cuts directed at children are years of freezes and real-value cuts in benefit rates that have left them totally inadequate to meet basic needs, as evidence to the recent Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into benefit levels demonstrated. I hope the Government will conduct the kind of review called for by its report. I hope they will also heed its recommendation to extend the local authority household support fund. Even if it is a sticking plaster, filling some of the gaping holes in the social security system, it is a vital local lifeline. Due to expire in September, it would leave only the discretionary welfare assistance that replaced the Social Fund that many local authorities no longer provide. A temporary extension would provide stability, prevent even greater reliance on food banks and allow for consultation on a longer-term statutory local crisis support scheme.

In conclusion, to cite Gordon Brown again,

“we need a clear commitment from the current government to rebuild a social security system that will genuinely protect people”. That was directed to the last Government, but I hope it will now fall on the more sympathetic ears of a Government who promise security and demolition of the barriers to opportunity, including the overwhelming barrier of child poverty.

1.08 pm

The Earl of Effingham (Con): My Lords, it is a great privilege to participate in this debate on His Majesty's gracious Speech. I congratulate the noble Baronesses, Lady Monckton and Lady Smith, on their excellent maiden speeches. The noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, is a leading force in her work for children with disabilities, and I am sure they will both make extremely valuable contributions to your Lordships' House.

The premise of my desire to speak in this debate is that I truly believe we can create life-changing opportunities for all families through simple and inexpensive tweaks to the education system, with the desired knock-on effect into healthcare. The children's well-being Bill will require free breakfast clubs in primary schools. The phrases “You are what you eat” and “Healthy body, healthy mind” ring true. Food education is critical, so if we can teach children from a young age the necessity of eating well and enjoying a balanced nutritional diet, that will be the cornerstone for them to reach their full potential in every aspect of their lives.

While it is essential for children to have breakfast, they must also learn the difference between what is good and bad for them. Ultra-processed foods currently account for around 80% of calories in packed lunches and 65% of calories in school meals, so providing children with more ultra-processed food at breakfast must be avoided at all costs.

The manifesto also refers to the national curriculum and flags

“protecting time for physical education”.

This is a welcome commitment, as currently only 47% of children and young people are meeting the Chief Medical Officer's time guidelines for taking part in sport and physical activity, despite every set of medical research proving that the benefits of exercise are huge.

The children's well-being Bill also refers to one in four children living in poverty, which is a shocking and unacceptable statistic for a developed economy. Generational poverty can be solved. Basic financial education would help and demonstrate that just £6 per week invested from the age of 18 at a 7% annualised return would produce a tax-free lump sum of £135,000 by the age of 68, which could then fund the stability of a home purchase for the next generation.

On healthcare, the Secretary of State has correctly said that the health of the nation and the health of the economy are inextricably linked. If we put into place the right plans for food education, physical education and financial education, the NHS crisis will be over and gross domestic product will increase incrementally.

So I ask the Minister: who will run these breakfast clubs and how can we ensure that the breakfast offered is nutritionally excellent and not high in sugar? Can the current daily mile programme in schools become the daily three miles and made compulsory for every school in the country as part of the curriculum? It would ensure that all schoolchildren meet the Chief Medical Officer's guideline of 60 minutes of exercise per day. What steps will the Government take to ensure that there is an appropriate element of investment in financial education in the curriculum?

From a healthcare perspective, for both physical and mental health, prevention is better than cure. If we can instil in our schoolchildren a love of good food, a love of exercise or team sport and the desire to invest for their and their families' future, the majority of issues that people have to deal with on a regular basis disappear.

I will leave noble Lords with a statistic: a 20% reduction in the six major disease categories that keep people out of work could raise GDP by £26 billion annually within 10 years and produce fiscal savings from increased tax revenues and reduced benefits payments of £13 billion annually, again within 10 years. That is £39 billion saved every year.

1.12 pm

Lord Faulkner of Worcester (Lab): My Lords, like other speakers in your Lordships' debate today, I would like to extend the warmest of welcomes to my noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern and to congratulate her on her quite excellent maiden speech from the Front Bench. I should just say that it is particularly gratifying to us in Worcestershire that she has included “of Malvern” in her title.

I am also delighted to see my noble friend Lady Merron in her place as the Health Minister in your Lordships' House. She was a brilliant shadow Minister and her appointment is wholly deserved. She has always been a great supporter of the health issue that has been closest to my heart in the 25 years that I have been here and which happily featured in the gracious Speech on Wednesday. I refer of course to the

Government's decision to go ahead with legislation based on the previous Administration's Bill eventually to phase out tobacco smoking completely. This will do more to deliver Labour's manifesto commitment to halve the gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions in England. Smoking is responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in society, with smoking rates among those working in routine and manual jobs almost three times higher than rates for those in managerial and professional roles. Tackling this inequality will alleviate a major health and economic burden on regions and nations across the United Kingdom.

In addition to preventing the next generation becoming addicted to smoking, we must also ensure that the 6 million existing smokers get the support they need to quit and are not left behind as we move towards a smoke-free future. Can my noble friend confirm that the Government will publish a road map to a smoke-free Britain, as was committed to in Labour's health mission last year? A new strategy is urgently needed to set out the measures necessary to end smoking for every group in society.

My noble friend will be aware of the powerful open letter sent to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health published in the *BMJ* on 8 July. It pointed out:

"The last Labour government launched Smoking Kills, the first cross-government tobacco control plan, a year after coming to power in 1997. This drove substantial declines in smoking among adults and children after two decades when little or no progress had been made".

Labour cannot achieve its manifesto commitment to halve differences in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions unless it prioritises the ending of smoking.

While most smokers start as children, every day 350 young adults start smoking, risking a lifetime of addiction, disease and premature death. Smoking puts pressure on our NHS and social care system, but the greatest financial impact is due to lost productivity. The estimated cost to the UK economy in 2023 was £55 billion, made up of £2.2 billion to the NHS, £18 billion in social care costs and £34 billion in lost productivity.

Labour backed the Tobacco and Vapes Bill in Opposition and in its manifesto. Indeed, phasing out smoking was a policy put forward by Labour before the Conservative Prime Minister introduced the legislation. Measures to prevent vapes being marketed to children, which will be part of the Bill, are urgently needed. I do not doubt for one minute the sincerity of the Health Ministers who served in the previous Administration in tackling the scourge of smoking, particularly the noble Lords, Lord Markham and Lord Kamall, who of course were always urged on by the indefatigable noble Lord, Lord Young of Cookham.

I always had the feeling, however, that far too much attention was being paid to the lobbying of the tobacco industry, which spotted early on that vapes offered a lucrative alternative means of getting its customers addicted to nicotine. Big tobacco killed over 100 million people in the 20th century and is on track to kill 1 billion in the 21st, mainly in low and middle-income

countries. The UK now has the chance to lead the world in phasing out smoking. The new Government must seize it with both hands and I wholeheartedly support the inclusion of a tobacco and vapes Bill in the gracious Speech.

1.17 pm

Baroness Meyer (Con): My Lords, I add my congratulations to the noble Baronesses, Lady Smith of Malvern and Lady Merron, on their new posts on the Front Bench. I also pay tribute to my noble friend Lady Barran for her excellent and diligent work over the years.

I too was surprised to hear about the reappearance of the ban on conversion therapy in the King's Speech. It is a very complex issue which needs further consideration and risks reigniting the culture wars that the Government want to end. The barbaric methods used in the 1950s are now illegal, but activists argue that new legislation is necessary to address more subtle forms of psychological and emotional coercion not currently covered. While these concerns are relevant, such a ban would also conflict with fundamental rights such as freedom of thought and religion, freedom of expression and the right to a private life. In view of these contradictions, can the Minister tell this House what legal definitions would apply to such a ban?

My greatest fear, as the noble Earl, Lord Leicester, mentioned earlier, is the unintended consequences such as a ban could inflict on children who are struggling with gender identity. Medical interventions have permanent and devastating effects. Many teenagers who have undergone treatment for gender dysphoria now regret being transitioned. I and other noble Lords have shared Keira Bell's story in this House before and we will keep sharing it if it helps prevent other children falling into the same trap.

As a teenager, Keira Bell was put on puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones. At the age of 20, she underwent a double mastectomy. These treatments gave her masculine features, such as facial and body hair and a deep voice but, as she transitioned, she realised that it was not what she needed. I quote her:

"As I matured, I recognized that gender dysphoria was a symptom of my overall misery, not its cause".

At 22, she decided to detransition, but to this day she is still suffering from irreversible consequences. My heart bleeds for her. What Keira needed, and what others like her need, is space and support to thoroughly explore their thoughts, not life-altering medication and surgery. As she puts it, "If only someone had provided me with therapy and thoroughly explored my thoughts when I was a teenager—I could have been spared the trauma and I could now be living a much happier and fulfilling life".

A conversion therapy ban must not follow in these disastrous footsteps. The *Cass Review* raised significant concerns about the potential criminalisation of clinicians under new conversion therapy bans. She pointed out that such legislation could create an environment of fear among therapists, making them anxious about conducting appropriate exploratory conversations with young patients. Similarly, parents should be free to

[BARONESS MEYER]

have open and honest discussions with their gender-confused children, without fear of prosecution, so legislation requires a careful balancing of safeguarding to address potential risks and ensure the well-being of all affected parties, particularly children.

The Government say that a ban must not cover legitimate psychological support, treatment or non-directive counselling and that it must respect the important role that teachers, religious leaders, parents and carers can have in supporting those exploring their sexual orientation. Can the Minister tell this House how they will legislate to ban one type of therapy while respecting these safeguards? Furthermore, can she tell us which groups the Government will be consulting before pushing such legislation?

1.22 pm

Baroness Greenfield (CB): My Lords, as a neuroscientist I welcome consideration of mental health in the gracious Speech. I declare an interest as founder and CEO of a biotech company, Neuro-Bio Ltd, where we are striving towards a novel and effective treatment for Alzheimer's disease. I was therefore sadly disappointed that no measure was made in the gracious Speech of the urgent issues relating to such a devastating health problem.

Why must the Government make dementia a priority? Almost 1 million people are living with the condition in the UK, and we expect this to rise to 1.4 million by 2040, due to our ageing population. Dementia costs the UK £42 billion a year, rising to more than £90 billion by 2040. One in three people born today will develop dementia, and it is a leading cause of death.

As things stand, dementia presents us with three broad challenges. The first is social care, an issue that many noble Lords have already touched on as a clear omission in the gracious Speech. Seventy per cent of residents in older-age care homes in England have dementia, while only 45% of care staff are currently recorded as having any level of appropriate training, so what could be the solution? A long-term workforce strategy: social care staff should be required to undertake dementia training, mapped to the *Dementia Training Standards Framework* or equivalent.

Secondly, there should be a sustainable funding model for quality personalised care, which pools the risk of care costs and is centred on achieving affordable care for everyone living with dementia.

The next challenge is diagnosis. More than one in three people living with dementia in England are currently undiagnosed. There is a significant regional variation in diagnosis rates, moreover, by more than 40%. What could be the solution? A target for a more ambitious dementia diagnosis rate should be a government priority. Secondly, there should be a commitment to better training for healthcare professionals. Thirdly, there should be funding for public awareness campaigns. Fourthly, there should be increasing quality and quantity of diagnosis, data collection and publication.

The final challenge is treatment. There are drugs that, for the first time, can slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease in the earliest stages of diagnosis.

Tens of thousands of UK citizens could potentially benefit from these drugs if they were approved. However, the healthcare system is not yet ready to deliver such treatments, due to the lack of early diagnosis and specialist diagnostics. What could be the solution? First, a satisfactory plan should be developed by NHS England and the Department for Health and Social Care to be thoroughly prepared and ready to start to deliver these new treatments for dementia. Secondly, the current drugs being assessed are just the beginning. Though welcome, they do not halt the neurodegeneration process; they only slow it down. However, there is the very real prospect—still at the research stage, admittedly—of innovative treatments that could do far more and be much more effective, perhaps even halting cell death altogether. The biggest barrier to progressing such game-changing therapy at pace is, quite simply and inevitably, inadequate funding.

To conclude, dementia is the biggest unmet clinical need of our time and, as such, it surely should have been a high priority in government plans in the gracious Speech. While diseases such as cancer are serious, often disabling and frequently terminal, you can still reminisce over old photographs and still spend meaningful and precious time with your grandchildren. These life-enhancing moments are gradually closed off for an individual with dementia, and it is a spectre that haunts us all. We need to invest funds immediately in rising to the three challenges of social care, diagnosis and, above all, innovative and effective treatment, so that we could finally offer, perhaps, the prospect of our grandchildren one day asking, as we did in the past for smallpox and polio, "Was Alzheimer's ever a problem?"

1.26 pm

Baroness Blower (Lab): My Lords, there is much to welcome in the gracious Speech, and I look forward to working with our new Front Bench to try to move forward every single aspect of it. Before I move into my main remarks, I would like to thank the noble Baroness, Lady Barran. We very often did not agree, but we did that in a very agreeable fashion—and sometimes we did agree, which was always quite helpful.

I begin with the review of the curriculum and assessment. It is an exciting prospect, and the National Education Union has said that we need a broader vision for education that supports well-being, allows all students to learn effectively and uses a variety of formats to capture all that students achieve and contribute. The current curriculum is too narrow and constrained. As the NEU and others have repeatedly pointed out, arts, music, dance and drama need to have a greater place in every student's education, but so too do all the skills listed by the noble Lords, Lord Baker and Lord Aberdare. As my noble friend Lady Morris said, we really need to look at the curriculum model: boldness is required here.

On assessment, it goes without saying that assessment should be fit for purpose at all key stages. Key stage 2 SATs have a distorting effect on the educational experience of years 5 and 6 pupils and contribute nothing valuable to their educational journey. A different approach is needed. Many academics and the NEU have much to

contribute on this. At secondary level, there is widespread support for re-examining why we persist with GCSEs at 16-plus and very deep concern about the defunding of BTECs. I hope all these aspects will be given proper consideration, especially in the light of ongoing critical reports, not the least just this week, about the role and value of T-levels, as mentioned by my noble friend Lord Knight. I know there are very many in the academic community and those with a great concern for education who will want to give the best of counsel to Becky Francis, and I hope she will be given the opportunity to take the widest possible view.

Ensuring that all schools will have to co-operate with their local authority on school admissions—rather than academies just going their own sweet way—on SEND inclusion and on place planning is particularly welcome. I echo all the questions on this from my noble friend Lord Watson of Invergowrie, and I look forward to hearing the answers.

As we all know, the school workforce is composed not just of teachers—who will once again be required to have qualified teacher status, which is a very good decision—but the essential school support staff, who will enjoy a seat at the national table on pay and conditions with the reinstatement of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body. It is a pity, though, that there is not yet a proposal for such a national structure for collective bargaining for teachers. I earnestly hope that that can follow in short order. We continue to face significant problems with recruitment and retention of teachers, so while the reinstatement of QTS is a welcome signal from the Government about the status of teachers, it will not help with paying the rent or the mortgage. Significant improvement in teachers' pay is needed. I hope the profession will not be disappointed when the Government announce the outcome of and their response to the STRB report.

Breakfast clubs are very welcome, as they will help the one in four children—according to 2023 figures—living in poverty. However, as so many anti-poverty organisations and campaigners have said, removing the two-child benefit cap would help so many families now. A task force may be a good long-term idea, but lifting the cap now is what is called for. Further steps must also be taken on school food. The NEU suggests that there are economic benefits as well as educational, social and nutritional ones to making sure that children receive free school meals.

I welcome the bringing of multi-academy trusts into the inspection system, but note that Ofsted is not held in high regard by the profession or many parents. Better ways of evaluating the work of schools and multi-academy trusts exist and function in other jurisdictions. I very much hope that the Government, in their welcome ambition for education, will soon give consideration to them.

1.31 pm

Lord Wrottesley (Con): My Lords, it gives me great pleasure to take part in today's debate on His Majesty's gracious Speech. I sincerely wish the Minister and His Majesty's Government success with their legislative programme.

I will focus on the importance of sport in the context of this debate. I would have liked to have seen more reference in the gracious Speech to sport and its vital importance as a guiding force in people's lives, especially for young people. As I hope all noble Lords appreciate, sport is the most practical way to learn many life skills, from its benefits to a person's mental health and well-being to being able to deal with healthy competition in a positive environment. I must declare an interest in that I have had and continue to have various roles in sport governance, as set out in the register of interests.

I want to interrogate the matter of sport following on from the mention of the children's well-being Bill. Can the Minister give more information about how sport will feature in this Bill? How do His Majesty's Government plan to increase participation in grass-roots sports and back the commitment to the "Get Active" campaign, which set a target to get 3.5 million more people classed as active by 2030?

In the gracious Speech, there is also a proposed Bill on football governance. I genuinely welcome this. Football is almost part of our national psyche, and some might even suggest a religion—I beg forgiveness from the Lords spiritual. Football often acts as a gateway for children to take an interest in sports and keeping active, not to mention the huge community and economic benefits that flow from that. We have only to look at last weekend to see the incredibly positive effect that football and sport can have—and it did not even come home.

It is incredible how diverse our nation's sport that we all rally behind is, from tennis, cricket and golf to all the Olympic and Paralympic sports that will be on show over the coming days and weeks in Paris, as well as field hockey, netball, volleyball and even ice hockey—I declare an interest as chair of Ice Hockey UK. I strongly believe that the wider we cast our net and embrace some of these maybe less well known or glamorous sports, rather than focus so intensely on mainstream sports, the richer, more diverse and more active a population we will have.

In my roles in sport I see first hand how, across all communities, young and old alike benefit from all sports. In the UK, we host an increasing number of major international sporting events for the nation to pull together and embrace our nation's top sporting teams and athletes. That can only be a wonderful thing for the nation and our great nation's citizens.

I am chair of Ice Hockey UK, which has been asked by our international federation to bid for the world championships in 2029. We are on UK Sport's preferred major and mega events hosting list, but due to the event's size and prestige it would require DCMS support. However, we are caught in no man's land, before there is a fiscal event of this Government. Will the Minister please kindly and urgently take this up with her colleagues so we can submit a letter of intent to the international federation by 1 September?

If we were to miss out on this incredible opportunity, we as a nation would lose out on over 300,000 visitors to the UK, a projected direct economic impact of £36 million and an indirect impact of £57 million—all for a modest £1 million to £1.5 million of investment.

[LORD WROTTESLEY]

This investment would see the growth of a truly global sport in the UK and showcase what the UK has to offer to our existing and potential future international partners.

We have a small window of opportunity to submit our bid to host the world championship before other more established nations in the sport start bidding again. The National Hockey League, better known as the NHL, is the biggest professional ice hockey league in the world and the fifth top professional sports league in the world by market value. It sits just behind our own football Premier League at over \$6.4 billion. I can see a day when the NHL comes to the UK. Please can the Minister look at this matter urgently before the deadline runs out on 1 September?

1.37 pm

Lord Murphy of Torfaen (Lab): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, on her retirement and wish her well; she has been a great Member of our House. I also pay tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, on her maiden speech. I particularly want to welcome to the Front Bench my noble friend Lady Merron, who is going to listen to my pleas in few seconds, and my very good, noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern. I think we served together in the Cabinet for about 16 years—gosh, how time flies and things change over 16 years. Her maiden speech was brilliant, and I wish her well in her new job.

Like my noble friend, I was a teacher—though long before her—and it was a great privilege to be one. I am glad we are concentrating on education and music today, because I want briefly to talk about what has happened to the arts and education. Over the last two decades, including when I was in government, we simply did not spend enough on the arts, and it has been frozen. The result of that over the last 15 to 20 years is serious underfunding. Only this very day, the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama has announced the closure of its outreach drama and music programmes for young people in Wales. Some years ago, I chaired a review into the college, and those outreach programmes were wonderful and brilliant, but they have gone because there is no money left. The college is one of the best in our country—it produced Anthony Hopkins and Richard Burton. To see those outreach programmes go is very sad and disappointing.

In the time I have left, I will mention the crisis facing opera in our country. It too has been seriously underfunded over the last 15 to 20 years. The Arts Councils, particularly the English Arts Council—I may be a Welshman but I follow what it does—has made some rather daft decisions on opera over the last year or so. The English National Opera, for example, is being forced out of this city in a very artificial way. Believe it or not, much of the funding for the Welsh National Opera comes from the English Arts Council because of the touring it does. It is in deep, serious trouble. Opera North is facing difficulties. The only opera company still operating relatively straightforwardly is the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden.

That is a national disgrace. If we compare ourselves with European countries, Germany has 59 opera companies, France has 17, and every other major

European country outclasses us in the provision of opera. The answer sometimes is that opera is elitist and that only wealthy people can go and watch this great art form. That is nonsense. You pay far more for a ticket to a football match than to watch a great opera. The problem is that if we continue to be in a situation where, in effect, four opera houses become one and touring disappears, it will become even more elitist as the years go by.

It may seem a rather niche thing to talk about today amid the wide, huge issues that we are debating, but it is important. How we gauge our society is how we deal with the arts as well, including opera. I would hate to see that there are no opera companies left in England and Wales in a few years' time, other than those that go to great houses and charge huge amounts of money to go and see it.

I make a plea for my noble friends the new Ministers to talk to their colleagues. I would like to talk to my colleagues in Wales but I cannot find a Minister there at the moment—they have all gone. When they return to ministerial government in Cardiff, I will certainly approach the new Culture Minister. In the meantime, we have brand new DCMS Ministers in our Government. I hope that my noble friends on the Front Bench can plead the case with their colleagues and perhaps even give me an opportunity to do exactly the same thing.

1.42 pm

Lord Addington (LD): My Lords, first, I congratulate my noble friend Lady Jolly, with a sense of sadness. She is someone who arrived, went straight into the hard work and has stayed there for such a long period of time. We will miss her at all levels, and I hope that her retirement in north Cornwall is fun—fun should come first, she deserves that—and also that she does not gloat too publicly about it.

When it comes to maiden speeches today, there is of course the noble Baroness, Lady Smith. I congratulate her both on her role and a very good speech. With her track record, what else did we expect? I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, as well. Both speeches were linked by the emphasis on education, and it is there that I would like to put most of my efforts, although the noble Lord, Lord Wrottesley, just spoke about the football Bill. I will be having a good look at that, about whether we can get something for sport in general out of that bit of administrative mess. Let us wait and see.

When it comes to education, I will concentrate on the area where I have to declare interests. I am chairman of Microlink PC, an assistive technology company, president of the British Dyslexia Association, and I am severely dyslexic myself—that is, apparently, the official definition.

When I look at the current state of special educational needs in this country, I know why these things were done. The road to hell is paved with good intentions: we may not be in hell yet, but we are certainly at about the third stage of purgatory. We have a system which has encouraged specialist law firms to form, to make sure that parents can get the help that they are legally entitled to. If that is not a definition of failure, I do not know what is.

Other Ministers have helped to put some sanity into this system. The noble Baroness, Lady Barran, probably deserves some credit for making small changes there as much as she could. As a Minister, she did not need to have assistive technology explained to her—the first I had ever come across. We must have a saner approach to how we deal with this. The idea that you have a £6,000 budget for every child with special educational needs to come out of a school is a fiction. It just does not happen, because that £6,000 is taken away from the school and every other pupil. It would be infinitely saner to start investing some of that fictional spend on specialism and better awareness within the school. You will take the pressure off, and many people can be dealt with like that.

Certain things scare local authorities—which are another big factor here; they are at war. How many years ago did we break the £100 million barrier, with local authorities contesting EHC plans and then losing 90% of the time? It is ridiculous. Can we do something so that the schools are better placed to handle this? Many more people can be helped in the school by a proper, trained person—and be given some actual incentive to do so. The system is frightened of itself. The lawyers come in, and the articulate and informed parents get the help that they need—but those who are not articulate and informed do not. We have to change that.

I realise that I am running out of time. Can we also have certain other things that are needed, such as flexibility? Dyslexia is only one condition. Systematic synthetic phonics is a great phonic tradition for learning to read, but it overloads the short-term memory of dyslexics and other people who have problems reading. The best defence I ever heard from a civil servant on that approach was, “Well, some dyslexics learn with it”. Oh, so some do not? Can we bring back a system where flexibility is taken a must-have when dealing with special educational needs? If we get only more central guidance on how the whole school should conduct itself, we will have more failure. I plead with the Minister to take on board the fact that she will have to address things by individual need not by diktat.

1.47 pm

Lord Prentis of Leeds (Lab): My Lords, like others, I welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Smith. What an impressive maiden speech. It is great to see her appointed to a ministerial position and I know that she will do a great job.

The gracious Speech was a breath of fresh air and a very public affirmation to our nation of the Government's clear intent: a laser-like focus on growing the economy, coupled with a raft of legislation that will change lives for the better. In recent weeks, like so many in this Chamber, I have listened on doorsteps across the country to so many people—people whose lives have been put on hold; people facing insecure futures, who are despondent and untrusting; and people with little hope that things can get better. That is why the King's Speech is so important: it offers a ray of hope that things not only can change but will change.

It is only right that the drive to grow the economy takes centre stage. Affordable housing, the skills agenda and the new deal for working people are all essential cogs in that drive for growth—but they are not the only essential cogs. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was right in stating that the new Government will retain the founding principle on which our NHS was born—free at the point of need—and to have a government mission to rebuild an NHS fit for the future. It is an ambitious programme, especially when so many parts of our health services are under pressure or in crisis.

Six million people in England are on consultant-led waiting lists. Reports from the ONS say that it could be as high as 10 million—well over 10% of the population of England waiting for treatment. Procedures are cancelled; referrals are delayed or simply refused. Public satisfaction has slumped to an all-time low. So many people are waiting and unable to work, on sick leave. That is why the new Government's pledge to reduce waiting lists is so important to grow the economy.

Illness and poor health are a serious challenge for the economy, society and the new Government, who must address it. It is right that a new generation of ideas drive that reform. There will be no going back to the future. Too often in the past, public service workers have seen themselves as victims of change, not part of the solution. This Government are committed to working with the health unions to ensure that the workforce is brought on board.

To do that, it is essential that the NHS long-term workforce plan to train, retain and reform is implemented, and that a similar one is developed for the social care sector. It is essential to take steps to deal with the 130,000 vacant posts across all NHS functions, which put an unbearable burden on staff covering for those vacancies.

In January 2024, 5.5% of the NHS workforce was on sick leave. The Nuffield Trust stated that, in 2022, the reported sickness rates were equivalent to over 74,000 full-time jobs. The main cause of the recorded sickness was anxiety, stress and depression. We will build an NHS for the future only if these workforce issues in both the NHS and social care are tackled.

In the few moments I have left, I will stand up for a Cinderella public service—early years and nurseries. If ever its economic importance is discussed, it is often only in the context of getting parents into work. This is despite childcare being an important contributor to the fundamental economy and the creation of local jobs. It has the potential to boost regional economies. The Secretary of State for Education is right in seeking to revitalise early years provision but, as with the social care sector, early years has a predominantly female workforce, who are very low paid with little career progression. Many are on state benefits, there is a high staff turnover, and worsening staff to child ratios are simply imposed on them.

The gracious Speech is so important. It is a game-changer instilling hope into our nation, from an ambitious Government literally on a mission. We in this Chamber must play our part.

1.53 pm

Lord Jamieson (Con): I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, on her new role as a Minister and her excellent maiden speech. I also come from a family of teachers, although I managed to escape and become an engineer. I also congratulate my noble friend Lady Monckton of Dallington Forest for her excellent maiden speech. I need to declare that I am a councillor in Central Bedfordshire.

Yesterday, we debated planning and place, which is a key role for local government. This Government have said that their priority is growth. However, the pressures of children and adult social care are overwhelming local government and removing the bandwidth and resources for it to develop great places to live and work. This will also be one of the key long-term contributors to addressing social care, with short-term pressures overriding what is best in the long term.

I welcome the earlier comments from the noble Lord, Lord Addington, which pre-empted some of my comments on SEND—the major topic of my speech. The current SEND system is not fit for purpose: it is hugely expensive yet delivers poor outcomes. While the 2014 educational reforms were largely positive for mainstream education, they appear to have had unintended negative consequences for SEND.

Since 2014, we have seen a more than doubling of children with EHC plans to over half a million. Costs have increased at an even faster rate, yet there has been no discernible improvement in outcomes. If anything, they have got worse, with the achievement of level 2 of pupils with SEND declining faster than the average and with no improvement in employment outcomes.

We have moved to an exclusive rather than inclusive system, with more pupils attending specialist schools—often some distance from where they live—increasing numbers of specialist placements and more home education with bespoke packages. Schools find themselves lacking resources and specialist support for SEND pupils, hence are incentivised to seek an EHC plan to get more resources or offload high-resource pupils. Parents seeking support for their child find that this is not available and can be achieved only through an EHC plan. Local authorities have the responsibility but neither the resources nor the levers to support SEND pupils, leading to rationing. There is a lack of capacity in mental health support. We lack educational psychiatrists, speech and language therapists to deliver what is needed. We have a legal framework that encourages an adversarial and legally based approach, rather than one focused on children and collaboration. In short, we have a system with perverse incentives that is leading to a vicious circle.

Things can be done differently, as happens in a few parts of the country where the current system has not yet broken down. There are many examples in Europe. We need a system where inclusion is the norm for the majority of parents; where schools do not need an EHC plan to get the support that they need; where local authorities have not just the responsibility but the resources and the levers to deliver; and where there is a clear understanding from all parties on what support to expect and what will be delivered. We need

a system that does not require resorting to a legal process and has a clear focus on delivering outcomes. This will not be easy, not because it is technically and financially difficult but because there has been a complete breakdown in trust in the system. Everyone is seeking to protect what they have because they do not trust the system. This mould needs to be broken, on a cross-party basis.

I welcome the proposals in the gracious Speech to require all schools to co-operate with local authorities on school admissions, SEND inclusion and pupil planning. I welcome that there will be specialist mental health support in all schools. However, this is not enough. I urge the new Government to move forward with the proposals in the previous Government's SEND review. I also urge the new Government to engage seriously with local government. The Local Government Association and the County Councils Network are shortly to publish a report on SEND and have written to the Secretary of State for Education with a number of very sensible recommendations. Those should be taken up because, without change, we will fail children and bankrupt councils.

1.57 pm

Baroness Coussins (CB): My Lords, my contribution will be to the education side of this debate. As the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, will reply to the debate, I hope that the Education Minister—the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, who is most welcome to this House—might be kind enough to meet me soon to follow up on what I shall highlight. I declare my interests in languages, as set out in the register.

Much needs to be done to reverse the damaging decline in the UK's language skills but, in the short time I have today, I shall flag up just one of the barriers to the teaching and learning of languages: the viability of educational trips and exchanges. Some 50% of schools are now cutting them, with that figure rising to 68% in deprived areas, but the good news is that this can be fixed, and quickly—a perfect early win for an incoming Government committed both to tackling regional and other inequalities and to creating opportunities.

The new Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, has already said that he is determined to do more to champion school and student exchanges as a vital part of resetting the UK's relations with our European allies. He told his German opposite number that he hopes

“we can fix that school visits issue”,

and he appeared willing to consider the EU's proposal to establish a youth mobility scheme for 18 to 30 year-olds to study and work, in welcome contrast to the immediate dismissal of this idea by both Labour and the then Government before the election.

One of the problems is the lack of co-ordination between the three relevant departments: the DfE, the FCDO and the Home Office. We know that the FCDO is alive to the issue, and the Minister knows all about the Home Office, so I hope she will feel happy to take the initiative to create the cross-departmental leadership for the dismantling of the barriers that are short-changing our young people.

A plan of action was submitted by the All-Party Group on Modern Languages to the then Schools Minister in February, so I hope the new Government will support this and start notching up some early changes and successes, knowing that the benefit of trips and exchanges not only applies to the take-up of languages but enhances many other areas of the curriculum, including geography, history, STEM subjects, art and sports. There is also an important positive impact of reciprocal mobility schemes on the supply chain for MFL teachers, and we know from DfE figures that we are looking at a chronic shortage there, second only to maths.

Teachers have told us that the problem is a combination of post-Brexit paperwork for travel and border checks, the burden of DBS checks, missing or conflicting official guidance, and access to opportunity and funding. The paperwork and costs must be reviewed, including bringing back the list of travellers scheme and the group passport scheme. At the moment, trips can face being aborted or delayed at the border because a coachload of children must have their passports individually checked, and coach drivers can reach legal drive time limits. One school I know missed its ferry home two years running because officials insisted on every child getting off the coach to be checked. One year they did not arrive home until 3 am. That was a school in London; it would have been a lot later for a school further away from Dover. Many trips go well, of course, but teachers are acutely aware of the potential for things going wrong.

Where passports are necessary, the cost must be reduced; £53.50 for under-16s is just too much for many families. Then we need clear and consistent guidance to help teachers plan. FCDO travel entry information needs to cover school groups that include both UK and non-UK nationals. Discrepancies between advice to schools from local authorities and from the FCDO must be ironed out. All this could and should be done cost-free and is quickly achievable. DBS checks are now less onerous but the changes are not yet common knowledge in schools, so much more needs to be done to communicate them. That is another quick and cost-free fix.

Finally, I urge the Minister to review the Turing Scheme. The more streamlined application process is welcome but schools have told us that they want a multiyear funding cycle, because a single-year cycle is impractical for many schools and colleges, and for their international partnerships. We also know that reciprocity helps the future MFL teacher supply chain. The easiest way of doing this, of course, would be to rejoin Erasmus+ as a non-EU associate country. I implore the Minister to reopen negotiations on this out of sheer enlightened self-interest for the UK. I look forward to an early opportunity to discuss all this with the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern.

2.03 pm

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath (Lab): My Lords, it was a pleasure to listen to my noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern's expert maiden speech, and I was very moved by that of the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton. I declare my interest as in the register. I hugely welcome

the Government's commitment to promoting children's well-being. This is such a vital issue for so many children across our country but can be rather a nebulous concept: what does well-being really mean? I will bring it to life by reference to the work of two charities that I have helped govern in recent years.

Until yesterday I was chair of Young Epilepsy, a role I had the honour to fulfil for eight years. I have seen for myself, through countless conversations with youngsters suffering from epilepsy, just how significant the challenge is for the 100,000 and more children and young people in the UK with this condition. One in three children with epilepsy is currently not getting the support they need to participate fully at school. Their seizures are either missed or mistaken for not paying attention. School staff are unaware of what to do when a seizure happens, and children are unnecessarily excluded from learning, sports and trips. Here are some of the voices of children themselves:

"I wasn't allowed to do any PE or the like all year even though given the okay by the doctors ... I wasn't allowed to participate in school trips due to the risk of having a seizure, even on small local trips".

A huge step forward could be achieved if schools were required to put in place an individual healthcare plan for every child with epilepsy, helping school staff understand each child's epilepsy, ensuring their safety and paving the way for full inclusion in every school activity. With the necessary support from a Labour Government genuinely committed to all children's well-being, this is within our reach.

But as so often for our children and young people, real progress requires the contribution of both health and education working in partnership. Only half of children with epilepsy are seen by a paediatrician with the necessary expertise within the required two weeks of referral after their first seizure. Children with complex epilepsy face additional challenges: only half are accessing the specialist support they need, and only one in three of those who could benefit from epilepsy surgery is referred to have this treatment even considered.

It is not simply a matter of physical health. Children with epilepsy are four times more likely to experience a mental health problem than their peers, but only one in five epilepsy clinics includes mental health support. Again, if we listen to the youngsters themselves, their stories can be heartbreaking. So the commitment in the King's Speech to reduce waiting times, focus on prevention and improve mental health provision for young people could not be more timely.

The second children's charity I have been delighted to be able to support in recent years, as a member of the board, is AET, a large multi-academy trust that brings together a family of nearly 60 primary, secondary and special schools right across the country. Time is against me today, so let me just reference the wonderful work of one of its primaries, in Birmingham, not far from where I grew up. More than two-thirds of its pupils get free school meals, but this year's results show that this certainly does not stand in the way of exceptionally strong academic performance: 93% of them achieved success in the SATs they sat at the end of their primary school years.

[BARONESS RAMSEY OF WALL HEATH]

Noble Lords might be wondering how the school does it and could be forgiven for imagining that this focus on English and maths must be at the expense of everything else, but not so. What is so striking about the school is the huge programme of personal development and the promotion of health and well-being activities of the sort referenced this morning on the news by our new Secretary of State for Education. In fact, the rigour and focus the school brings to the three Rs are just as evident in the approach it takes to children's well-being through sports clubs, social skills training, critical thinking, community involvement, dance and drama workshops, public speaking and so much more. The school believes that academic standards and health and well-being need to reinforce each other, not be in competition, and its example is a beacon that shows what can be done.

We all know, unfortunately, that this is the exception that proves the rule and that far too many of our children and young people do not get the broad curriculum and extracurricular activities so evident in the example I have just given. That is because the accountability and funding regime that the new Government have inherited does nothing to promote it, leaving individual heads to do the best they can, often in challenging circumstances, and far too often our children are the ones who suffer as a result.

Our new Government's commitment to a comprehensive review of the school curriculum and accountability system could not be more timely. It provides a wonderful opportunity to harness the commitment and expertise of head teachers up and down the country to turn the exception I have talked about today into the rule for all our children.

2.08 pm

Lord Kempson (Con): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Ramsey of Wall Heath. I welcome the constructive tone of the debate today as we begin our work in this new Parliament. It is also a pleasure to pay tribute to my noble friend Lady Monckton of Dallington Forest for her thoughtful and excellent maiden speech and, likewise, to the Minister for her maiden speech. I associate myself too with the comments made about the valedictory remarks of the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly.

I congratulate Ministers opposite on their appointment, because the weight and responsibility of government now sit with the Labour Party. I know what it is like to work in government as a policy adviser, so I wish them the very best as they begin to feel the pressure to deliver.

There is no shortage of complexity in the issues before your Lordships' House, but I want in my remarks to zoom out slightly and remind ourselves of the title of today's debate, to ensure that it is properly scrutinised. On our Order Paper it says:

"Creating Opportunities: Education, Early Years and Health Care".

If noble Lords will forgive me, I will use a phrase that is familiar to millennials like me—I think it originates from the television programme "The Simpsons". There is a concept on that programme called "saying the

quiet part out loud". I wonder whether with the prefix to the title to this debate we may be guilty of saying the quiet part out loud—that is, by using the phrase "creating opportunities", the Government may be suggesting subconsciously that somehow government creates the opportunities in education, early years and health.

Of course, we know that that is not fully right, because life does not work that way. As we have heard in the debate already today, many Members of your Lordships' House are outstanding leaders of charities and in the voluntary sector. It is those organisations, and the wonderful people at the heart of them, that really create opportunities for those most in need in our country, enabling them to access the advice, support and practical training that really turns lives around. Many noble Lords are luminaries from businesses large and small; we know that it is entrepreneurs who create the chance for people to secure good jobs and provide for their families, having positive impacts on education and health outcomes. Indeed, families, faith groups and social enterprises of all kinds are the vital machinery of opportunity, whether in education, healthcare, early years, or otherwise. So I hope the Minister may reassure me that, if the Government wish to create opportunity in health, education and early years, Ministers will prevent themselves falling into the trap of believing that they can do so best from Whitehall—that they may reach out to pull levers that simply do not exist.

There are some elements of the gracious Speech that, in that vein, give me cause for concern, as has already been expressed on many sides of your Lordships' House today. At the top of that list I would put the plan to impose VAT on independent school fees. I did not benefit from a private education but I passionately believe that we cannot create opportunity by simply narrowing or attacking the opportunities that are already enjoyed by others. If we do so, we will be failing to follow the evidence that we have to hand, and may risk wasting our time. Does the Minister really believe that we will create opportunity with this policy, which could force many fee-paying schools to reduce and even abolish their scholarship programmes, which are enjoyed by so many disadvantaged pupils—the very programmes that fund access to these excellent schools for those from less-advantaged backgrounds? Is it right to think that forcing independent schools out of business will improve access across the country to sport, music and artistic opportunities?

As I said, I believe we must instead find ways to widen existing opportunities to all. I wish the Government well in their important tasks, and with their bulging in-tray. I hope they will be a Government who focus on the priorities of people across the country, not on politics, and who seek to extend the ladder of opportunity, rather than in some ways begin to pull it up.

2.13 pm

Baroness Morgan of Drefelin (Lab): My Lords, I join all those across the House who have welcomed my noble friends Lady Merron and Lady Smith of Malvern to the Front Bench. I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, on her maiden speech, and my noble

friend Lady Smith of Malvern—what a barnstorming speech; it is so good to have her back. I also say how sorry I am that we heard a valedictory speech from the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly—what a lovely contribution to finish on.

It is 13 years since I last spoke from the Labour Benches, and even longer since I spoke from the Government Benches. I put on record my thanks to my colleagues on the Cross Benches for giving me such a welcome home during that time, while I served as chief executive of the breast cancer charity Breast Cancer Now. I may have retired from that position as a charity leader, but I still am hugely concerned about the provision of services for patients with cancer. I agree with my noble friend Lord Knight that it is very hard for patients to hear the analysis of the Secretary of State for Health that the NHS is broken, because of course patients rely on the NHS for hope. Despite the tireless efforts of NHS staff, waiting times for cancer patients are woeful. We punch well below our weight in terms of survival rates in this country, and health inequalities and that old postcode lottery are playing out across the country. I welcome the ambitions set out in the King's Speech to improve the NHS for all, tackle waiting times, focus on prevention and improve mental health provision, particularly for young people.

I would like to flag a particular issue which is an exemplar of the challenges facing our life sciences industry and the medical research world that I have come from. Breast cancer is one of the UK's most common cancers. It is a significant health challenge: 55,000 women and 400 men are diagnosed each year. Despite amazing progress over the last couple of decades, we still see 11,500 women and 90 men die from incurable breast cancer every year; often, this form of breast cancer is referred to as secondary breast cancer. As we know, behind these statistics are real women's lives. Breast cancer has not only a devastating impact on their lives but a real and measurable impact on our economy, as the work of Demos and Breast Cancer Now has shown.

With this new Labour Government coming in, we have the opportunity to truly transform the outcomes for people living with breast cancer, through promoting improved screening uptake, faster diagnosis and fairer, faster access to treatments and new innovation. That is so important. Ensuring that new, clinically effective drugs reach patients as quickly as possible is vital for improving cancer outcomes. It is also vital for our life sciences industry and for the medical research ecosystem that our universities are such an important part of. That new innovations reach patients as quickly as possible, at a price that the NHS can afford, is absolutely vital for a thriving economy and for people's well-being in the future. An agile process for drug approvals in this country is therefore absolutely vital.

However, thousands of women are waiting with a particular type of incurable breast cancer, called HER2-low secondary breast cancer. They are missing out on a new drug called Enhertu. It is the first licensed treatment for their type of cancer and offers real hope for them; it is a life-extending treatment. In March, Enhertu was provisionally rejected by NICE for use on the NHS in England, impacting on these women's

lives and putting them on hold. We know that seven months before, in December, the Scottish Medicines Consortium approved this drug for use on the NHS, creating this sorry lottery. As a matter of urgency, will the Minister consider talking to NICE, which has a new process that is being adopted here for the first time, NHS England and the drug companies involved—Daiichi Sankyo and AstraZeneca—to see whether a solution can be found? NICE has put on pause its process, which is a highly unusual move and very welcome. I believe that this is an example of something on which we really need to press forward with urgency.

2.18 pm

Baroness Walmsley (LD): My Lords, I will focus my remarks on the Government's intentions on health and care.

Your Lordships will be aware of the focus of my party's general election campaign on social care. Despite its importance—it affects the lives of millions and the ability of the NHS to pick itself up—there was nothing in the King's Speech about it. It is true that you cannot fix the health service without fixing social care, yet we have not heard what the Government intend to do. Like others who have spoken in this debate, I hope that the Minister winding will reverse that. However, I was pleased to hear reference to children's well-being and mental health, and particularly pleased to read of the new Secretary of State's focus on spreading best practice and the prevention of ill health.

This year, I have been able to focus on prevention as the chair of the Lords special inquiry into food, diet and obesity. The remit of the committee, which will publish its report in November, is to look at

“the role of foods, such as ‘ultra-processed foods’, and foods high in fat, salt and sugar, on obesity and a healthy diet”.

The reasons why the Liaison Committee chose this topic are obvious and uncontested. Poor diet is second only to smoking as a preventable cause of disease and death. Despite the best intentions of successive Governments, obesity rates have continued to rise. We are one of the fattest countries in the western world. Two-thirds of children are exceeding the recommended salt intake and 19 out of 20 children exceed the recommended sugar intake. Almost one-third of 11 year-olds are overweight and more than 60% of adults are either overweight or obese. This situation leads to a high risk of preventable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and many cancers.

All this adds up to human misery and an inability to go to work and contribute to the economy. Obesity alone costs taxpayers almost £100 billion a year by some calculations, including a vast amount of the NHS budget. It was these facts that caused the Liaison Committee to ask my committee to look into the factors causing this dreadful situation and make recommendations. Of course, I am unable to reveal the committee's findings yet. However, what I can do is roll the pitch a little in the hope that the new Government will look, eventually, at our report as an opportunity to respond positively to this urgent and costly food crisis.

[BARONESS WALMSLEY]

In mentioning some of the areas our witnesses covered, I should say that a 10-month inquiry with a general election in the middle did not allow us to consider the treatment of obesity or the environmental issues. We focus on the preventative power of a good diet and the harmful effects of a bad one. Here I would like to pay tribute to the late Dr Michael Mosley, who died so tragically a few weeks ago. Although we were not able to invite him to give evidence, there has been nobody in public life who has done more to help people focus on factors which contribute to their health than Michael Mosley. Many of his highly accessible broadcasts and books focused on diet, and since his untimely death many people have said that his work changed their life and health. I will be delighted if our report has a fraction of the life-changing effect of his work.

We heard from a wide range of experts and members of the public, and certain themes emerged. First, we were urged to be bold and to recommend a range of government actions which amount to a cohesive strategy. Small actions here and there have not worked. There have been 14 obesity strategies over the past 30 years, yet the nation is still getting fatter. Lives have shortened and the pressure on the NHS and the economy has grown.

Secondly, we were urged to recommend measures which do not just rely on people taking personal responsibility, because of the pressures of what has been called the obesogenic environment.

Thirdly, we were urged to focus on children's health, given that it is more difficult to become a healthy adult if you are overweight as a child. Finally, we have reached out to people with lived experience of the issues, and from them we have received some of the most compelling evidence of the need for action. It is on their behalf that I ask the Minister to ensure that the new Government respond positively to our report when it comes out, with actions that will contribute vastly to the future health and happiness of our population and the health of the economy.

2.24 pm

The Earl of Clancarty (CB): My Lords, I will concentrate my remarks on arts and arts education. I declare an interest as a visual artist. I am heartened by the change in language, particularly around arts education. I am sorry we do not have a specific category for the arts in this debate on the gracious Speech. The arts are an essential aspect of our democracy and this needs to be better recognised at all levels of government within the UK.

Over the last 14 years we have seen the progressive downgrading of the arts in our school education. According to research by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, only one in 12 people working in film and TV is from a working class background. Both the EBacc and Progress 8 were introduced specifically to sideline the arts. Both should go. They are accountability measures, not part of the curriculum. We do not need a review for this.

A good proportion of the 6,500 new teachers should be arts teachers, including dedicated teachers in arts subjects at primary school level. Will the Government improve ITT bursaries for art and design, and music, so that they are on a par with the sciences? The arts offer in state schools needs to be brought up to the same high level as exists in many private schools, as the noble Baroness, Lady Garden, said.

I trust that the rhetoric around so-called "low-value" courses in higher education has ceased and that changes made at the Office for Students reflect a different culture. More importantly, will the Government make it a priority to help to prevent more closures of arts courses threatened at universities?

The educational community would cheer to the rafters if the Government were to negotiate rejoining Erasmus+. Turing is better than nothing, but is a pale imitation of what Erasmus as a reciprocal programme achieves, and much more. Will they do so?

After years of cuts to local authority and Arts Council funding, what the arts need most is substantial state reinvestment. Do the Government agree? In terms of overall government spending, the moneys concerned are a drop in the ocean, yet the benefits accrued, including financial rewards, far outweigh such modest expenditure. It is embarrassing that one single city in Germany—Berlin—gets more state funding than the whole of the UK.

The Arts Council is overloaded, taking on much of what used to be funded by local authorities. There are instances where funding is urgently needed. I will give two examples. At the smaller scale is a brilliant museum located in a deprived area of a town in Buckinghamshire whose council funding is threatened to be cut off and the building and the attached gardens, used by local people, sold off. On that point, will the Government take steps to halt the sale of our precious public buildings and spaces, many used for the arts and other community activities?

Secondly, at the other end of the scale, following the point made by the noble Lord, Lord Murphy, will the Government urgently address the concerns around Welsh National Opera—a company started originally by miners and teachers, which through touring benefits both Wales and England? Emergency funding is required to stop musicians going part-time, but in the longer term England and Wales together need to review the current Transform funding model that so clearly penalises WNO.

There should be space for classical music and community projects, and the other arts including theatre and the visual arts, which often get overlooked. I ask the Government to take a look at the recommendations in the visual arts manifesto led by the Design and Artists Copyright Society. One recommendation is the appointment of a freelance commissioner for the arts to look at their rights and levels of pay. It is good that the Government are addressing workers' rights—this should be a part of that.

In April, the *Guardian* reported that 74% fewer UK bands now tour Europe post Brexit, and that this affects their ability to tour America. The clear desire by the Government to address music touring is encouraging, but I also urge the Government to look

at the effect of Brexit on all the creative industries, including the visual arts, craft and fashion. There is a growing sense that we will not regain the former pre-eminent position our creative industries had not just in Europe but across the world until we rejoin the single market.

2.28 pm

Lord Willetts (Con): My Lords, I begin by drawing the House's attention to my interests, particularly a professorship at King's College London and a role at the University of Southampton. I also welcome both our new Ministers to their roles. We very much look forward to engaging with them in the months and years ahead.

I congratulate my noble friend Lady Monckton on her excellent maiden speech. In her reference to her grandfather, she might have put the muzzling of cats on the political agenda. It sounds like a cause that this House might embrace.

I would also like to say how much my noble friend Lady Barran contributed to our debates on education with her extraordinary courtesy. Her speeches were always so well informed and long may she continue in a Front-Bench role.

I would like to focus on higher education, because it is crucial to the priorities the Government have set out in the King's Speech and it is very important for opportunity. Higher education is the one stage of education where kids from disadvantaged backgrounds outperform. It is also key for growth. A lot of vocational and technical training happens in higher education. We should not have an old-fashioned picture of our education whereby that is not part of the role of universities, when it is.

Of course, higher education institutions can transform places. The journey from starting off as a mechanics institute or a teacher training college, becoming a big, ambitious FE college and then a university is often associated with the transformation and growth of a city. Worcester, if I may say so, is a vivid example of that process. Universities are one of the most powerful mechanisms we have, therefore, for spreading opportunity to some of the cold spots in the UK.

Higher education cannot do this, however, if its resources are as constrained as they are at the moment. Universities are under serious financial pressure. We all lose out but, above all, students lose out if the real resource behind their education and their university experience is being cut. I therefore very much hope that we will now see action to tackle this crisis before a university goes bust. Many are under financial pressure; some are in real danger of going bust.

We do not need another big review of our entire higher education system. All three of the main parties represented here in this Chamber, when faced with the responsibilities of office, have essentially operated the same system: a graduate repayment system. There is no fantasy alternative model that gets rid of all the imperfections of the current model. We therefore do not need to waste time on some massive review; we need instead simply to focus on improving the current system, getting across the crucial message, of course,

that students do not pay up front. For students, the main issue is the cash they have to live on while they are at university. That is the pressure point threatening access, not misconceptions about the cost of fees.

There is—if I may use a rather crude term in this elevated debate—a deal to be done. Of course, Ministers and the Government will have pressures that they want to meet, so the deal must involve some increase in fees, so that universities are better funded. It should also involve more initiatives on access. BTECs are a very important part of access to university. The new Minister will notice that there is a dangerous cabal of ex-Ministers around. When I see the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, and my noble friend Lord Baker debating, it is a bit like veterans Wimbledon: you can come here and see the education debates of 20 years ago going on. However, when they make common cause on BTECs—others here also associate ourselves with that—I hope that Ministers will listen. As part of the deal, there also needs to be pressure to ensure that education standards are rising in universities and that students get a fair deal.

All that can be done and should be done as a matter of urgency. The demographic backdrop is very important as well. Because of the surge in the birth rate, reaching a peak in 2012-13, we now face a decline in the number of young people in nurseries and primary schools. The number of young people in secondary education has peaked; the next five years will see a surge in the number of people over 18. They should benefit from a reformed apprenticeship levy, high-quality further education and a properly resourced and effective higher education system.

2.34 pm

Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe (Lab): My Lords, like others, I extend a warm welcome to my noble friend Lady Smith and congratulate her on a great maiden speech. I also congratulate my noble friend Lady Merron on her appointment, and wish the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, a long and happy retirement and thank her for her services and companionship.

On the Opposition Front Bench, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Evans, for his kindness in dealing with the topics I raised with him. In particular, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, for her help. We tried to get the quality of children's school meals changed. We had private conversations, but we did not quite make it. And wow, now we have change—we hope. We have a different Government, and I am hoping that some of the issues raised today will see change actually taking place.

I have come up as 50th in the speaking order, so I have torn up my speech. The noble Earl, Lord Effingham, covered much of my ground. I declare an interest as a member of the Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, chaired by the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley. She said much of what I was intending to say. There is one topic, which is a bit different, that I wish to draw to the House's attention and in particular to the attention of my colleague the Minister, to see if I can persuade her fairly quickly to take action.

[LORD BROOKE OF ALVERTHORPE]

As the Minister knows, I have been concerned for a long time about sugar, obesity and children. I have been doing quite a lot of work privately on sugar and how we might seek to engage those in the industry that produces our food and drinks. Many of them are demonised for what they do; they are making profits and producing, in effect, rubbish and poison, and they are harming us. But they will continue to produce that food and those drinks. We need to engage—like it or not—with people who do things we do not like. Within those groups, there are people who might have a good heart, and who see that change is needed, that we now have a new government, and are perhaps willing to start exploring whether we can have a different approach.

I tried to persuade the previous Government that we should look at alternatives to sugar and the reformulation of food, and that we should look at more fibre going into food. Their view was that it should be left to the private sector—to industry—to initiate change. Well, the changes have not come. I have been talking to a number of people. I have been in correspondence with companies such as Marks & Spencer. I met Tate and Lyle yesterday, which I met previously to talk about these issues. If we are prepared to invite them in, we might start to get discussions around the table that might lead to a different approach to the previous one.

This country has been falling behind. If you look at what Europe has been doing and the conversations that have taken place with food and drink manufacturers, there has been much more co-operation than we have been experiencing here. They are looking to change legislation and to effect moves that will lead to better quality food. Similar changes are taking place in the United States, which has a great problem with obesity.

I am hoping I might be able to persuade the new Minister for public health and our new Minister here to have a conversation with me about the opportunities for change, which I sense is around. A group of manufacturers is happy to come in and start a conversation. This might lead, with good will on both sides, to getting industry itself to reformulate. Perhaps the companies will need incentives, such as subsidies, rather than simply talking about taxing them. This may be a way they can get involved, so we can truly start to deliver on the big change we need to reduce the growth of obesity in our society.

2.39 pm

Baroness Hollins (CB): My Lords, it is a pleasure to respond to the gracious Speech and to have had a chance to hear inspired contributions from so many noble Lords. In particular, I applaud the valedictory speech by the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, who will be hugely missed. I also congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, on her wonderful maiden speech. I add my welcome to the new Ministers here today and congratulate the new Government on their commitment to give equal attention to mental health as to physical health.

Equal attention means investing equally in the workforce and the NHS estate. It means addressing waiting lists and delayed discharges in mental health

services. It means investing in research, in prevention and in the availability of evidence-based therapies. It also means attending to wider societal influences on the mental health and well-being of everyone. That includes an education that prepares each child for their future lives. It includes having a meaningful occupation, a purpose and a sense of truly belonging.

I agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, that believing in people helps them to believe in themselves. I also note the comments by the noble Lord, Lord Baker, about employability skills, teamwork, communication skills and the ability to take initiative and responsibility. I would add knowing how to take care of one's health and well-being. That includes being able to safely manage social media, which is such a huge threat to the mental health of young people.

The noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, spoke about the importance of protection and support for children, to ensure their best start in life. The roots of good mental health are established in infancy. We know that adverse childhood experiences affect both physical and mental health; ACEs are associated with obesity and mental illness, and having five or more ACEs is associated with a significantly reduced life expectancy, perhaps by as much as 20 years.

I was a member of the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill in the last Parliament. I must emphasise the injustices that too many autistic people and people with a learning disability currently experience, often because of wider system failures. NHS data shows that 92% of people with a learning disability and/or autistic people who are in mental health hospitals are detained there, under the Mental Health Act, for an average length of stay of nearly five years. Last year I reported on the lack of a therapeutic environment and on the high levels of restrictions that people may be subjected to, and the traumatic impact of these.

None of the ambitions laid out around improving health outcomes will be achievable without the transformation of social care. We could learn from neighbouring countries such as Italy, Germany and Denmark. We could learn from pilots here at home in Tower Hamlets and the Black Country. We could commit to continuing evidence-based programmes such as the national HOPE(S) programme, a person-centred human rights and practice leadership programme whose funding runs out early next year. Since 2022, HOPE(S) has enabled 64 autistic people and people with learning disabilities to leave confinement in a psychiatric hospital, some of whom have been locked in sensory and socially deprived spaces for more than seven years. One in six of those now lives in their own homes in the community. Beyond the human benefits, return-on-investment analysis for HOPE(S) shows that people can be treated with respect and dignity for less money. I hope the Minister will look into the funding needed to continue the national funding for HOPE(S).

The point is that legislation alone is not enough. Investment in culture change programmes such as HOPE(S) and in developing the right community support is essential. Given that, will the Minister outline to the House what plans the Government have to invest in community-based care, including the right social care

provision and suitable housing, so that we do not end up with good legislation being hindered by a lack of adequate community support? I look forward to working with the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, during the progress of the Bill, and I live in hope.

2.44 pm

Baroness Whitaker (Lab): My Lords, I too shall underline the role of further education. I declare an interest as a past chair and current fellow of the Working Men's College and a former chair of the Department for Education stakeholders' group for the education of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people. May I also say, after my new noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern's inspiring maiden speech, how good it is to see her in Parliament again, and in one of her many areas of expertise: education?

The nation has voted for change. Adult and further education are essential to change. Closing the substantial gap in our level and spread of skills would go far to achieve the improvement in productivity that we need to fund services, security and well-being. Of course we need investment in technology itself but we need, crucially, investment in people. It is no coincidence that our competitors have better productivity, together with higher status and capacity for technical education. I welcome the comprehensive strategy for post-16 education in the Labour Party manifesto, referred to in the gracious Speech.

The British neglect of technical education is long-standing. Changing it requires a new mindset: parity of esteem in engineering, for instance, valuing design and all the skills which require problem-solving, collaboration and multidisciplinary approaches far more highly, as the noble Lord, Lord Baker, noted. We were good at this when our great 18th and 19th-century inventors flourished—though, interestingly, few of them had an elite education—and we remain good at high-level scientific education, invention and discovery. But where technical education kept pace with scholarship on the mainland of Europe, here it lagged, perhaps outgunned by the prestige of classical public school education and ideas about the needs of governing an empire.

In further education, so we have inherited confusion, a welter of qualifications and a failing apprenticeship system. The new comprehensive approach should rely on destination data to monitor that it is getting people into the jobs we need for a modern, high-skill economy.

The personal satisfaction of worthwhile work, cited by our Prime Minister, is also a force for social cohesion. When I was chair of the Working Men's College, the sense of achievement among students who were retraining, repairing the gaps in their secondary education, or bringing the motivation which moved them to emigrate to the United Kingdom to inspire qualifying for work, brought home how precious personal fulfilment is. Women who had never finished school were able to provide for their families; young men whose school education had left them apathetic and unconfident found their feet in society.

But education think tanks have estimated that a missing third never get on to the skills ladder. Further education can return them to the path to worthwhile work. For that, what goes on in secondary schools is

crucial; early careers guidance for all, steering towards examination subjects, the essential ensuring of basic literacy and numeracy to gain entrance to the next stage, bringing back the children who have dropped out—all these are passports to personal fulfilment and economic contribution for the missing third. Can my noble friend assure me that the path to further education will start in schools?

Finally, a shameful reason for dropout is the alienation which comes from discrimination and prejudice. The proportions of some black and minority-ethnic groups who enter and complete further education are far below the numbers of their populations. This is starkly obvious for Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people and I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, for her support for efforts to tackle their disadvantage. I have been working with the Association of Colleges on a campaign to widen access to all black and minority-ethnic people. Since April, 40 colleges have pledged action, which we shall celebrate in Parliament on 9 September. Will my noble friend join with me in congratulating those colleges and the association on a project which will improve lives and help to power our economy?

2.49 pm

Lord Thurlow (CB): My Lords, I will direct my comments towards the healthcare aspects of today's debate.

I welcome the mental health Bill, as it is vital and overdue to provide greater needs-based patient care, but I am disappointed that it is the only reference in the gracious Speech to change in the NHS. More reform is required. The reality is that our wonderful NHS is badly broken. While the Labour manifesto promised to build the NHS for the future, there is little sign of that in the gracious Speech. Have the Government abandoned this challenge? I hope not. The NHS model desperately needs cost-saving reform. As we have heard, its huge cost is projected to grow quickly to an astonishing sum, yet it remains short-staffed and with IT systems at breaking point.

There is a list of unnecessary expense items. Health tourism is a good example, blocking beds and filling the diaries of specialists simply to look after those who come from abroad for a short stay to enjoy our world-class standard of medical provision and the fact that it is free at the point of delivery. The "Lagos shuttle", as many will know, is the aptly named people trafficking equivalent organising medical travel arrangements from west Africa. Yet the NHS seems to do nothing. Hospitals have tried, and some use volunteers, but where is the initiative from senior management across the sector?

Missed appointments are another glaring opportunity. There are thousands of them every week that lengthen delays, yet there appears to be no attempt to penalise those who simply cannot be bothered to turn up. In France, a recent Act of Parliament penalises those who fail to turn up. We could do the same.

Hospital administrators could manage the process of confirming eligibility for free care as a British citizen, yet to us this seems unthinkable—even offensive—

[LORD THURLOW]

whereas most other countries with a national health service manage the process perfectly well. We should make strenuous efforts to prevent such waste.

My comments do not focus on the delivery of service that we as patients receive. The doctors, nurses and all the staff are not at fault. We still enjoy the wonderful level of care and compassion for which the NHS is so famous. Staff at all levels are heroes, but the BMA has referred to staff burnout, junior doctors have taken the last resort of strike action and morale appears to be low.

I conclude with a request to the Minister. The provision of healthcare for those suffering with Huntington's disease is woefully lacking. It is a neurological condition like motor neurone disease, but unlike MND it has nothing like the profile and public awareness that leads to improved fundraising, research and wider clinical provision. Those suffering from Huntington's are in a particularly tragic place, as it directly impacts the lives of their children. It is a genetically transferable condition which creates terrible anxiety for those children, who can establish whether they in turn will suffer from it only by testing. The decision whether or not to test is traumatic and immensely stressful. We have centres of excellence, but they are few and far between. There should be a positive drive to replicate this best practice throughout the UK. I ask the Minister to do what she can to improve these facilities.

2.53 pm

Baroness Tyler of Enfield (LD): My Lords, as this debate draws to an end, I warmly welcome the newly appointed Ministers to their important new roles. I thank the outgoing Ministers, and commend the two excellent maiden speeches that we have heard today. I particularly commend my noble friend Lady Jolly for her excellent valedictory speech and pay tribute to her outstanding contribution as a Government Whip during the coalition and as a party spokesperson, and in particular the work she does for people with learning disabilities. She will be sorely missed on these Benches and beyond.

Like so many others today, I welcome many of the measures in the gracious Speech and look forward to scrutinising legislation when it comes to this House. There are areas where the measures do not go far or fast enough, and there are some key omissions that I will highlight. My noble friends Lord Storey, Lord Sharkey, Lord Addington and Lady Garden have all talked about education with great expertise. I will focus on health.

I welcome the commitment in the gracious Speech to improve the NHS, specifically the urgent need to reduce waiting times, focus on prevention and improve mental health provision. I wholeheartedly agree that there is an urgent need for a more preventive model of care, with investment moved upstream; it is crucial if we are to lower waiting times, improve access and reduce health inequalities.

The answer to overcrowded hospitals is not simply more hospitals: the health and care system must be radically refocused to put primary and community care at its core if it is to be effective and sustainable. In

my view, this should include new patient-centric integrated services, such as walk-in clinics, diagnostic centres and polyclinics, to improve speedy access, give patients more control, and take the weight off overburdened GPs and hospitals. We also need to use existing hospitals more efficiently. We know that valuable NHS equipment and operating theatres too often stand idle in the evenings and at weekends. Will the Minister say what plans the Government have to address this and whether they include bringing in independent clinical teams from outside the NHS?

A more radical shift to a preventive model of care was one of the key findings of the integrated care Select Committee, so expertly chaired by the noble Baroness, Lady Pitkeathley, on which I had the privilege to sit. I hope Ministers will take heed of that excellent report and what it recommended. We really do not want to end up reinventing the wheel.

Like my noble friend Lady Walmsley, perhaps my biggest disappointment is the silence on social care. We all know that the current problems in accessing healthcare will never be resolved until social care is fundamentally reformed. There has been talk recently of a royal commission, but no mention of it in the gracious Speech. I wonder whether a royal commission, however well-intentioned, is what we need; I worry that it will simply kick the issue into the long grass. In the last decade, we have seen countless reports, reviews and commissions into social care, but, to the huge frustration of those in the sector and beyond, nothing ever happens. In short, the political will simply evaporates. We know what the problems are and, broadly, we know what needs to happen; we just need to start moving on what will inevitably be a gradual path.

The Government have pledged to establish a fair pay agreement in the adult social care sector and improve working conditions. I welcome that, given that there are over 130,000 vacancies in adult social care. It is certainly to be hoped that measures in the planned employment rights Bill to increase pay and scrap exploitative zero-hours contracts will help to attract and retain more staff, but that will happen only if they are accompanied by commensurate local government funding increases. Will the Government commit to a social care workforce plan to complement the NHS workforce plan?

I turn now to the critical issue of unpaid carers, echoing the words of the noble Baroness, Lady Pitkeathley. *Labour's Plan to Make Work Pay*, published in May, included a commitment to review the implementation of the Carer's Leave Act 2023 and examine all the benefits of introducing paid carer's leave. However, the background briefing to the employment rights Bill, published on Wednesday, contained no mention of this. There is a real opportunity here for the Government to move quickly to deliver this review and introduce enabling provisions to ensure that a new right to paid carer's leave is introduced as part of the Bill. What specific plans are in place to deliver that review and to introduce these enabling provisions?

I greatly welcome the commitment to ensure that mental health is given the same attention and focus as physical health and to modernise the Mental Health Act. To say it is grossly overdue is an

understatement, and I understand the scepticism of some in the sector who have heard all these promises many times before, only for nothing to happen. For too long the Mental Health Act has failed people who require mental health care. Racial inequalities in the use of detention, high levels of restraint and the removal of patient autonomy are just some of the problems of the current Act. Introducing a new mental health Bill to reform that Act provides a crucial opportunity to enhance patients' rights, to strengthen safeguards for those admitted to mental health hospitals, particularly for children placed in inappropriate settings and on adult wards, and to rebalance the system to one that prioritises and promotes the patient's voice and choice in their treatment.

It is welcome to see the tobacco and vapes Bill reintroduced. We should not forget that, of those people suffering from mental health conditions, more than 40% smoke, compared to just over 12% of the general population.

I declare an interest here as a member of the Financial Inclusion Commission, which has not had a mention yet today. Too many people experiencing mental health problems also suffer from financial and digital exclusion. That is why I was so delighted that the Liberal Democrat manifesto included a commitment to introduce a national financial inclusion strategy, including measures such as promoting access to cash, particularly in remote areas, and supporting banking hubs and vulnerable consumers. Could the Minister say what plans the Government have to introduce a comprehensive financial inclusion strategy?

I turn now to children's mental health. As we have debated so often before, those accepted into child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS, as we know it—are often left waiting for many months, if not years, for treatment, during which time their mental health often deteriorates. It is estimated that only around a third of children with a probable mental health problem are able to access treatment, showing how far away from the parity of esteem with physical health we really are. I look forward to hearing the Government's plans in this area.

I welcome the children's well-being Bill, particularly the pledge to introduce free breakfast clubs in all primary schools, but I would also like to see an equal focus on promoting children's mental health at primary school age. The gracious Speech contained a pledge to improve mental health provision for young people, which I very much support, and the Labour Party manifesto committed to providing specialist mental health support for every school, mirroring my recent Private Member's Bill. Could the Minister confirm whether this will include primary schools, as my recent Private Member's Bill did? Sadly, it narrowly missed its Third Reading, because the election was called. Leaving it until secondary school is simply too late. Could the Minister say when we can expect to see action on introducing open-access mental health hubs for children and young people in every community?

Finally, I turn to child poverty. We have had some powerful interventions here. I was proud that the Liberal Democrat manifesto contained a pledge to abolish the iniquitous two-child benefit cap. I wish

there had been more focus on this and on other elements of our ambitious anti-poverty strategy during the campaign. We have heard the figures today of those in child poverty and the fact that it is going up and that many of those families suffering have had at least one parent in work. We welcome the Prime Minister's very recent announcement of a child poverty task force, but it is quite clear that the two-child benefit cap is the principal policy contributing to this alarming rise. Could the Minister set out the timetable for the task force reporting and say how quickly we can expect to see action taken on the two-child limit?

3.02 pm

Baroness Barran (Con): My Lords, I open my remarks with a warm welcome to all noble Lords who made their maiden speeches today. The speech of my noble friend Lady Monckton of Dallington Forest was striking both for her modesty about her skills in public speaking and for her very evident compassion and extraordinary achievements through Team Domenica. I also thank the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, for her moving valedictory speech, which I gather got her to almost 600 contributions in *Hansard* in your Lordships' House.

In particular, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, on her maiden speech. She brings not only a lot of experience but relevant experience to your Lordships' House, and I know that this will be valued by all of us. She and I share some things. Her work with the Jo Cox Foundation focused on loneliness, and I had the privilege to cover that in DCMS. Sadly, there is one important divide between us which I am not sure we will be able to bridge: the noble Baroness clearly has great skills on the dance floor. My ballet report at the end of my first term, aged four, said "Diana has no natural talent".

I also welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, to her place, and I wish her and the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, every success in their new roles. My noble friend Lord Howe once said to me that there are two departments to which every person in the country wants to succeed: one is health and the other is education. They have very special roles.

It struck me, when I looked back over many years at speeches from both the Opposition and the Government in these debates, and at election results, how much commonality of aspiration there has been between different parties on all sides of the House on the issues that we are debating, although we may differ on the ways of achieving those aspirations. That is in part reflected by the legislation in the King's Speech, as several Bills in this area were part of the previous Government's legislative plans.

Before I go on to talk about the substance of the King's Speech and the Government's proposals, I will make my round of personal thank yous. I am very touched by all the thank yous I have received from your Lordships today, but I particularly thank the noble Lord, Lord Watson of Invergowrie, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Twycross and Lady Wilcox of Newport, who generated just the right level of anxiety for me, every time I was on the Front Bench, to keep me on my non-dancing toes.

[BARONESS BARRAN]

I turn to the legislation, starting with the health Bills. On this side of the House we welcome the decision to progress with the reform of the Mental Health Act. The previous Government undertook very thorough pre-legislative scrutiny and worked hard with families, the mental health voluntary sector, practitioners and parliamentarians to make sure that the legislation would genuinely result in better decisions when someone needs to be detained under the Mental Health Act, in particular—as we heard from a number of your Lordships—when that detention relates to a child. I would be grateful if, in her closing remarks, the noble Baroness could reassure the House that the substance of the Government's new Bill will reflect the previous Government's commitments in this area. Understandably, the Government have said that implementation will take place in phases, when there is sufficient skilled workforce to deliver the reforms. When will the Government set out their timetable for implementation?

We also welcome the decision to proceed with a tobacco and vapes Bill, and we agree with many of your Lordships' comments about the important contribution that this can make to the health and well-being of our nation.

I think I am right in saying that there was an announcement this morning that the Government will proceed with a royal commission on social care. There have been multiple reviews of social care, so it would help the House if the noble Baroness could explain which unanswered questions a new royal commission would focus on and what its timescale is.

On education, there are elements of the children's well-being Bill that we on this side of the House welcome. In particular, we are pleased to see plans to set up a register for children not in school, which is something that we had wanted to do and spent many hours debating in this Chamber—as my noble friend Lady Berridge said—often ably led by the noble Lord, Lord Soley. We also worked hard behind the scenes to reconcile some strongly felt views in this field, by both home-educating parents and local authorities, as demonstrated by the consultation on elective home education guidance, which closed in January this year and which I hope will prove useful to the new Government as they work on this area.

I was pleased to hear from the Minister that the Government intend to look at unregulated settings, but are there plans to look also at the quality of the education children educated at home receive? The scale of that issue has changed out of all recognition since Covid, and of course, every child has the right to a decent education.

Turning to the proposed multi-academy trust inspections, we also recognise the need to return to the basic principle that has underpinned so much of the success of schools in England: that accountability and autonomy are aligned and require high levels of transparency. The growth of multi-academy trusts has meant that, in some cases, accountability via Ofsted inspections has been at a school level while autonomy has been at a trust level. Rightly or wrongly, that has contributed to a sense of unfairness in our inspection system. The previous Government had begun work on

this area, and we will offer constructive scrutiny of the new Government's plans. While the principle of MAT accountability might be clear and simple, the implementation will certainly be complex, with implications for school inspections—which the Government are also proposing to change—for intervention powers and policies, and, not least, for the skill set that will be required of Ofsted to deliver that. Indeed, there is a valid question about whether inspection is the only or best route to achieve accountability.

More broadly, it is hard for us to discern the new Government's vision for our schools from this Bill. We are genuinely puzzled by the focus on requiring all academies to adhere to the national curriculum: not only is this already the case for the vast majority but, even for the small number who do not adhere to it, the rigour of the Ofsted inspection regime assures the quality of the curriculum being taught in all our schools. Similarly, with close to 100% of teachers holding qualified teacher status, we are puzzled as to why this is a priority and what problem it really seeks to solve.

These measures, together with the duty to co-operate on school admissions and the insistence on annual safeguarding checks, leave us with a sense of a Government who, ironically, trust school teachers and leaders less than their predecessors. Our programme of reform was built on the premise that school and trust leaders were the real experts and that the route to quality, innovation and better outcomes for children was to trust them and give them agency. I fear that the proposed measures in this Bill may constrain some of that.

Turning to skills, the King's Speech also included the Skills England Bill, which commits, if I have understood it correctly, to replace IfATE with a new body, Skills England. Again, I ask the Minister: what problem are the Government trying to solve with this change? IfATE played a very important—and, we believe, effective—role in putting employers at the heart of skills development. I look forward to hearing in future debates more about how the Government expect their wider reforms of the apprenticeship levy to unfold.

Returning to schools, it will not surprise the Minister that we on this side of the House have real concerns about the proposals to require independent schools to charge VAT on their fees. I would be grateful if she could confirm whether her Government will guarantee funding for all the areas where she has committed to invest the proceeds of the VAT on independent schools, even if it is not raised in full. Also, have the Government analysed the impact on every region of the availability of places in state-funded schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities whose parents can no longer afford private education?

One thing has not changed by moving sides: I have run out of time. I tried in my speech to focus on the legislation that the new Government are bring forward, but there are so many things that I have not had time to cover, including important issues such as teacher recruitment and retention; children with special educational needs and disabilities; the proposed changes

to Ofsted; the curriculum; the new Government's commitment to our capital programmes—particularly for schools affected by RAAC and by the Caledonian Modular problems—the future of the lifelong learning entitlement; and university funding.

We know that many of these issues are interlocking. Changes to the curriculum have implications for inspection, assessment and exams, and changes to the inspection regime have implications for intervention in underperforming schools. So great care will be needed with implementation. That is where the House in general, and these Benches in particular, come in. We will be constructive and always aim to bring fair challenge based on evidence. I hope the Minister recognises the achievements of the last Government, particularly in the area of education, and sees the new Government's role as one of evolution rather than revolution.

3.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Baroness Merron)

(Lab): My Lords, it is a tremendous honour to be closing today's debate on behalf of His Majesty's Government. I extend my thanks to His Majesty for his gracious Speech, and to all noble Lords for their thoughtful contributions and questions. On behalf of myself and my noble friend Lady Smith—this one, of Malvern—I also say how much we have appreciated such generous words of welcome and encouragement from across the House. I assure your Lordships' House that we will always do our best. My noble friend Lady Smith made a fine maiden speech, exhibiting her characteristic intelligence, warmth and skill, which the House will continue to see in her new position on the Front Bench. I served in the other place with my noble friend—it does feel rather like we are getting the band back together.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, the noble Lord, Lord Markham. He was unfailingly collegiate, professional and caring. I know that I, and all other noble Lords, really valued that. It is a great pleasure to see the noble Lord, Lord Evans, and the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, in their places. I have never doubted their commitment to making things better for people. I share in the assessment of the noble Baroness, Lady Barran, that she has indeed earned herself a gold star.

I was glad to see the noble Lord, Lord Storey, in his place. I look forward to working with the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, and give special thanks from these Benches to the noble Lord, Lord Allan, for being such a constructive colleague.

I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Monckton, on her maiden speech, and I know that we very much look forward to hearing more from her with her great life experience, as well as her business experience. To the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, we will certainly miss her wisdom and experience, and I wish her and her family many years of happiness and good health.

When I closed this debate the last time on behalf of the Official Opposition, I said:

"I can only hope that the next gracious Speech will be different and will grasp every opportunity for change".—[*Official Report*, 9/11/23; cols. 253-55.]

Well, different it is and change there will be. All that we speak of today is against the backdrop of the most challenging circumstances since the Second World War. With no time to waste, therefore, the Chancellor is carrying out an urgent assessment of our spending inheritance and will be presenting the results to Parliament before the Summer Recess, so that the findings can inform every spending decision we make.

It is, like for many others, some 14 years since I served as a Health Minister in the other place. In that time, the challenges before us have widened and deepened. We now have the highest waiting lists and the lowest patient satisfaction, and we have an education system struggling to cope and employers struggling to find the skills they need. All of this is despite the best efforts of the workforce, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. This gracious Speech gives the hope and the means that the next generation will be healthier and better educated than any that has come before.

This has been a debate rich in constructive proposals and comment. It was absolutely marked by the amount of good will towards this new Government from across the Chamber, as people want to see change. Although I am buoyed up by that—in fact, I am rather touched by it—I must say to noble Lords that I promise I will not get used to it. I have also heard the points about what more could be done and what was not in the gracious Speech; I have heard the many valuable questions and challenges. I will reflect on those. Even though I will be unable to refer to all the points in my response today, I hope noble Lords will understand that that nevertheless means that I take their points extremely seriously.

Turning to the two health Bills, like many noble Lords, I am delighted that we are bringing forward a Bill to modernise the Mental Health Act. Through it, patients will be given greater choice, autonomy, enhanced rights and support and we will ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. As the gracious Speech confirmed and the noble Baroness, Lady Hollins, highlighted, we will ensure that mental health is given the same attention and focus as physical health. Let me tell your Lordships' House that this was music to the ears of the service users, campaigners and advocates with whom I met and spoke in my first few days in post.

Since the Mental Health Act was introduced in 1983, rates of detention have nearly doubled. Black people are three and a half times more likely to be detained under the Act, while four in 10 people with a learning disability who are cared for in hospital could be cared for in the community. This Act has been languishing on a 40-year waiting list, shaping the lives of people decades after it became law. So I commend the detailed work of the pre-legislative scrutiny Joint Committee, as well as the invaluable contributions by many noble Lords and others to develop this Bill through both the independent review and their absolute persistence and focus. Reform of the Act is long overdue, and we want to legislate as soon as possible while getting the details right.

[BARONESS MERRON]

The tobacco and vapes Bill will give a once-in-a-generation opportunity to end the vicious cycle of addiction to tobacco, which is the number one cause of death, disability and ill health. We will save the next generation from becoming hooked on tobacco and nicotine. Through this legislation, we will introduce a progressive smoking ban to gradually end the sale of tobacco products to those currently aged 15 and below. I say to the noble Lord, Lord Patel, that our primary focus will be protecting our children by banning vapes being deliberately branded for and targeted at them.

I turn to the education and skills Bills in the gracious Speech. As my noble friend Lady Smith said, we will transform the life chances for millions of children through not just the health measures in the gracious Speech but the children's well-being Bill, which will raise school standards and open the doors of opportunity to every child. In bringing free breakfast clubs to every primary school, we want to see hungry minds, not hungry bellies. Breakfast clubs and school meals are about so much more than just food: I have seen them be a magnet for children to play and to learn, including learning how to be with others.

Barriers have stood in the way of young people achieving their potential, holding back individuals, society and economic growth. Skills shortage vacancies have more than doubled between 2017 and 2022 to more than 500,000, and the number of work visas granted increased by almost 80% between March 2022 and March 2024. Setting up Skills England will help us to close both these gaps. Uniting businesses, unions, combined authorities and government will make sure that training programmes are well designed and properly delivered to simplify the skills landscape for businesses and learners alike, ensuring that programmes can deliver the skills that businesses need to drive that all-important economic growth that so many noble Lords referred to. It will also create a formal link between migration data and skills policy, so that we can develop a homegrown, highly skilled workforce and reduce our reliance on migration.

A number of noble Lords raised several questions about T-levels and, more broadly, how we will support the many young people who leave education without the qualifications they may need to get on in life. To my noble friends Lord Knight, Lord Watson and Lady Morris, and the noble Baroness, Lady Garden, I say that qualifications are needed to deliver our mission to boost opportunity for everyone and to make sure that there are no glass ceilings holding back young people in our country. Our priority is to ensure that there are high-quality, accessible qualifications for all young people. T-levels provide a respected qualification for many, and we support their development, but we will be saying more about that soon and about how we will ensure that, where T-levels do not currently provide the necessary access, we do not leave leavers with no viable option.

On the points raised by the noble Lords, Lord Baker and Lord Aberdare, the Government have indeed already established an independent review of the curriculum. That will seek to ensure that the curriculum provides an excellent foundation, including those necessary digital, oracy and life skills that noble

Lords referred to in this debate. It will ensure that it is a broad curriculum, with access to music, art, sport and drama, as well as vocational subjects.

The noble Baronesses, Lady Monckton, Lady Fraser and Lady Finlay, and the noble Lord, Lord Lexden, along with other noble Lords, raised the question of support for children, including those with special educational needs, and related that to ending tax breaks for private schools. We are committed to making VAT apply to school fees and ending charitable business rates relief for private schools. These changes will not impact those with a necessary place at an independent school that is funded by a local authority to meet a special educational need. I add that all children of compulsory school age are entitled to a state-funded school place if they need one, and the department will ensure that the state-funded sector has the resources it needs to manage any impact of these tax changes affecting independent schools.

It is important that I remind your Lordships' House that, in our view, these changes are important to enable investment in the public sector, including for 6,500 more teachers and improved nursery provision. I know that both of those are very much in the hearts and minds of noble Lords across your Lordships' House. We will engage constructively with the independent schools sector, and we want to see it thrive in this new context. We will work with the Treasury, and I can say to noble Lords that there will be further details in due course.

Turning to the points raised on health and social care, let me openly acknowledge the feeling expressed by this House, including by the noble Lords, Lord Patel and Lord Evans, the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of London, my noble friend Lady Pitkeathley and the noble Baronesses, Lady Walmsley and Lady Tyler, who all spoke of the need to address the challenges in adult social care and asked that it be given the priority it requires. They made the point well that after decades of neglect, these challenges are significant and urgent. We will work with the sector to build consensus on the longer-term reforms needed to create a sustainable national care service. We will make a start by delivering a long-overdue new deal for care workers, ending the constant churn in social care and recruitment challenges. I hope that the noble Lord, Lord Prentis, and other noble Lords will be pleased to know that we will engage with workers and trade unions to develop the first ever fair pay agreement for care professionals, taking lessons from other countries where that already operates successfully.

On charging reforms, noble Lords will be aware of the commitment that this Government inherit to implement these reforms in October 2025. It has become clear that the health and care systems are going through a more severe crisis than we first thought. The Health Secretary has asked officials to report to him on progress against this as a key priority. I look forward to keeping your Lordships House updated.

To the noble Baroness, Lady Finlay, on palliative care, I can give the assurance that this Government understand the vital role of hospices and we will ensure that palliative care is both considered and prioritised.

When it comes to the issue of puberty blockers, the decisions this Government take will always be based on evidence and not on politics. The Cass review made it categorically clear that there is not enough evidence about the long-term effects of using puberty blockers to treat gender incongruence to know whether they are safe or beneficial. In response to the Cass review, we are acting to ensure that evidence and safety come first, and that puberty blockers and drugs are available only to those for whom they have been proven to be medically necessary. To ensure that safety is prioritised, we will launch with NIHR and NHS England a clinical trial to ensure that we fully understand the effects of puberty blockers to treat gender incongruence.

I thank noble Lords for their words and their thoughtfulness in emphasising the support that must be provided to individuals who are struggling, and reiterate the sentiment that we must protect safety and act according to the evidence. I also acknowledge that several questions were raised on the conversion therapy ban by the noble Baroness, Lady Meyer, and the noble Earl, Lord Leicester. I can say that a draft Bill will be brought forward to deliver on our manifesto commitment and we will consult all relevant groups.

Many noble Lords, including the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, my noble friend Lord Brooke and the noble Earl, Lord Effingham, rightly highlighted the urgent need to tackle obesity. I can certainly assure my noble friend Lord Brooke that our Government's approach will be very much about bringing key players around the table to make progress. We know that the NHS spends £11.5 billion every year on illnesses caused

by obesity, while costing our society a staggering £74 billion. It is a particular scourge on the poorest in our society and holds back the life chances of children from deprived communities. We will bring forward restrictions on TV and online advertising of unhealthy food to children and we will ban the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16s.

This alone could bring down the number of children living with obesity by some 20,000 and I very much welcome the focus of noble Lords on ensuring we have a preventive approach to obesity. We will ensure that schools can provide a range of different sports and activities in addition to PE lessons, to help more pupils meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity per day.

The gracious Speech marks the beginning of a decade of national renewal. It will break the pernicious link between background and success that has defined this country for far too long, so that the next generation can grow up in a Britain where chances in life are defined not by where you have come from but by the possibilities you can receive. The road to get there will be long and doubtless bumpy, but this is a journey on which I hope noble Lords will join us, with their expertise and insight, to improve the quality of people's lives. In my view, the gracious Speech marks a turning point. I hope we can embrace it and bring about the change we seek.

Debate adjourned until Monday 22 July.

House adjourned at 3.36 pm.

