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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 13 May 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Business of the House

Mr Speaker: I welcome Thangam Debbonaire to the Front Bench as shadow Leader of the House.

9.33 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business of the House will include:

MONDAY 17 MAY—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech on safe streets for all.

TUESDAY 18 MAY—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech on affordable and safe housing for all.

WEDNESDAY 19 MAY—Conclusion of the debate on the Queen's Speech on a rescue plan for the NHS and social care.

THURSDAY 20 MAY—General debate on the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster.

FRIDAY 21 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 24 May will include:

MONDAY 24 MAY—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 25 MAY—Remaining stages of the Telecommunications (Security) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 MAY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Environment Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 27 MAY—General debate on dementia action week, followed by general debate on implementing the 2020 obesity strategy.

Both debates were previously recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

Hon. and right hon. Members will also wish to be reminded that the House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 27 May and return on Monday 7 June.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for that, and, in this role, I look forward to working with him and with you, Mr Speaker, especially on making this world heritage site the most accessible it can be, and in particular autism-accessible in tribute to our late colleague, Cheryl Gillan.

The news and images from the middle east this morning are truly horrifying. We join the Government in urging

calm. We ask them to do all they can to halt the terrifying attacks and loss of life and to work with allies to help restore a peace process.

My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), has a remarkable work ethic, championing colleagues and staff in this place and showing calmness in a crisis, and I thank her. She is a hard act to follow.

I was also pleased to see in recent elections the high regard that the people of North East Somerset—the Leader of the House's constituents—have for their previous MP, his predecessor. They voted in large numbers for Labour's Dan Norris as our metro mayor. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Dan on his successful election as the Mayor of the West of England? Will he support Dan's call for a better deal for his own constituents from this Government?

I know that the Leader of the House prizes democracy, one of this country's greatest exports, so will he agree that it does not deserve the treatment it was given in the Queen's Speech? The Government propose to restrict the right to vote by requiring photo identification, yet a mere 0.00002%—I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for that figure—of the votes cast in 2019 were found to be fraudulent. The reason given for this attack on democracy is one conviction, out of more than 47 million votes. Ministers have said that as we have to ID to pick up a package, we should need it for voting, but 3.5 million people do not have photo ID. In any case, these Ministers are clearly not picking up their own parcels, as they would know that many forms of ID without photos are accepted. Will the Leader of the House please explain to his own constituents why they cannot vote by giving their name to a clerk and being counted by a teller, when that is how their own MP votes in this place—in normal times, at least? Will he join me in saluting the respect the British public have for democracy and reconsider the Government's reckless, expensive and anti-democratic decision?

The Queen's Speech was astonishing for the lack of understanding of the problems that we had before the pandemic—problems made worse by it—and for the lack of ambition to tackle them. We need urgency and boldness to create those decent, secure jobs, to halt climate change, to build truly affordable homes and to boost productivity.

We also need to know what has happened to the Prime Minister's much-hyped plan to fix social care. After a truly terrible year in which the need for this plan could not have been any clearer, there is barely a whisper of it in the Queen's Speech—a paltry nine words. Meanwhile, there have been £8 billion of cuts from social care budgets by successive Tory Governments since 2010, and we have a welfare state for the 2020s built on the life expectancy of the 1940s. It is 659 days since the Prime Minister promised us a plan, but, nearly 10 years after the Dilnot commission published its recommendations, which could be that plan, older people who made this country what it is have had to spend their own hard-earned money on a care system that is urgently in need of such a plan. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to come to this House and explain this dereliction of duty?

[Thangam Debbonaire]

The Government fail to appreciate the strength of feeling across Parliament and the country about the cladding and fire safety crisis, exposed so tragically and cruelly by the Grenfell Tower fire. Members of all parties know the struggles of their own constituents. They have repeatedly tried to get the Government to stick to their promise—oft made—that residents would not be made to pay for dangers they did not cause, so will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to lift the burdens from residents in buildings both above and below 18 metres and place those burdens firmly on the industry that caused them? Will the Leader of the House urge him also not to wait until the Building Safety Bill, but to act now and vote with Her Majesty's Opposition next week on our building safety motion?

Finally, the Leader of the Opposition has, of course, welcomed on our behalf the Government's announcement of a public inquiry into covid and the Government response, but the Prime Minister needs to heed the cry of bereaved families, who have been calling for this inquiry for over a year and want lessons to be learned urgently, not next year—they want them in time to inform any further waves, which are still, sadly, a risk because of the variants. Will the Leader of the House ask the Government to publish the lessons learned review urgently and to heed the words of survivors and bereaved people?

The covid memorial wall, with its thousands of red hearts facing us across the Thames, bears witness to the loss and pain of the last year. We owe it to those people who died, to their relatives and to the country to make sure that the Government are openly and speedily transparent. They deserve no less, and we in the Opposition will, on their behalf, hold the Government to that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position. We have been neighbours or near neighbours in Somerset and Bristol for some years. I think we started debating together on "Points West", and now we face each other across the Dispatch Box, and I am sure it will continue to be as friendly but as forceful a debate as we had all those years ago. The hon. Lady is known across the House for her good nature and kindness but also her clarity of thinking and forcefulness, so I look forward to these sessions as a source of a bit of heat but also some light too.

I want to pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who was an absolute pleasure to work with. Mr Speaker, I am sure that you found the same on the Commission, where she was committed to making things work for the whole House in a bipartisan spirit. She raised every week at the Dispatch Box important issues, particularly relating to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and the other people held improperly by a regime that does not respect the rights of individuals. Her campaigning was forceful, her questions were usually quite tricky and she was a delight to be a counterparty to.

I feel that the poor old right hon. Lady has become the Admiral Byng of the socialist party. As you may remember, Mr Speaker, Admiral Byng was ultimately disposed of because he was sent out with ships that were not good enough. HQ failed and blundered, but it had to look around and find some scapegoat, and the

most senior scapegoat of Hartlepool seems to be the right hon. Lady, which seems a little bit harsh. She is the Admiral Byng memorial former shadow Leader of the House of Commons.

I turn to the important questions that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) asked. Absolutely, trying to restore a peace process is important, and the Government have called on both sides to show restraint; that is of fundamental sense. We hope that peace will be re-established, and we are working with our allies.

Of course I congratulate Dan Norris on being elected as the Mayor of WECA—the West of England Combined Authority—much though I do not think WECA should exist, because I think it is a means of taking money out of North East Somerset and giving it to Bristol, which is not something I have ever been much in favour of, but I wish him well in his new role.

It is important that elections are fair and proper. The hon. Lady mentioned that we do not have to prove who we are when voting in the Division Lobby in normal circumstances, but she is forgetting that we are not allowed to wear overcoats in the Division Lobby, just in case we send somebody through to vote in our place.

Mr Speaker: Or hats.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Or, indeed, as Mr Speaker helpfully says, hats. Therefore, there are requirements in this place to prevent personation, and surely what is good enough for the House of Commons to prevent personation is right. [Interruption.] Although that was a wonderful heckle, at the moment we are using our identity cards to vote, so the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is not right on this occasion; that is a most unusual lapse in his normal attention to the detail of the procedures of the House.

Having photographic identification ensures that a problem does not arise. This country has an electoral system of which people can be proud and in which people have confidence. We must not allow that confidence to slip. We do not want hanging chads and then to deal with it afterwards. We want to stop hanging chads happening before that becomes an issue and personation becomes at risk. It is only reasonable to ask people to turn up with their photographic identification or get it from their local council, so that they can vote. I fear that it is absolutely classic of the socialists—they do not have any confidence in their own voters. We have confidence in our voters, because we think our voters will not find it unduly onerous or taxing to turn up with an identity document of some kind.

As regards the ambition of the Queen's Speech, it actually delivers on all the things that the hon. Lady seemed to be asking for—there is major planning reform, there are freeports to help boost the economy and COP26 is coming this year. I thought her comments were rather more in favour of the Queen's Speech than hostile to it. I am grateful for that; I will take what I can in these circumstances.

Social care has been a long-standing issue. The last Labour Government—happily, a long time ago now—had two Green Papers and one royal commission, and still could not come up with any solution, but this Government are committed to coming forward with our solution by the end of this year. That is absolutely clear, and it was mentioned in the Queen's Speech—the

Gracious Speech. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been the most assiduous attender in this House, updating this House on every aspect of his responsibility. He is very good at doing that, and he does it more often than almost any other Secretary of State.

As regards cladding, and of course we come to the anniversary of Grenfell in June, that is a serious issue, and the building safety Bill will deal with it. It is proper to deal with these things in the appropriate legislation. That is what Her Majesty's Government said as the Fire Safety Bill was going through, and it will be dealt with in the building safety Bill, which will be coming forward shortly. The hon. Lady should wait for the exciting announcements that come from this Dispatch Box.

Finally, as regards the inquiry, it is surely better to do it when the pandemic has come to an end. It is still being dealt with. The vaccine roll-out is an enormous achievement, but it is still being rolled out. An enormous administrative effort is still required to make sure that it is taking place effectively. I think that to distract from the good work that is being done with an inquiry now would be a mistake, but the time will come and it will come relatively soon.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on special educational needs support to not only ensure that we level up equality of opportunity for everyone, but consider the establishment of SEND—special educational needs and disabilities—hubs throughout the country, including in Bury, to provide health, emotional, educational and employment assistance to some of the most vulnerable in our communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Department for Education has launched a major review of the special educational needs system, which is planned to be published before the summer of 2021. Based on discussions with children, young people, families and partners across education and healthcare, it will consult on proposals to deliver a system that is clearly focused on preparing for fulfilled adulthood through every stage, and to identify and address issues earlier within mainstream education. The Government believe these measures will not only improve children's and young people's outcomes and put them and their families at the heart of the SEND system, but deliver a SEND system fit for the future, with high-quality support delivered affordably and sustainably for the long term. I am glad to say that my hon. Friend is going to be speaking in the Queen's Speech debate later, so I hope he will raise this issue further then.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Can I also welcome the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) to her place? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)—remember the Perthshire One—will also be very much looking forward to working with her. I would add my own tributes to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). She was certainly a great support to me as I stood in in this role—and I continue to stand in in this role—over the past weeks. Obviously, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire is very keen to make a return to this role, but we shall have to hold our anticipation for a little longer until we can see that happening.

I have no doubt that the Leader of the House will want to join me in congratulating the new Scottish Government on a record-breaking election success in last week's Scottish Parliament elections—more votes than any other party in the history of devolution—and it is certainly great to see them returned in such great numbers. From a personal point of view, I note that the Members for Midlothian North and Musselburgh, Colin Beattie, and for Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale, Christine Grahame, both returned with an increased vote share and increased majorities.

I share the concerns of other Members about the ongoing situation in Israel and Palestine. I think that is of great concern to us all. Would the Leader of the House perhaps make time available for the Secretary of State for International Trade to give a statement to the House on the impact of arms export licences and how this has such an impact on conflicts around the globe?

Over recent weeks, I have often raised the issues of openness and transparency. We still see these issues ongoing and allegations still do not go away. Investigations are now ongoing, but concern still remains that the Prime Minister can let himself off the hook on any conclusions the adviser on ministerial interests might come to, just as happened with the Home Secretary previously. Surely this is evidence that the enforcement of the ministerial code is not nearly strong enough. In the words of Transparency International, the “guiding principles alone are not sufficient when it comes to guaranteeing integrity in public office.”

So can we have a statement from the Minister for the Cabinet Office on strengthening the code, perhaps even by making it by law?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, of course we miss the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), but the hon. Gentleman is an excellent stand-in and, as I understand it, he is standing in in almost every role within the Scottish National party at the moment; I wonder whether he might have to take over as First Minister in due course and be seconded. Of course I congratulate the First Minister and the SNP on their election success, and Her Majesty's Government look forward to working very closely with all the devolved Administrations in a spirit of good will and cohesiveness. I am delighted that the First Minister has decided to join the United Kingdom Government in the inquiry into covid, showing the strength of the United Kingdom. I am beginning to hope—although this may be excessive hope—that there is the prospect of one sinner repenting, which would give great joy to the others who do not need to, as the First Minister becomes more Unionist in her outlook.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raises the question of arms export licences. They are extremely carefully controlled and Her Majesty's Government work closely with our allies to ensure that we sell arms only to those countries with which we have the closest relationship, as of course we do with the state of Israel.

On openness and transparency, the great openness is a majority of 80. The Prime Minister has the mandate from the British people. The ministerial code is the Prime Minister's code. It would be a ridiculous state of affairs to think that the will of the British people could in some bureaucratic way be superseded. It cannot be; the Prime Minister has the support of the British people,

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shown again last week in an enormously successful vote. So while I am congratulating the SNP and the Mayor of WECA, let me also congratulate our own Prime Minister on being able to connect with the British people in a way that few other politicians have ever achieved.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The residents of the Carsic estate in Ashfield are fed up with a handful of local idiots who are the source of the vast majority of antisocial behaviour and this is happening all over the country. The majority of these nuisances are social housing tenants who show no respect to the vast majority of decent, hard-working tenants who are being let down by a system that makes it very difficult to evict nuisance tenants. Would my right hon. Friend welcome a debate in this House to discuss how we can give our police, our councils and our courts greater powers to allow decent people, like the decent people of Carsic, the right to a peaceful life?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question because I think all of us as constituency MPs deal with this issue. Some social landlords, such as Curo, are very good and responsive. Others, and I have found in my experience the Guinness trust, are very much less responsive in helping. Social landlords are required by the Regulator of Social Housing to work in partnership with other agencies to prevent and tackle antisocial behaviour in the neighbourhoods where they own homes. The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 provides the police, local authorities and other local agencies with a range of tools and powers that they can use to respond quickly and effectively to antisocial behaviour, and these include civil injunctions that can impose restrictions or positive requirements on individuals whose behaviour is causing or is likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress.

My hon. Friend is right to raise this in the Chamber of the House, because sometimes the best way to get action is by putting pressure on, as the Member of Parliament, to get the various agencies to work together.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: The planning Bill announced in the Queen's Speech will ring loud alarm bells for many residents in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, not least those in Sydenham, Whitnash and Bishop's Tachbrook, given that it would allow applications to automatically gain approval in certain areas, stripping residents of their right to have a say. For those in Sydenham, the news this week that the council planning committee has recommended approval of the application for 500 homes in east Whitnash will come as a shock, given that it was turned down previously and that the planning inspector recommended that it should not be built due to the limited capacity of the Sydenham road network. The site is, after all, a cul-de-sac at the end of a cul-de-sac on a cul-de-sac; the roads cannot cope. Will the Leader of the House grant me a debate on the proposed development, which is totally unnecessary, as concluded by independent Office for National Statistics data?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman's constituency issue is ideally suited for an Adjournment debate, but the planning Bill is essential. Her Majesty's Government believe in helping people to own their own home. This is about home ownership and having a planning system

that actually makes it easier for people to own their own homes and to build the houses that people need—something that we have been failing to do over many years, based on a system established in the late 1940s that thought that central Government always knew best. Central Government do not always know best. There is a significant demand out there. The supply needs to meet that demand, and we need to strengthen and reinvigorate our home-owning democracy.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the numbers allowed at life events such as weddings and funerals in the road map out of lockdown? While I welcome the Government's research programme, which saw an audience of 4,000 people at the O2 earlier this week for the Brit awards—I used to be invited when I was younger—many constituents are frustrated that they are having to wait until 21 June to have more than 30 friends and family at their wedding. Following the success of our vaccination programme, I do hope that that guidance can be reviewed.

Mr Speaker: I hope the Brit awards are listening.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am sure they are. My hon. Friend's words are heard across the nation. They reverberate around the land. They go out from this great hall to be heard in every corner of the United Kingdom.

I am glad to say that this week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed a further easing of restrictions from 17 May, as the latest data confirm the four tests have been met. That includes weddings, receptions and other life events taking place with up to 30 people and, I think importantly—I think this was the right priority—increasing the cap on the numbers attending funerals in line with how many people can be safely accommodated in venues. It is crucial that we push on with our vaccination programme, and that people follow the rules and take advantage of lateral flow tests, so that we can make this road map to freedom a one-way road.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: Last month in my constituency, a 17-year-old boy, Levi Ernest-Morrison, was stabbed to death metres from his front door. Despite the Government saying they are committed to a public health approach to youth violence, over the last 10 years, we have seen youth centres and Sure Start centres closed, and education and children's mental health budgets slashed. Can we please have a debate, in Government time, about tackling youth violence once and for all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There has clearly been a problem with rising levels of crime in London. The Government are committed to doing everything they can to tackle that, partly through the employment of more police, with over 6,000 more police officers already recruited and a target for 20,000 more, and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is currently before this House. It is really important that, across all parties, we support the efforts that are being made to back up the police and to have more police. I feel so sorry for the families affected. The hon. Lady, I am sure, is giving support to her constituent at this very sad time.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I was delighted to see former Labour leader Tony Blair show that he is concerned, as I am, with the woke left wanting to cancel

anyone who disagrees with them. I am delighted that the Government are coming forward with legislation to protect freedom of speech at universities, but Dudley does not have a university, so does my right hon. Friend agree that that legislation should also be applicable to colleges, online, and to other areas of our lives?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise his concerns about the charge of the woke brigade, though I seem to remember that the charge of the Light Brigade was ultimately not an enormously successful venture. I think the charge of the woke brigade will be similarly thwarted in the end.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, which was announced in the Queen's Speech, will protect the fundamental principle of freedom of speech by strengthening existing freedoms of speech and addressing gaps in the current framework. There must be consequences for breaches of freedom of speech duties, and these legislative changes will ensure the significance and compliance that freedom of speech deserves.

This issue is of fundamental importance. If our places of education are not bastions of freedom of speech, what purpose do they serve? The whole point of a university is the clash of ideas, as we have a clash of ideas back and forth in this House. Freedom of speech in this House is protected by the Bill of Rights. We should protect, encourage and enhance freedom of speech across the land.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: The Scottish Parliament has extended the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds and most recently to all new Scots with leave to remain and refugee status. Last Thursday saw a record turnout, which was a victory for democracy as well as for the Scottish National party. The Leader of the House says that his voters might be able to afford ID, but many across the country will not, so can we have an urgent statement on exactly why the UK Government are seeking to suppress and restrict electoral participation with their offensive, unevidenced and exclusionary voter ID rules?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady may want to consult *Hansard* because I pointed out that councils will make ID available for free to people who do not have suitable identification documents, and I believe 98% of people already do. The franchise will be extended in the Bill that we bring forward to ensure that people living overseas do not lose their votes after 15 years, so I hope that she will support that further extension of democracy.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: I speak as the chairman of the all-party group on 22q11 syndrome, which is a genetic disorder best described as the most common syndrome not heard of unless you have it, with many children having, among other things, learning difficulties. With that in mind, I believe that for many children who require specialist education support, such as those with 22q, the educational catch-up from covid-19 may not be as straightforward as for those without. Our recovery from covid-19 must be as equal as possible for all, so may we have a debate in Government time to raise awareness of the lesser known but equally prevalent genetic disorders, such as 22q, and the impact that covid-19 has had on learning and educational recovery post-pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on taking over the all-party group that looks at these issues? The point she raises is one of great importance. We must value everybody in our society equally—that must be a fundamental principle of how the society of the United Kingdom works—and, therefore, support those with special educational needs and disabilities and help them to make up for time lost during the pandemic. Sir Kevan Collins has been appointed as the education recovery commissioner and is considering how schools and the system can more effectively target resources and support the pupils in the greatest need. Special schools and alternative provision will be available to access funding to provide summer schools and the national tutoring programme. We have also prioritised children who attend specialist settings by providing additional uplift both in the 2020 catch-up premium and in the 2021 recovery premium. It so happens that today's Queen's Speech debate on a brighter future for the next generation is an opportunity to raise this matter further.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I send my congratulations to Pam Duncan-Glancy, the first permanent wheelchair user elected to the Scottish Parliament, but not all wheelchair users in public office have a good story to tell. Harriet Clough, the second wheelchair-using councillor ever elected to Bristol City Council could not stand this time because of the closure of the EnAble fund—a temporary fund designed to cover the cost for reasonable adjustments for candidates with a disability. Does the Leader of the House agree that having a disability should never stand in the way of running for public office, and will he outline when the Government will bring forward a permanent fund as a first step towards removing barriers for candidates with a disability?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with the hon. Lady that it is absolutely right that people with disabilities should face no barrier to engaging in public life. They should be helped, supported and encouraged, but in the selection of candidates, the primary responsibility is with political parties.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): A recent report, which included input from the Department for Transport, looked at the rail services in and around Manchester and suggested that one option should be a change in the pattern of services on the Hope Valley line, which includes services between Cleethorpes and Manchester airport, which is regarded as absolutely essential as it provides connections to the rest of the network. Concerns have also been expressed by Sheffield Members. Could the Leader of the House arrange for the Rail Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—to come to the House and make a statement to reassure Members and passengers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend, as always, is a great champion for his constituency. I can assure him that the Government take the matter seriously. We are set to spend £137 million of taxpayers' money to deliver more capacity and improve connectivity between Sheffield and Manchester. The Hope valley capacity scheme is designed to remove bottlenecks on the line by creating places for fast passenger services to overtake slower-moving freight trains, allowing more trains to run and increasing

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the reliability of services. When it is finished, I think that the Hope valley line should be renamed the Martin Vickers line, as a proper tribute to my hon. Friend for all he does for his constituents.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Many of my constituents tell me that they are finding it difficult to get face-to-face appointments with GPs. While I appreciate that telephone and video consultations will remain a factor, will my right hon. Friend give a statement to the House to say that face-to-face appointments should be available within a reasonable timeframe if they are needed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The question is obviously important, and my hon. Friend is right to raise it. General practice is open and has been throughout the pandemic, and people should be able to receive services in the way that is most suitable for them. The way in which people can get general practice services during covid-19 has changed; practices are offering more triage and remote consultations—video and online—to see as many patients as possible, while protecting staff and patients from the avoidable risk of infection. NHS England and NHS Improvement have issued guidance on the importance of continuing to offer face-to-face appointments, utilising remote triage and making use of online and telephone consultations where suitable.

General practice appointment levels are, I am glad to say, now close to pre-pandemic numbers. In February 2021, an estimated 23.5 million appointments—an average of 1.19 million per working day—were booked in general practice in England, of which 13 million were face-to-face, which is 55.3%. People who need face-to-face appointments ought to be able to get them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If we are congratulating people, could we congratulate Buffy Williams on winning her seat in the Senedd for the Rhondda last week? At the same time, could we also pay tribute to Leanne Wood? She was a Plaid Cymru Assembly and then Senedd Member for 18 years, which shows phenomenal dedication. We should pay tribute to those who are our opponents, not our enemies.

May I ask the Leader of the House whether he attended the Brit awards the other night, or watched them perhaps—or whether he knows what the Brit awards are? In particular, did he listen to Dua Lipa's very important contribution about our health workers in this country? She said:

“It's very good to clap for them, but we need to pay them.”

I say that because it is not just the people who have been doing the vaccinating and those who have kept us safe over the past 15 months, but the people who will have to get the NHS back into shape to deal with all the other conditions that could not be dealt with for the past year. We need to give them a boost in the arm—and that is money, isn't it? Can we have a debate on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Buffy Williams on her victory in the Rhondda? He is most gracious in paying tribute to Leanne Wood; he is right to do so, because 18 years of public service is a long time and losing elections is never fun, even for our political opponents. It is worth recognising that.

Unfortunately, I did not pay much attention to the British awards.

Chris Bryant: Resign!

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not as trendy, fashionable or à la mode as the hon. Gentleman—if only we could all be such models of modernity as he is. To come to his fundamental point, nurses will receive a 1% pay rise and have received some additional funding as well, but we must recognise that the public finances are under great strain after the hundreds of billions—over £400 billion—that have been spent to protect the economy and deal with covid. There are constraints on what can be spent, but there is an independent review. The Government's proposal has been made, and we will see what the review says.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The Spode works in Stoke-on-Trent Central is a complex and exciting regeneration project where new creative businesses are breathing life back into a much-loved historic site, bringing new cultural recovery to a historically underfunded area. Will my right hon. Friend make parliamentary time to discuss the impact that small businesses in the cultural sector will have on reviving towns and cities post pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concern. It is a top priority that small businesses are the engine of our recovery. They are as much a part of our cultural heritage, especially in industrial cities such as Stoke, as any museum or concert hall. We have to date spent over £1.2 billion in financial support to more than 5,000 individual organisations and sites both large and small across the United Kingdom, including, I am glad to say, the Spode Museum Trust. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer also announced in the 2021 Budget an additional £300 million of taxpayers' money to support theatres, museums and other cultural organisations in England through the cultural recovery fund, together with other cultural support, such as funding for our national museums. This means that the total taxpayer package for culture during the pandemic is now approaching £2 billion, which is really an unprecedented sum.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Over recent weeks, many constituents have contacted me with huge concern about the removal of hedgerows at the start of a housing development, in what most of us think of as the close season for cutting or removing hedgerows. I have looked into the individual incident, but my constituents and I would like to see further protection of our hedgerows and wildlife in the context of development, so can we have a debate in Government time on how we can strengthen that protection for our hedgerows, birds and wildlife?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that the hon. Lady is really calling for the agricultural reforms that are being put forward to ensure support for farmers who support the environment. Certainly, talking to farmers in North East Somerset, I know that they are well aware of their obligations to protect hedgerows, but this is not an obligation that they resent. They feel it is a natural part of their farming duty.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: I am afraid that Parliament is not working. It is not properly holding the Government to account. It strikes me that

Parliament should lead, so could we have a statement from the Leader of the House telling us when Parliament, and particularly the House of Commons, is going to be restored to its normal process? When will we end virtual proceedings, so that we can have proper voting and not have hundreds of votes in the Deputy Chief Whip's pocket, and when will we end social distancing in the Chamber? We really need to lead and get Parliament back doing its job properly.

Mr Rees-Mogg: A voice cryeth in the wilderness! I am tempted to say, "Physician, heal thyself." Where is my hon. Friend? Why is he not in this Chamber holding me to account and leading by the example he wants? I entirely agree with him. I am waiting with joy for that day when we are back to normal, which I hope will be 21 June, when everybody will be back here and it will be safe, and we will not have to wear masks and the Dispatch Box will not be covered in perspex, and we will be back to a full and flourishing Chamber. I agree with my hon. Friend that scrutiny is good for the nation, good for the Government and good for our constituents, but I would encourage him to come to London, come to Westminster, and take his seat.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): On this holy day of Eid, a day of salvation for Muslims across the world, many including in my own constituency are watching with horror as an abhorrent humanitarian crisis escalates against the Palestinian people in that region. It may well be an uncomfortable truth for the UK Government that they have fuelled, and continue to fuel, deadly conflicts such as the one we are seeing in Gaza through the reckless sale of arms to right-wing coalition Governments, but it is a truth none the less. Given the continued intransigence of this UK Government and their willingness to turn a blind eye, will the Leader of the House allow a full and frank debate on such matters, and allow us, the Members of this House, the opportunity to work to stop such atrocities being committed at the hands of our perceived allies?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned Eid, and this is an opportunity to wish people a joyous Eid. It is also, of course, the feast of the Ascension, so it is an important religious day for many communities. I mentioned earlier the issue of the sale of arms, which is covered very carefully by regulations that ensure that arms are sold only to regimes that we have close relationships with, that are our key allies, and that behave in a humane and proper way. The Government have called for restraint on both sides and pointed out that the killing of unarmed civilians is always wrong in the conflict that is currently going on, but Israel is a very important ally to the United Kingdom.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In the past two weeks, in my constituency, there have been four attempted abductions of children. This is causing huge alarm among families, and of course I am shocked by it. The police have increased their patrols in the areas where this has happened, but may I ask my right hon. Friend whether it would be possible for us to have a debate about how we can alert the public and highlight the fact that each one of us should help the police by being their eyes and ears, in order to try to prevent further abductions

of children? Thankfully, these people did not succeed, but there is a real worry here and we should highlight this to the general public.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is doing so very effectively. It is deeply troubling that what he reports is going on. I reiterate that the Government are recruiting more police, with 6,620 so far. It was Sir Robert Peel who said, "We are the police and the police are us." In his call for us to support the police, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right; we are a society that is policed with civilians, not by a military, and therefore everything we can do to support the police in their difficult task is worth doing. I am glad to hear that there are more patrols in response to the worrying circumstances that he reports to the House.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: The Leader of the House said earlier that he does not think the West of England Combined Authority should exist because it unduly benefits Bristol, but Bristol is not getting the support it needs for Temple Quarter regeneration, for example, or for improving transport infrastructure, such as the A4, which many of his constituents use to drive through my constituency and into Bristol city centre. May we have a statement on what the Government's levelling up agenda means for the West of England? To me and to many of the people who voted for Dan Norris last week it looks very much as though we have been written off.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is a socialist Mayor of Bristol and a socialist Mayor of WECA, and they have responsibility for a lot of these development areas. Levelling up is something for the whole country, as I know very well in my own constituency. I am very much looking forward to things such as the introduction of the lifelong learning loan, which will help people who may have been left behind in education previously and who will be able to get a second chance. Levelling up is for everybody, but I fear it is true that money leaks out of North East Somerset into Bristol under WECA, and that is not something I am broadly in favour of.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con) [V]: I believe I represent the largest population from St Vincent and the Grenadines outside the islands. In the aftermath of the eruption of the volcano La Soufrière, I of course share my constituents' acute concerns for their family, friends and property. May we please have an oral statement on the situation on the islands and the British Government's response?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituents and is right to bring this important issue to the attention of the House. I assure him that Her Majesty's Government are monitoring the situation in St Vincent and the Grenadines closely, and our thoughts are very much with those affected by the eruption. The Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad, spoke to the Prime Minister of St Vincent and the Grenadines and his high commissioner to the UK on 14 April. They discussed initial and continuing UK support for the recovery following the volcanic eruption. Our resident British commissioner in St Vincent and the Grenadines has also been in contact with the Prime Minister and other

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

officials there. I encourage my hon. Friend, in the first instance, to apply for an Adjournment debate, so that this matter may be aired more fully.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I support the Government's work to do all they can to stop any variants of the virus coming into the UK, but may I raise an issue with the Leader of the House relating to the support that disabled constituents receive when they have to quarantine? My constituent Mr Davies raised with the hotel staff the fact that he would need additional support, but he received none during his 10-day quarantine. His wife was not able to support him. This situation led to several visits from paramedics to offer additional medical support. He did not receive the right type of food and his care during the 10 days was truly shocking.

I understand that the Health Secretary made a statement on 5 May to qualify the exemption process for constituents with disabilities, but the system is not working. It is almost impossible to gain the exemptions from Ministers in time for constituents who may then not have to quarantine or could quarantine at home. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the relevant Minister of State or the Health Secretary to make a statement to set out how the exemption system works, so that Members can do their jobs in supporting disabled constituents and so that, crucially, if a disabled constituent does have to quarantine, the hotel staff are aware of their needs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a constituency case of great importance, and I am very sorry to hear about what happened to Mr Davies. I will take up the issue with the Secretary of State for Health immediately after this session, because, clearly, disabled people who do need additional support ought to receive it.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): One of the recurring themes that emerged when I was back out on the doorsteps in Warrington during the local election campaign was the level of antisocial behaviour being inflicted on some of my constituents. Police often refer to it as “low-level” antisocial behaviour, but people who suffer it experience really high levels of annoyance. Can we have a debate in Government time on the value of community policing and the importance of freeing up police officers from unnecessary paperwork, so that they can get out on the streets and deal with antisocial behaviour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, although I was concerned by the fact that he said that antisocial behaviour rose once he got back on the streets—I am sure that the two were not directly connected. None the less, it is remarkable how unpleasant and fretful low-level antisocial behaviour is for constituents, particularly for elderly constituents. I am sure that adding 20,000 police officers will help, but community policing is of fundamental importance. I have often found in my own constituency that a quiet word from a police community support officer can nip this type of antisocial behaviour in the bud. We all have to work with our police forces across the country to encourage them in the right direction and to get back to “Dixon of Dock Green” policing, which I think does stop low-level criminality.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Retail workers have been covid heroes, but this pandemic has exacerbated the already growing levels of violence and abuse that they face at work. This is, of course, unacceptable, and Parliament has an obligation to act in this Session to protect them. Will the Leader of the House facilitate that by giving over Government time for a debate on this crucial matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter again. Concern about crime affecting retail workers is shared across the House. He pays tribute to the retail workers who stayed at work throughout the pandemic—the service that they gave to the nation was second to none. Like NHS workers, they made huge sacrifices and took risks—initially, they were unaware of the level of risk that they were taking—to ensure that the rest of us could have access to essential supplies. When it comes to time for debate, it is rather easy for me this week. The Queen's Speech debate is going on, and that is an opportunity of several days' length for people to raise any and all issues that they think are important. This is definitely an important issue.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: As the MP for North Devon, I am proud to represent some of the best beaches in the country, and I have pledged 10 hours of my time to join volunteers in cleaning them up during Keep Britain Tidy's great British spring clean. Microplastics and nurdles are too small to be picked up by our wonderful volunteers, but they still cause great harm to nature and are finding their way into our food chain. Will my right hon. Friend consider allocating Government time to discussing how we can fix that problem at source, perhaps with new legislation in the Government's Environment Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. It is obviously important to protect the marine environment from litter and it is one of the Government's priorities, which is why we introduced our robust ban on microbeads in rinse-off personal care products in 2018, preventing billions of tiny pieces of harmful plastic from entering the ocean.

My hon. Friend is fantastic in her war against litter. I say to her that we will fight litter on the beaches; we will fight litter on the landing grounds; we will fight litter in the fields and in the hills; we will never surrender to litter.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) [V]: The loss of a baby at any stage of pregnancy can be an extremely traumatic experience for parents. However, if a baby is stillborn before the end of the 24th week, it is treated as a miscarriage, and, under current rules, bereaved parents receive no formal support or paid leave from their employment. Does the Leader of the House agree that we must do more to support families suffering baby loss, and will he agree to have a debate in Government time on providing paid leave to those who experience miscarriage?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have the greatest sympathy for the issue that the hon. Lady raises. The loss of a baby is such a terrible and traumatic blow for families who are looking forward to bringing a new life into the world,

and they deserve all possible support. I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but there is cross-party support for ensuring that people who suffer in this way receive help and assistance. Her point is very well made. Perhaps an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate would find a lot of support from other Members.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Harrow Council spent £250,000 putting in dangerous cycle lanes and a series of deeply unpopular low-traffic neighbourhoods. It is now spending £85,000 to remove them, after the public outcry. In addition, it proposed to sell off the very popular Belmont community centre to be redeveloped for flats. Then, of course, after the public outcry, it made a screeching U-turn and claimed to have saved the Belmont community centre for the public. Could we have a debate in Government time on the waste of money that takes place in certain places in local government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The council would seem to be rather remarkable in its skills if it was able to do a screeching U-turn in the midst of all those cycle lanes. The waste of taxpayers' money is scandalous. We have to hold socialist councils to account when they waste public funds doing things that do not work and waging war on the motorist. We all know that it is only the Conservatives who back the motorist. The socialists and the Liberal Democrats—if there are any left—do not like the motorist and do everything they can to make the motorist's life more difficult, whereas we aim to make it easier with a huge road-building plan that will make motoring the pleasure that it has always historically been.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: The Dunston staiths are a large timber structure on the south bank of the River Tyne in Gateshead that were used to load coal on to ships for transport to London and the south of England. The staiths were extensively renovated for their use in Gateshead's garden festival in 1990, and they are an important symbol of our industrial heritage and a monument to the coal industry. At over 600 metres long, they are also a feat of engineering and construction in themselves.

Sadly, in recent years the staiths have been subject to several very damaging arson attacks, and the Tyne & Wear Building Preservation Trust simply does not have the resources to repair them properly. Could we have a debate about sustaining our industrial heritage, and would the Leader of the House please assist me in securing a meeting with a Minister from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to explore a solution to our ongoing repair and maintenance problems on one of the country's most important industrial heritage landmarks?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What the hon. Gentleman asks for is something of importance, because our industrial heritage is important to the nation as a whole. May I commend him on his diffidence? I have brought forward in my name, on behalf of the recommendations made by the Backbench Business Committee, two debates on 27 May, and the hon. Gentleman did not lobby, prod or push to

have a debate on his pet subject. I think that shows considerable restraint and honourability—as, of course, all hon. Members show at all times.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: The Leader of the House knows that the road map is going along slowly but steadily, and that restrictions are being removed. In fact the nightclubs will be open in the foreseeable future, and I look forward to attending with him.

In the House of Commons we are supposed to be leaders. But we are not leaders—if we look at the House today, we can see how few people are sitting in the Chamber, because they cannot. I am at home today because I had to come home for a personal reason. I have been in the Chamber all week, and I will be there next week. Also, six people can be entertained outside, in the fresh air, in most places in the country, but not in the House of Commons—only two people. Next week, six people will be able to enjoy hospitality inside, but not in the House of Commons—only four people, I understand, in the Dining Room; I do not know how many in the Tea Room or in any other rooms. Why are we so far behind the rest of the country, when it is legal to meet people in groups of six outside this week and inside next week, but we do not do it? When will we be up with the rest of the people of England—when will we be the same?

Mr Speaker: May I say, to help the Leader of the House, that there is a meeting on Monday? We will be looking at the road map; everything is being reviewed. Now, to say that these things are not going to happen—I would not want to disappoint the hon. Lady, and I think she ought to wait till Monday and let us see what we come up with. We are exactly in line with Public Health England advice and the way the rest of the country is looking.

Mrs Latham *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady may shake her head, but the reality is that if she waits till Monday she may well be happy and surprised, and I am sure that is what we would all wish for her.

Mr Rees-Mogg: These are really matters for the Commission and its spokesman to answer. The issues that affect the Leader of the House are the bringing forward of motions, and I can assure my hon. Friend that the motions fall away on 21 June, at which point we will be back to normal. But I would say to her what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)—that there are seats here, and that if people want to lead by example, the example is on the seats here.

Mr Speaker: I am now suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

10.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Ballymurphy Inquest Findings

10.34 am

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the findings of the Ballymurphy inquest. I want to put on the record the Government's acknowledgment of the terrible hurt that has been caused to the families of Francis Quinn, Father Hugh Mullan, Noel Phillips, Joan Connolly, Daniel Teggart, Joseph Murphy, Edward Doherty, John Laverty, Joseph Corr and John McKerr.

I also want to pay tribute to the great patience with which the families have conducted themselves during their determined campaign, which has lasted almost 50 years. The Prime Minister is writing personally to the families, having yesterday expressed his deep regret to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and apologised unreservedly on behalf of the state.

The findings of the coroner are clear: those who died were entirely innocent of wrongdoing. The events at Ballymurphy should never have happened. The families of those who were killed should never have had to experience the grief and trauma of that loss. They should not have had to wait nearly five decades for the judgment this week, nor should they have been compelled to relive that terrible time in August 1971 again and again in their long and distressing quest for truth.

Over the course of the troubles, more than 3,500 people were killed, and tens of thousands injured, with families torn apart forever. The majority of those killed were innocent civilians, such as those on the streets of Ballymurphy.

The vast majority of those who served in Northern Ireland did so with great dignity and professionalism, but it is clear that in some cases the security forces and the Army made terrible errors too. The duty of the state is to hold itself to the highest standards at all times. When we fail to meet these high standards, we must recognise the hurt and agony caused.

There is no doubt that what happened in Ballymurphy in those awful few days also fuelled further violence and escalation, particularly in the early years of the troubles. The Government profoundly regret and are truly sorry for these events, for how investigations after these terrible events were handled, and for the additional pain that the families have had to endure in their fight to clear the names of their loved ones since they began their campaign almost five decades ago.

In order to make lasting change, actions are required as well. The Belfast Good Friday agreement was the defining action that allowed Northern Ireland to begin to move away from violence, but the events of the past continue to cast a long shadow, as we have seen. Those who were killed or injured during the troubles came from all communities, and they included many members of the security forces and armed forces. Immense and difficult compromises have since been made on all sides, including the early release of prisoners, which was so difficult for many people to accept.

To a very large extent, Northern Ireland has moved away from violence, so we stand by those compromises and the progress made towards a more peaceful society. Yet the desire of the families of victims to know the

truth about what happened to their loved ones is strong, legitimate and right. The campaign for justice in Ballymurphy has reminded us all of that—if we needed to be reminded at all.

Twenty-three years after the signing of the Belfast Good Friday agreement, thousands of murders remain unresolved and many families still yearn for answers. With each passing year, the integrity of evidence and the prospects of prosecution diminish, and the Government are not shrinking away from those challenges. We are determined to address them in a way that reflects the time that has passed, the complexity of Northern Ireland's troubled history and the reality of the compromises that have already been made. But above all, we are determined to address them in a way that enables victims and survivors to get to the truth that they deserve. We must never ignore or dismiss the past; learning what we can, we must find a way to move beyond it. The coroner's findings this week are part of that often very painful process.

The Government want to deliver a way forward in addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland; one that will allow all individuals or families who want information to seek and receive answers about what happened during the troubles, with far less delay and distress. We want a path forward that will also pave the way for wider societal reconciliation for all communities, allowing all the people of Northern Ireland to focus on building a shared, stable, peaceful and prosperous future. I commend this statement to the House.

10.39 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

As the Secretary of State has outlined, in five separate shootings across three days in August 1971 in the Ballymurphy estate in west Belfast, 10 innocent civilians were shot dead, nine by the armed forces, with evidence unable conclusively to determine in the tenth case. Among them were a priest, a mother of eight and a former soldier who had fought and was injured in world war two. Fifty-seven children were left without a parent—their lives for ever changed. Yet the trauma of the murders was undoubtedly compounded by what followed: families prevented from finding comfort by lies told about their loved ones that have haunted them down the decades, and a fight for the truth hampered by entirely inadequate investigations and wholly unjustifiable obstacles. Who cannot be struck by the dignity and tenacity of those families who, in the face of those obstacles, have fought for the truth and finally, this week, have been vindicated?

The conclusions of Justice Keegan are clear and irrefutable: those who lost their lives were posing no threat; their deaths were without justification. They were Francis Quinn, Father Hugh Mullan, Noel Phillips, Joan Connolly, Daniel Teggart, Joseph Murphy, Eddie Doherty, John Laverty, Joseph Corr and John McKerr. An eleventh man, Paddy McCarthy, a youth worker, died from a heart attack. That families have had to wait for so long to clear their name is a profound failure of justice and one we must learn from, because, as the Secretary of State said, many more families are still fighting for answers. They include Cathy McCann, who in 1990 was the sole survivor of a Provisional IRA bomb in Armagh in which a nun and three policemen were killed. Twenty-one years earlier, her father had been killed by the auxiliary police force, the B Specials.

This ongoing failure to find the truth is an open wound that ties Northern Ireland perpetually to the past. Burying the truth and refusing to prosecute or investigate crimes has not worked in the 23 years since the signing of the Belfast Good Friday agreement, so how can anyone in this House look victims like Cathy in the eye and tell her she must move on? The Government gave victims such as Cathy McCann their word. Through the Stormont House agreement, they promised to establish a comprehensive system to look at all outstanding legacy cases through effective investigations and a process that would, where possible, deliver the truth and the prospect of justice. Yet last Wednesday night, victims found out on Twitter that the Government intend to tear up that plan and provide an effective amnesty to those who took lives. The statement today brings us no closer to understanding the Government's policy to deal with the legacy of the past.

The lessons of the past are clear: addressing the legacy through the unilateral imposition of an amnesty from Westminster, without the faintest hint of consultation with victims or the support of communities or any political party in Northern Ireland or the Irish Government, would be impossible to deliver. It would make reconciliation harder, and it would not achieve what the Government claim they want. Any process that remains open to legal challenge will invite test cases and bring more veterans back through the courts.

I will finish with a comment on the Prime Minister's actions—or lack of them—over the past two days. In the aftermath of the Bloody Sunday inquiry, David Cameron came to this House and apologised in a statement. He did not brief apologies from disputed calls with politicians. He took full responsibility. Where is the Prime Minister today, and why has he not publicly apologised to the Ballymurphy families and to this House? Will he take responsibility as Prime Minister and show the victims the respect they so obviously deserve? Victims like those who lost loved ones at Ballymurphy have been let down for far too long. Ministers should bear in mind the words of one victim I spoke with yesterday, as they worked through the next steps of legacy:

“I just want to know what happened. I want to know my dad's life meant something. I just want the truth.”

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady and I are overwhelmingly united in our thoughts for the Ballymurphy families and for all families who have suffered so much, and so unnecessarily, during and since the troubles. I believe we are also united in our determination to do what we can to put a stop to this suffering and to ensure that people get the information and get to the truth.

My apology and the Prime Minister's apology yesterday to the Ballymurphy families cannot change what they have endured, but I can promise that it will be followed by action to prevent others from all communities who have lost loved ones or been injured, whether civilians, paramilitaries or soldiers, from continuing to go through the same lengthy and traumatic experiences that have taken too long to get to the truth. Our approach will have at its heart a clear focus on doing what is right: what is right for all those who have been directly affected by Ballymurphy and the many other terrible events and incidents of the troubles; and also what is right for wider Northern Ireland society, including the new generation—a younger generation—who did not live

through the troubles. We need to ensure that we are not leaving this for them to deal with. This generation must be looking to the future while always understanding and being aware of the past, with its tragedies as well as its opportunities.

The Government will not baulk from those challenges. The challenges involved in confronting the past are complex and sensitive, and we appreciate that. We recognise that we will not baulk from confronting the past, including our own state actions. That is necessary to ensure that we do get answers for individuals, but also as a critical step towards the reconciliation we all want to see continue and deliver in Northern Ireland for its shared and prosperous future.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) [V]: This is clearly a tremendously emotional moment. I thank the Secretary of State for prior notice of his statement and for its tone and its contents. For many, the events of which we are speaking happened a lifetime ago, but for the victims' families and their communities they happened yesterday and every day since they occurred. It was clearly an abuse of security power. The Government are right to apologise and to make that loud and well known, because these events are as painful today as they were on the day they happened.

As my right hon. Friend tries to resolve the legacy of the troubles, focusing, as I know he will, on truth and reconciliation, will he assure me that he will do so with the emotional sensitivity he has demonstrated today, with compassion and understanding, and with a view to build a cross-community coalition as we help Northern Ireland to turn the page to a better present and future as we resolve the issues of the past?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee makes a really important point. He is absolutely right. In looking at how we move forward, we have to work, and I am determined that we will work, to do everything we can with our partners not just in Irish Government but across the parties, victims' groups and civic society in Northern Ireland to ensure reconciliation and for an opportunity to recognise the accountability of the fact that Northern Ireland has suffered for far too long from the traumas of the past. Working together, I am sure that we can find a way to help Northern Ireland move forward and ensure that Northern Ireland can deliver on the phenomenal opportunities, expertise and excitement that is there to deliver for people and have that shared prosperous and stable society.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The pain that the loved ones of the victims of the Ballymurphy killings have gone through over the past half century is unimaginable. I pay tribute to their courage, their fortitude, their dignity and their unswerving determination to seek the truth—however difficult that was—about how their loved ones died. The First Minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster, put it extremely well when she said:

“Lots of lessons to be learned. Grief is grief. Justice must be blind. Too many empty chairs across NI and unanswered questions.” The path to truth, justice and reconciliation, as we know, is an imperfect one. While the past cannot be changed, its truth can be acknowledged and reconciliations

[Richard Thomson]

made easier. In that vein, the Prime Minister should come to the House to offer that apology in person on behalf of the citizens in whose names these actions were taken, and apologise not only for the length of time it has taken to bring truth to the families but for the unjustified and unjustifiable deaths of their entirely innocent loved ones. Does the Secretary of State agree more generally that justice delayed is justice denied and that the best interests of truth, reconciliation and the wider public interest are not best served by seeking to put a time bar on the pursuit of justice?

Brandon Lewis: As I have already said, both I and the Prime Minister have apologised, actually, and the Prime Minister, as I said in my statement, is writing directly to the families as well. As I said, no apology can make up for the loss and the pain that the families have been through. I share the hon. Gentleman's sentiments and appreciate the tone that he has used. We are in full agreement. My view is that we need to get to the truth and we need to allow the families of the victims who want that information—the knowledge of what happened—to be able to get to it much, much quicker. That is certainly something I am focused on. He is also quite right that this is not about having time bars on anything but having a process that means that the families do not have to wait decades to get to the bottom of what happened—to understand the truth of what happened.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I welcome the Government's apology today. This tragic case lays bare again the horrors of the troubles for victims and families from all parts of Northern Ireland. I am concerned that when I and the Government signed the New Decade, New Approach agreement over a year ago we committed to intensive discussions with victims' groups, but for a variety of reasons that has not happened. Will the Secretary of State commit today to undertaking comprehensive discussions with victims' groups and victims directly, and give us a timeline for that? Will he also confirm that he will not bring legislation back to this House until that engagement has happened and victims and families have been able to shape and be part of what the Government are proposing to resolve the issues of legacy?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Obviously we understand that the legacy issues are complex, as he knows well; that is why they remain unresolved for so many decades. As I have been clear before, the principles of Stormont House are strong, powerful principles that we all want to see delivered on. We want to work together to find a way to be able to put them into practice and deliver them in a way that means that families are not waiting decades, as sadly the Ballymurphy families have had to do, to get to the bottom of the truth and understand of what has happened. We have been engaging across civic society with victims' groups and representatives, as well as the Irish Government. We will be looking to engage very directly and very deeply over the period ahead to see if we can find a way for everybody to come together to find a way forward that can deliver on that promise and deliver on ensuring that we get to the bottom of information in an efficient way that works for the victims and for the families, and that can help Northern Ireland to move forward with reconciliation in a positive way.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) [V]: I am sure that the entire House would like to join me in offering our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families of Ballymurphy. But we also want to congratulate them and their community on the fortitude and resilience they have shown over decades in their pursuit of truth, and to congratulate their legal teams, who have not always been treated with the respect and decency they deserve. I am glad to hear that the Prime Minister is writing to the families personally, because the families do deserve a personal apology. The Secretary of State will be aware that these events are widely known in Ireland and internationally as the Ballymurphy massacre. That seems an accurate description to many of us, as we are talking about the murder of unarmed civilians over the course of three days, and, as the House knows, the coroner has found that they were all innocent, they were all unarmed, and their killings were without justification. We are still awaiting official admission of many other deaths in former colonies, including Kenya. It is good to hear the truth about these events after all these decades, but sadly some of the relatives will have passed away. May I ask the Secretary of State: is anyone ever to be prosecuted for these crimes?

Brandon Lewis: I think the outline of the right hon. Lady's question goes to the core point that a number of Members and I have already made: that Ballymurphy is a clear, tragic example of how it has taken far too long to get information for those families. We need to find a process that ensures that families can get information much more quickly, while people are still with us as well, as she outlined. As regards prosecutions, that is a matter for the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, and we have seen the outcome of some prosecutions it had just the other week. It is not a matter for the Government but for the independent prosecution service.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the tone he struck in his statement. These families have endured an exceptionally long campaign in their search for answers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this shows that the current system to deal with the legacy of the troubles on all sides in Northern Ireland has failed and that the drawn-out, expensive court proceedings for veterans, victims and families are flawed and need to be reviewed?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. As we have seen, tragically, in the recent past as well as this week, the current system has simply not been working for anybody. It is failing to bring satisfactory, speedy or timely outcomes for families, leaving Northern Ireland with unanswered questions for families within it. That leaves society hamstrung, effectively, by its past. That is why, as a Government, we are committed to finding a way forward that will allow individuals and families who want information to seek and receive those answers about what happened during the troubles with far less delay and distress. We have a duty to the victims and the families in Northern Ireland as a whole to deliver on that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP) [V]: The Ballymurphy families have waited for 50 years to get even this limited form of closure. To compound matters, one of the victims also had a young teenage son brutally murdered by the IRA just two years afterwards.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that, whether it is the families of innocent victims in Ballymurphy or shortly afterwards—for example, the Claudy bomb carried out by the IRA in 1972 in my constituency, about which they have received no closure, no justice and no apology—they do not suffer the ignominy of hearing about an amnesty in the next few months?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman highlights the complexity and sensitivity of the issues and reinforces the point that it has been far too long for people to have to wait to get to the bottom of the truth. Part of reconciliation is the ability to understand what happened—that is hugely important—but it is also about accountability. That is why it is important that the state takes accountability, as we are doing, for what happened in the Ballymurphy case. Others should do the same, where there is relevance for them and actions were taken by them. It is important that we get to the heart of what happened, so that people can have that understanding, accountability and truth.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I declare an interest, as one of a number of Members of Parliament who served in Northern Ireland prior to the Good Friday agreement. I very much welcome the statement and the apology today. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our armed forces, whom we place in harm's way, where they face incredibly difficult circumstances, often at great personal risk. The majority of service personnel follow the law of armed conflict, but if standards ever fall, they must be swiftly and fairly investigated.

I welcome the Government's fresh approach to securing lasting change by fairly drawing a line under the pre-Good Friday troubles. There is a real danger of fuelling current tensions and potentially creating new victims because we have not reconciled past events. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Good Friday agreement proved that the troubles require a political, not military, solution, but it hesitated in mopping up a series of difficult, unresolved incidents, for which those on all sides still seek closure? Will he consider introducing a wider statute of limitations, along with a truth recovery mechanism that applies not just to veterans but on all sides, so that Northern Ireland can finally draw a line and look forwards, not backwards?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point about the complexity of the issues and the dreadful range of situations in the troubles, with a number of unresolved injuries, murders and deaths. We need to get to the bottom of that. He is also right that we need to find a way forward that can be delivered on and that works for families. The current situation is simply not working for anybody. It is not working for Northern Ireland, and it is not delivering in a timely fashion and getting to the heart of the truth for families.

It is right that we respect our commitments to our veterans as well. As I said in my statement, obviously the vast majority acted with honour and probity throughout the troubles, but we must have a system that gets to the heart of things. We are open to looking at a wide range of options. I have made commitments to the House about bringing forward legislation, which I still have the ambition to deliver on, but we want to do that by working with our partners across Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government to find a solution that will work, cause stability and have sustainability.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): The Secretary of State says that the British Army made terrible errors in Northern Ireland. Joan Connolly was a mother of eight. She was shot four times by the British Army and was left lying on the ground for hours to die. That is not an error; that is sheer bloody murder. Will the Secretary of State ask the Prime Minister to come out of hiding, come with me to meet the Ballymurphy families and tell them to their faces why he wants to protect their killers?

Brandon Lewis: As I have outlined already today, the Prime Minister is contacting the families directly. There is his public apology on behalf of the state and he has had conversations with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in which I joined him yesterday. Obviously, Members and colleagues will be aware that the report was published on Tuesday, which was the first full sight we had of it. We received it on Tuesday, and we put out a statement on the same day. Having had an opportunity for us to reflect on that report, I am now making a statement to the House of Commons. But, obviously, we will be considering it in more detail in the period ahead in order to ensure that we are able to reflect properly on it. As I said in my statement, it is right that we take accountability for the actions that were unacceptable, as the coroner's court highlighted, but also that we are taking the time and opportunity to make sure we learn from the experiences of the past and also, coming back to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) a few moments ago, take account of what we have learned since 2014 about how we can move forward in a more efficient and effective manner that delivers for families and victims so that we get to the truth.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I served in Northern Ireland from the early 1970s onwards. I did not serve in Ballymurphy but all I can say is that those of us who were serving in Northern Ireland when incidents such as Ballymurphy and Bloody Sunday were happening—and the vast majority of the Army—were in deep shock about what happened. It did not reflect what we felt; we were in deep shock. In order to try to help the families, if they so wish it, may I ask my right hon. Friend that a full and frank report about what happened to their loved ones be sent to them in each individual case—if, of course, they wish to receive it?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. Again, it goes to the heart of making sure that people have the information. My understanding, but I will confirm it, is that the coroner's report does give details of the individual deaths, and that obviously will be fed back to the families, who have been waiting, as I say, for far too long. However, I will write to my right hon. Friend to confirm that point.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: I want to focus on the courage and dignity of the Ballymurphy families and their long fight for justice, rather than the wider legacy issue, except to say that the Government's plans do not have the support of the Ballymurphy families, other victims groups, political parties in Northern Ireland and, indeed, many veterans themselves. Can I ask the Secretary of State to confirm the scope of this apology? Specifically, does it also include how the British Army labelled many of the victims by calling them IRA

[Stephen Farry]

gunmen, and also how the Ministry of Defence and indeed some individual soldiers frustrated the process of justice over many years?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that, as I said in my opening statement actually, the apology is for not just the dreadful incident—the tragedy that we saw at Ballymurphy in 1971—but the period since and what those families and the victims have had to go through. Absolutely.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I welcome the statement and the apology, and I commend the coroner for coming to a definitive decision in the inquest. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to acknowledge the hurt and pain felt by all sides of the community, and that we need a spirit of reconciliation so that we can move on in Northern Ireland?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I repeat what I said in my statement: we must never forget. As I said, “We must never dismiss or ignore the past”, but we must learn from it—we must find a way to move forward.

Going to the heart of what my hon. Friend said, my experience of dealing with and talking to people across Northern Ireland—across the whole community of Northern Ireland in civic society—shows that there is a determined desire to have proper reconciliation, stability and sustainability. There is a determination to have a Northern Ireland that is a prosperous and an exciting place to live and work, which it is, so that we can all continue to be proud of it and continue to live with the amazing success we have seen there since the delivery of what was, at the time, a very difficult series of decisions that led to the Good Friday agreement.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State is right to recognise that reconciliation depends on the truth, but the problem with the whole horrendous saga around the murders at Ballymurphy is that a cloud of corruption has hung over it now for nearly five decades. What the Secretary of State describes as serious errors was murder by agents of our state covered up by our state, and we must now recognise the damage that has done. So will the Secretary of State commit to making sure that every effort will now be made to reveal what happened not simply at the time but in the years since to cover this up? That must include access to the records of the security services, because, frankly, if he will not give that commitment, he will be letting down the Ballymurphy families.

Brandon Lewis: As I have said, the Ballymurphy families have waited for far too long, through successive Governments and over too many decades, to get an understanding of what actually happened. We need to find a way forward that can make sure that families such as the Ballymurphy families are able to get that information—that understanding, recognition and truth—much more quickly. That will mean ensuring that they have access to all the information that is available both across Northern Ireland and from the British and UK state.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Government’s commitment in the Queen’s Speech to bring forward measures that will address the legacy of the troubles—troubles I remember all too well. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that these measures will be focused on getting answers for victims and their loved ones in a way that allows Northern Ireland to heal and come together, rather than further deepening divisions?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the ability to heal and the ability to look forward while always being accountable for and recognising and understanding our past. I can confirm that I am absolutely committed to working to find a way forward that will provide certainty for those who have been directly affected by the events of the troubles and deliver wider reconciliation for Northern Ireland, recognising that Northern Ireland itself suffered during the troubles.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s apology, but, although I mean no disrespect to him, I do feel that something of such gravity really does require the Prime Minister to apologise directly, not by proxy, to the families of those killed, and I hope that he will urge that.

The findings of the inquest into the Ballymurphy killings clearly show that the state was not an observer, but was a participant in the troubles. Does that not surely mean that the Government cannot unilaterally impose a plan to address that conflict legacy, and will he now return to what he previously agreed and ensure that, in dealing with the past, we put victims and their loved ones first?

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman looks back to my opening statement, he will see that the Prime Minister is and has been apologising directly to the families as well as more publicly and widely, so I will just correct him on that point. More widely, we have got to find a way to ensure that we have a system that works and delivers for people. The Stormont House agreement has been referred to, but the reality is that that was in 2014. We have learned things since then; there has been consultation since then, and it is right that the Government take that into account and we take forward the Stormont House principles in a way that can be delivered and can work for families and for Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the fact that the Ballymurphy families have finally been served their long overdue justice. However, I also wish to urge my right hon. Friend to outline as soon as he can a timeline for when we can bring forward the new measures in this parliamentary Session that will deliver answers for all those affected by the legacy of the troubles and put an end to the cycle of investigations and prosecutions, allowing Northern Ireland to move forward with a brighter future.

Brandon Lewis: As set out in the Queen’s Speech, we will bring forward legislation in this Session to address the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. I am committed to bringing forward legislation that focuses on reconciliation, and if we get that right, it will deliver for victims, for veterans and for all the people of Northern Ireland. That is the work we will be doing in the period ahead.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: The humility of Tory Members today is to be welcomed, but three years ago in a Westminster Hall debate, I was shouted down by some of the same Tory Members when I mentioned the actions of the Parachute Regiment in Ballymurphy. Members will of course take their lead from the Prime Minister, and it is disappointing that he is not making the statement here today. Following the publication of the Saville report, Prime Minister David Cameron made a statement and an apology to those families. The Ballymurphy families have been through a similar hell for nearly 50 years, so when will the Prime Minister meet those families, look them in the eye and apologise for the unlawful killing of their loved ones?

Brandon Lewis: As I have said a few times this morning, the Prime Minister is apologising directly to the families.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his heartfelt apology. This is a most heartbreaking affair. It cuts right to the quick of a divided city, a divided country and a divided people. As a Protestant man, as a Unionist and as a loyalist, I stretch out my hand of love, of forbearance, of common grief and of compassion to my neighbour who has suffered, and I say to them that their tears and the sting of their tears are the same as the sting of our tears. There is no difference in the colour or feeling of that grief, and we share that grief with them today in a heartfelt and compassionate way. I hope that they accept the sincerity of those remarks and those feelings, which are across our country.

This verdict does lift, Denning-like, the curtain on the appalling vista of what has happened in Northern Ireland. No doubt more and more will follow. That is not something we look forward to, but know that more will come. The Secretary of State is correct when he says that the pitch has been somewhat queered by the release of terrorists from our jails and by the on-the-runs and letters of comfort to them, because their victims will never see any justice in our country. We therefore cannot have scapegoating of our soldiers or our police officers or a perverse exhibiting and rewriting of what happened in Northern Ireland, in an “Alice in Wonderland” like way, where the peacekeepers become accused of being the peace-breakers. This is a most difficult and tragic situation, and all we can say is that we have to wish the Secretary of State well in what he does now.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, which I know will be genuine and hopefully well received across Northern Ireland in terms of the need for people to come together. It is right that this week and at this moment in time we are focused on the pain, loss and suffering that the families and the victims of Ballymurphy have experienced for far, far too long. He is right that we must also remember that more than 3,500 people were killed and tens of thousands of people were injured, with families affected across Northern Ireland and beyond, the majority of whom were innocent civilians.

By far the majority of our armed forces acted with honour and focus, and Ballymurphy just highlights what a tragic period in the history of this country the troubles were and why it is so important that we work together, recognising some of the very difficult, painful compromises that have been made over the past few

decades to deliver the Good Friday agreement and the peace and prosperity that Northern Ireland has seen since. That should be treasured, and it is something we need to build on and deliver on in the future.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): When I speak to people about Northern Ireland, I apply a simple test, which is, “What if this happened in Bristol, and not Belfast?” Much like the people of Belfast, the people of Bristol sometimes wish they had a different Prime Minister, but he is their Prime Minister, for those of all faiths and none and those of all persuasions and none. As their Prime Minister, it is a disgrace that he is not here to make this statement from that Dispatch Box. He should have done that earlier this week. We all know the symbolism of these Benches and that Dispatch Box.

The Prime Minister has said that he wants to learn from the experience of the past, so I say gently to him that the experience of the past 100 years is that when a British Prime Minister ignores what is going on in Northern Ireland, we see a difficult situation that does not improve. Some of the things he has now said are deeply problematic, such as unilaterally pulling away the Stormont House agreement. If that is the case, he very quickly needs to come here with the Irish Government and all the political parties involved and tell us what will be in its place. That is the true apology that would be right for those poor families from Ballymurphy and across this whole tragedy.

Brandon Lewis: I am afraid that what the hon. Lady has just outlined is wrong on a number of points. Apart from the things that I have outlined, the Prime Minister is in contact with the Ballymurphy families directly, and there is the statement he made yesterday and the conversation he had with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister yesterday.

My point has actually been that I think the principles of Stormont House are hugely important. There is a range of things there that we need to deliver on. The reality is that since 2014 that has not happened, for a range of reasons. There have been learnings, and things have changed since then. There has been a consultation that we need to reflect on and deliver on. We need to make sure that we can deliver on those principles and get on with it, rather than being another seven years down the line with people still talking about something at a time when we are losing people and families are not getting the information that they deserve. At the heart of what we want to do is making sure that we are leading to delivering for victims and that we have reconciliation for people across Northern Ireland. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I think somebody’s phone is ringing.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: The chaos and impunity of the Ballymurphy killings contributed to the near-collapse of the rule of law in Northern Ireland and a sickeningly casual attitude to human life. For years after those killings, thousands more people had their lives needlessly and cruelly taken by killers in and out of uniform.

To justify an amnesty, some say that no good can come from delving into dire events in the past. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that good did come this week because lies were confounded, the truth was affirmed and the innocence of victims was vindicated? Does he

[*Claire Hanna*]

acknowledge that, precisely because state actors and paramilitaries since the agreement have failed to bring forward information, victims feel that the only way that they can get to truth and justice is through the judicial process? Does he agree that those who run from truth and accountability are those in state agencies and those in the militias who know the most and who inflicted the worst?

Brandon Lewis: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, I agree that there is no doubt, and we do need to acknowledge, that the actions and the particular incidents at Ballymurphy did fuel further reactions and retaliations that drove the troubles, particularly in those early years. We need to take accountability; that is why I referenced that in my statement.

The hon. Lady is also right that it is right that the state takes accountability and apologises, exactly as we are doing today, when there is clear acknowledgment that things were done that were wrong. That is what we are doing today. I fundamentally agree with her that it is important that, whoever the actors were, there is a huge majority of unsolved deaths, injuries and murders across Northern Ireland that people are looking for information about. They have a right to get that information, and we need to do everything we can to get that information, to get that accountability and to get to the truth.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: I take the Secretary of State back to 8.30 am on this day, 13 May, in 1994 in Hill Street, Lurgan in my constituency of Upper Bann. Fred Anthony, 38, a Protestant, was a cleaner in the town's Royal Ulster Constabulary station. As he travelled in his car along Hill Street with his wife and two children, an IRA booby-trap bomb exploded. Fred Anthony died; his three-year-old daughter spent a week in a coma, both her legs were broken and shrapnel lodged close to her brain—a life lost and a family destroyed.

No one has ever been charged in relation to this cold-blooded, ruthless murder. The Anthony family, who I spoke with this morning—like so many families of victims of the Provisional IRA—desire truth and justice. They look at the Ballymurphy findings and wish that they, too, had been given the same resource to find truth as the Ballymurphy families, who have fought hard and learned so much. What is the Secretary of State's message to the Anthony family today, and what support can he give them to find truth and justice?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady has again highlighted the very sad reality of too many families not yet having an understanding of the information that they need to be able to know what happened and the truth, which gives an ability to move forward. We are very clear that our objective of addressing the legacy of the troubles and delivering on our commitments means that we want to deal with the past in a way that helps people in Northern Ireland, such as the families that the hon. Lady just outlined, to look forward. That means that this is something we need to deliver on. We need to find a system that can get that information and get to the truth. It is clear that this week's case—let alone other cases that we have seen recently—shows fundamentally that the current system has not been, and is not, delivering

for victims and the people of Northern Ireland. When it takes 50 years to get the truth, something is wrong and we need to find a different way forward.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: Taking 50 years for the truth to be established about the killing of the 10 innocent Ballymurphy civilians is truly shameful, and the truth uncovered is due to the tireless efforts of the families of the victims. Why has it taken so very long to get to the truth and why has the Prime Minister refused to meet the families of those killed? Can the Secretary of State tell us, in reference to the previous question, what specific action his Government will take to reassure the people of Northern Ireland that they are unequivocally committed to discovering the truth about all unsolved killings and to deal appropriately with legacy issues, as set out in the Stormont agreement?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady is not correct to say that the Prime Minister has refused anything. As I say, he is contacting the families directly. There has been a lengthy delay in delivering even the findings of the Ballymurphy inquest. That is obviously not directly a matter for the Government in the latter part, but I know that covid has had a significant impact on the legacy inquest timetable. However, the hon. Lady highlights the point that I have been making consistently: this has taken far too long. It should not take 50 years to get to the truth. We must make sure that it does not take 50 years for people in the future. That is why we are working—I have been talking to the Irish Government; we want to work with the Irish Government—but we do need to find a way forward. Stormont House was 2014. The principles of it are absolutely right. They are core to delivering for the families in Northern Ireland. We need to do that in a way that reflects what has happened and what we have learned since 2014—in a way we can deliver on to make sure that these families get to the truth. We have committed to doing that through legislation. We want to work across our partners and the people of Northern Ireland to find a way to do that that works for everybody in Northern Ireland.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Prime Minister's predecessor came to this House to report on the findings of the Bloody Sunday inquiry. His presence helped build reconciliation. Families in Ballymurphy have served a half-century sentence waiting for justice. It should therefore have been the Prime Minister addressing Parliament today. Peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland can never be taken for granted. It has to be won, and that starts by showing a commitment to finding truth and justice, so does the Secretary of State agree that, from this point, it must be the families of this injustice in Ballymurphy who are put first, and that the Government must listen to them as to how reparation processes have to change to expedite justice?

Brandon Lewis: As I said, there were big, bold, difficult and complex steps taken that led to the Good Friday agreement—decisions that were difficult for people at the time, but they have delivered peace and prosperity over the last few decades. Northern Ireland has predominantly moved away from violence. We need to make sure that we continue to respect the principles that led to the Good Friday agreement and continue to look at how we develop that to ensure that Northern Ireland can continue to prosper.

Within that, it is absolutely right that we want to make sure that families are able to get to the truth and the information without not just the delay, but the pain and difficulty that families are having at the moment. Obviously, the Ballymurphy families have been through a completely unacceptable experience over the last 50 years, but there are also other families out there, other unsolved murders, and other injuries that have been caused, where nobody has yet got to the bottom of what happened. It is important that we find a way forward that ensures that those families and victims who want that information can get it in a timely fashion. There is a real risk, if we do not do this in a way that works, that we will have people passing away without ever knowing the truth. That is not acceptable and we have a duty to deliver for them and for the future of Northern Ireland.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) [V]: Given the gravity of this report, I think that the Prime Minister should be at the Dispatch Box making this statement. In five separate incidents, over the weekend of Operation Demetrius, 10 people, who posed no threat and bore no arms, were shot dead. That must raise questions about the preparation for Operation Demetrius—what was said to those soldiers about the yellow card that each of them should have been carrying. What can the Government do, and particularly the MOD, to shed light on what was said and done in preparation for Operation Demetrius?

Brandon Lewis: As the hon. Gentleman said, and as others have rightly said and I have said, the families should never have had to wait 50 long years to hear Justice Keegan's findings this week. Obviously, I convey my thanks to her for the work that she and the team have done. I can promise, as I said earlier, that that will be followed by action to prevent others who have lost loved ones—from all communities, including the armed forces—from going through the same continual, lengthy and traumatic experience to get to the heart of the truth of what happened.

It is an awkward truth for us all that the prospect of prosecutions resulting from criminal investigations is vanishingly small, but we have seen that a sense of justice can be provided through truth, acknowledgment

and information. We want to deal with the past in a way that not only helps society in Northern Ireland to be able to look forward rather than back, but also gets to the truth, and therefore accountability and an understanding of what has happened in a whole range of cases—Ballymurphy and others—that are still unsolved.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The Secretary of State said in his statement that Ballymurphy should not have happened, and of course we all agree, but it did happen; and it happened again six months later, in the city of Derry. The Prime Minister now needs to come to that Dispatch Box and apologise properly, on behalf of us all, to the people of Ballymurphy.

“Entirely innocent”, Mr Speaker: “entirely innocent”. Does the Secretary of State accept then, given the time it can take, and has taken, for the families of the innocents to get the truth of events, that it must mean that justice does have no limitation? If so, will his Government pause now and reconsider their recent moves to create such a limit for justice?

Brandon Lewis: Look, as I said earlier, the Prime Minister has given an unreserved public apology for what happened in Ballymurphy. I am here, the Government are here today, not just apologising but taking accountability for what happened and what should not have happened, not just at the time of Ballymurphy—obviously that was unacceptable—but for what was also unacceptable: what has happened since, in that 50 years that we have had to wait. But in answer to the hon. Gentleman I will be very clear to the House, as I have been, I hope, through the course of this morning: we are determined that families need to get to the truth. They need to be able to know what happened. There are too many cases out there unresolved, where families do not have the information of what happened, and therefore it is impossible for them to be able to have an opportunity not only to know about their past but to really look forward to their future. We are determined to do that. There should not be a time limit on getting to the truth. We need to find a way—based on the fact that the current system is failing everybody—to have a system that can work, that gets to the truth and gets information, for the benefit of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and for those families.

Point of Order

11.27 am

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I would appreciate your guidance. As you may be aware, yesterday the Minister for Universities, speaking on Radio 4, said that it is the Government's policy to protect and promote the free speech of controversial and offensive advocates at universities. She explicitly confirmed that this would include holocaust deniers, who would be supported in law against people protesting against them. There are few more serious crimes in history than the Nazi holocaust—the murder of 6 million Jews, as well as hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti, disabled and LGBT people, political opponents and other minority groups—and to hear a Minister say that the Government plan to change the law to take the side of those who would deny that genocide is truly appalling.

As a proudly Jewish parliamentarian, my blood ran cold listening to the interview. There is no merit to any assertion that either academic rigour or the university experience is improved by exposure to such ideology. Holocaust denial cannot and should not be protected speech under the law. How can you assist in ensuring that the Universities Minister comes to the Dispatch Box to explain what she has said, apologise, and recant this chilling policy?

Mr Speaker: May I first thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order? I want to set out on record that I find the idea of holocaust denial completely abhorrent; let me make sure that people are aware of that. The hon. Member will have the opportunity to clarify this matter when the relevant legislation is before the House. I hope that she will take it up with the Minister at the appropriate time when that legislation comes forward. In the meantime, I am sure that it would also be worth asking for a meeting with the Minister for clarification.

I am now going to suspend the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Debate on the Address

[3RD DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 12 May).

Question again proposed,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

A Brighter Future for the Next Generation

11.35 am

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson):

This country has faced unprecedented challenges over the past year as we have tackled the global coronavirus pandemic. The impact on education has been considerable. I would like once more to put on record the enormous debt of gratitude the country owes to everyone who has played their part in keeping our children safe and learning, and to the young people themselves, for their resilience at this incredibly difficult time.

We are beginning our national recovery, and as part of that we aim to, and we will, build back better. As Her Majesty the Queen set out in her Gracious Speech on Tuesday, this means a full and far-reaching legislative agenda. Our programme of ambitious reforms to level up this country will continue apace, alongside an overarching mission to make sure the country's recovery has a solid and sure foundation. We are committed to making sure that everyone in the country has the education and training that is right for them, as well as to lifelong upskilling, so that better-paid jobs are within local reach and not down to a postcode lottery.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with Dame Louise Casey, who said today that we cannot be a levelled-up country if we have got food banks?

Gavin Williamson: This party is committed to delivering right across the country. This party is committed to making sure that we make a real difference to every child's life by raising standards in education and making sure that all the way through their lives, people have the opportunity to train and better themselves in order to succeed and deliver for their communities and families. Of course we will always take action to support families. That is why we increased universal credit; that is why we have taken the action we have all the way through this pandemic; and that is why we have invested billions of pounds in the furlough scheme, to make sure that in these difficult and challenging times, people can provide for their family.

One of our main priorities is to make sure that children whose education has been held back during the pandemic are given the means to catch up and that their long-term prospects do not suffer. We have put a package of measures in place to make sure that children who are behind get extra support. We are working with the Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins,

to develop an ambitious long-term plan for recovery and have already provided more than £2 billion to enable schools, colleges and early years settings to support pupils' academic and wider progress. We know that disadvantaged children and young people have been affected more than others, and we will target support for these pupils.

I have said that we have a packed legislative agenda, and this is an historic moment for radical reform in post-16 education—radical reform that has been too long needed. This is the most significant reform we have seen in this country not just for the past 10 years, but for two generations.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): In our mission to upskill, re-skill and retrain people as we work towards a better Britain—building back better—will my right hon. Friend reassure me that the measures announced in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech will ensure that people, particularly those from left-behind communities such as Stoke-on-Trent and left-behind regions, get the skills and training they need to get well-paid, good-quality jobs?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has championed this issue in Stoke-on-Trent Central ever since she got elected, recognising the importance of delivering for Stoke-on-Trent. Far too often, the Labour party did not deliver at all for Stoke-on-Trent, but we are seeing things change. It is not just about skills, but about driving up education standards right across the city, and that is what my hon. Friend and her colleagues who represent Stoke-on-Trent are doing, along with Councillor Abi Brown, who leads the city council. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and other colleagues to deliver on this issue.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his commitment to invest in further education in my constituency. Does he agree that, as we emerge from the pandemic, it has never been more important to invest in further education, particularly in some of the most disadvantaged communities across our country?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has been an enormous champion of further education in his constituency, and he has done a fair bit of lobbying—in a very proper manner, it should be added—on behalf of Cornwall College. It is good to see that there will be investment in his constituency to deliver better prospects not just for his constituents, but for constituents right across Cornwall, making a true difference.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Williamson: I will always give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Alan Brown: I will hold the Secretary of State to that.

When it comes to reshaping education, climate change should be an important part of the curriculum. At the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, we heard from young activists from Teach the Future, who said that the Scottish Government have been willing to engage with them about the merits of including climate change in education. The Secretary of State has

refused 18 requests to meet the organisation. Why is he so arrogant and out of touch that he will not even engage with the young?

Gavin Williamson: I perhaps exaggerated my enthusiasm to give way to the hon. Gentleman. We recognise how important it is that young people have a good understanding of climate change. That is why we are looking at bringing forward a natural history GCSE, which will be very important in both learning the subject and teaching it. The Government lead the world in this area: we are hosting COP26 in the amazing city of Glasgow, the Prime Minister is leading on this agenda at the G7 in Cornwall and we are setting the pace. We do not just talk about it, as the SNP does; we deliver on it.

The Prime Minister set out his vision for a skilled and resilient workforce when he announced the lifelong loan entitlement as part of the lifetime skills guarantee. That will transform opportunities for everyone, at any stage in their life, by providing people with a loan entitlement for the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): To talk about levelling up is truly to talk about education. I thank the Secretary of State for the investment in secondary education that he has made in my constituency with the Radcliffe high school. When it comes to further education and the skills agenda that he has mentioned, the institutes of technology are a fine example of how we can achieve in that area. Will he meet me again to discuss the University of Salford?

Gavin Williamson: It is fair to say that despite the fact that my hon. Friend's constituency was represented for many years by a Labour Member of Parliament, the free school in Radcliffe that was wanted so much was never delivered. My hon. Friend gets elected, however, and what does he do? He delivers for his constituents with a much-needed new secondary school. Of course, we all know how important institutes of technology are for driving the revolution in skills that we need to be able to meet the demands of the economy. I will be more than delighted to meet him to discuss the institutes of technology and how we roll them out across the country.

Our agenda will mean more choice and better prospects for all. This is levelling up in action, and it will turbocharge our economy by getting people back into jobs and getting Britain working again. It is a truly transformational investment in local communities, not an exit route out of those communities.

Our White Paper on skills for jobs sets out a blueprint for providing our young people with better choices within our further education system. New legislation will put employers at the heart of our skills reforms. They will join forces with further education colleges to deliver a skills accelerator programme. We are going to make sure that there is a better balance between the skills that local employers want from their workforce and those being taught by colleges and other providers, so that young people have a valuable and top-quality alternative to university.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): If the Secretary of State wants to speak about opportunities for young people, why will this Government

[Steven Bonnar]

not give the young people of these four nations the opportunity to have their say in the democracy that we are all taking part in? Also, this Government have slammed the door closed on the opportunities for our young people to work and thrive in 27 nations. There is no opportunity coming from the Tory Government, which is why the young people of these nations reject Tory policies.

Gavin Williamson: I think the hon. Gentleman is warming up for what will no doubt be a long speech later in the day. He obviously needs to come and see the brilliant progress that we are making in maths in England, unlike the sad reversals that we have seen in Scotland, with the failed education system that the SNP has presided over and the damage it has done to the education system in Scotland. If he had the benefit of sitting in some of the schools that are delivering such brilliant maths education right across England, he would understand that the Turing scheme opens up opportunities in many more countries than just 27. In fact, it will be a global scheme that looks beyond the European Union, to countries right across the world, making sure that young people have more and greater opportunities, not less. His horizons might reach only as far as the European Union, but we recognise that young people want opportunities on a global scale, in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, China—emerging great economies as well as old friends and allies.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important point about the opportunities that we give young people. Will he join me in welcoming the opening of a new special school in Basingstoke under the Government's academy programme, the Austen Academy, to ensure that children with special needs get the sorts of opportunities that he is talking about?

Gavin Williamson: I know that my right hon. Friend has been a real champion of the Austen Academy, recognising the important role that academies can play in delivering not just mainstream education but more specialist support for some pupils. It is an important step forward, ensuring that we get high-quality education across all our schools. We have seen some amazing work being done in our special schools, and I look forward to seeing that school grow and prosper into the future.

We want to encourage people to stay part of their community. Rather than encouraging them to leave home to find a rewarding career, we intend to empower them to find fulfilling and rewarding work wherever they live, invigorating communities and driving economic growth up and down the country. They do not need to leave their home towns in order to succeed.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that in Keighley we are progressing nicely with our towns fund application. One of the projects that we are hoping to deliver is a skills hub, bringing together businesses and education providers, such as Keighley College, to deliver the skills we need for manufacturing, engineering and tech. Does he agree that a skills hub in Keighley is exactly what we need for levelling up?

Gavin Williamson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend—that is vital for the reinvigoration and regeneration of Keighley, and driving it forward. We know that Keighley has a great and proud tradition of manufacturing, leading the world in the engineering and the work that is done there, but that has to be supported, and it can only be sustained with the right skills in that community, supporting those businesses to be able to grow and prosper into the future.

All that we are doing is a natural progression of the groundbreaking reforms we have already been rolling out, such as our T-level and apprenticeship programmes, which will deliver the skilled individuals to boost the post-pandemic economy and bring down unemployment. Starting this year, the Government are investing £3 billion in the national skills fund. That is a significant investment and has the potential to deliver new opportunities to generations of adults who may have been previously left behind. Any adult who does not have an A-level or equivalent will be able to access around 400 fully funded courses as part of the lifetime skills guarantee. That offer is a long-term commitment, backed by £95 million of funding from the national skills fund in its first year. We have temporarily extended the time for universal credit claimants to undertake training to develop work-related skills and qualifications, and we will review this in six months.

There is a golden thread running through all our reforms: everyone should have access to the same enriching opportunities to broaden their horizons and make the most of their potential wherever they live, whether it is London, Leeds, Leigh or Loftus. I am proud to have announced the Turing scheme, which will enable students to study and do work placements overseas. It will start in September and will focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is backed by significant investment of £110 million and will provide funding for around 35,000 students to go abroad.

Peter Kyle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman has had an opportunity to speak; I am sure he will contribute later on.

The Turing scheme is genuinely global in reach and will connect our young people with a whole world, rich and varied in its cultural experiences, giving them the opportunity to learn from the very best institutions on a global scale.

This is a Government who deliver on their promises. We are fulfilling our manifesto commitment by introducing a Bill to protect freedom of speech and academic freedom in universities. Free speech is the lifeblood of democracy. Our world-class universities have a long and proud history of being spaces in which differing views or beliefs can be expressed without fear or censure. However, there have been increasing concerns about a chilling effect on campus and that not all students and staff feel able to share their views. That is why we will strengthen existing duties on universities, extending those duties to students' unions and establishing a director in the Office for Students to protect and promote these rights.

We have always been determined that every child, regardless of background, should have access to high-quality education, and that is just as true for our youngest children as it is for those who are on the cusp of

adulthood. The early years are a crucial time in a child's development, and we know that the pandemic has had a significant impact on many young children. Earlier this year, we announced £18 million to support language development, which includes £10 million for an early language programme to help nursery children who have been affected by the pandemic. We are introducing the early years foundation stage reforms, which will be statutory for all early years providers from September this year.

When it comes to the most vulnerable children, there is no such thing as being too bold. We have launched our children's social care review of systems and services, so that vulnerable youngsters can experience the benefits of a stable and loving home, many of them for the first time. The review will take place alongside ongoing reforms to raise standards in local authorities, boost adoption, improve support for care leavers and improve quality and placement practice in unregulated accommodation, including banning the placement of under-16s in unregulated homes and introducing national standards for provision.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State look again at placing a ceiling of the age of 16 on the requirement not to place young people in unregulated accommodation? I am sure he will agree that there are very many vulnerable 17, 18 and 19-year-olds for whom that would also be an important measure.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady will know about my commitment and passion in this area and how important it is to look at how we can improve things for these children. Certainly, as part of looking at how we continuously improve, we will make sure that we get these regulations in place initially, but we will then be looking at how we can continue to improve on that work.

Our country, like many others, faces a number of social and economic challenges as we recover from the pandemic. I am confident that, thanks to this ambitious legislative programme and our unwavering mission to level up every inch of our country, we will all have a chance to play our part in that recovery. In Her Majesty's Gracious Speech, a fairer, better Britain is emerging, and future generations, as well as this one, will feel the benefit.

Mr Speaker: Just to advise Members, it is looking like around six minutes each for speeches.

11.55 am

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open this debate on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, because nothing can be more important than our obligation to create a bright future for the next generation. On the Opposition Benches—indeed, I am sure, across the House—we believe that every child, whatever their background, must be able to make the most of their childhood and reach their full potential. As politicians, we have a solemn responsibility to ensure that the next generation enjoys greater opportunities than we have had, and that Britain is the best country in the world to grow up in.

Regrettably, this Queen's Speech is a missed opportunity. It is a missed opportunity that comes hard on the heels of a decade of Conservative failures that have betrayed our young people: 1,000 children's centres closed since

2010 by Conservative Governments; schools funding 9% lower in real terms in 2019-20 than in 2009-10; Labour's proud track record in lifting a million children out of poverty wholly wiped out by Conservative austerity policies, with more than 5 million children expected to be in poverty by 2024; FE funding cut almost in half, and apprenticeship starts among under-25-year-olds down by 40% since 2016. The problems were there even before the pandemic.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Of course we all want to do our best for the most vulnerable children in our society, but will the hon. Lady acknowledge that, rather than the picture she has just painted of the past 10 years, the improvement in the delivery of children's social care services, for example, with more good and outstanding local authorities delivering children's social care and the number of inadequate services dropping considerably, is a testament not only to the people on the frontline working hard for those children, but to the Government policies put in place to ensure that that could happen?

Kate Green: I pay tribute to everyone working in local authorities and in the children's social care sector for the hard work that has led to improvement in children's services—vital services for the most vulnerable children in our country—but, frankly, the Government could have made it a great deal more straightforward for local authorities if they had not gone round trashing local authority funding. Our local councils have seen cuts of around 40% in their funding over the last 10 years, and that has put huge pressure on social care professionals, especially children's social care professionals. It is very much to the credit of social care workers that we have seen improvements around the country, but I hope that the Government will use the children's social care review that the Secretary of State referenced, which we are eager to engage with, to ensure that we put adequate, sustainable funding in place for these most vulnerable children.

Alan Brown: The hon. Lady is talking about opportunities for the future and reshaping things. She will be well aware that in the Scottish elections last week, a majority in favour of an independence referendum was returned. Does she think it is right that the young of Scotland should get their say in a referendum or does she think the Labour party should stand shoulder to shoulder with the Tories and try to block them from having their democratic say?

Kate Green: As a Scot myself, I feel pretty confident in saying that I do not think the priority for Scotland and for people in Scotland right now is a constitutional referendum. I do not think that it is the most pressing concern for young people when there are worries that they are struggling to achieve the same standards in school as we are seeing in the rest of the United Kingdom and when we see young people struggling to get—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) needs to hear what he does not like to hear. The Scottish Government are failing young people. Educational attainment is declining. We see no sign of their having taken on the seriousness of how the SNP Government have let down young people. Let us concentrate on the priorities that really matter for the future of young people in Scotland and across the United Kingdom.

[Kate Green]

Despite facing soaring unemployment and the toughest jobs market for a generation, young people in desperate need of new opportunities have been overlooked by the Government. The 16-to-19 funding for catch-up has been woefully insufficient, and careers advice and guidance will be crucial after David Cameron's Government brutally slashed it. The Government's proposals are too little, too late. Apprentices, and BTEC and vocational students, have been repeatedly treated as an afterthought. Unemployment is forecast to rise over the course of this year, and the consequences of the pandemic will be with us for years to come as huge parts of our economy and labour market experience profound change.

Christian Wakeford: Children's attainment in literacy is going backwards, as is children's mental health, and children are needing to go through potty training again. There are fears over people's prospects and the jobs market. Which of the above does the hon. Lady think is a "good crisis" for people to take advantage of? Will she apologise for the comments that she made previously?

Kate Green: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for enabling me to be able to put on record in this House my regret for those remarks. They were inappropriate and insensitive and will have been offensive to people who have suffered terribly in this pandemic, including those who have been bereaved and lost those that they loved and will be missing terribly. I should not to have used those remarks, and I thank him for giving me the opportunity to put that on record in this Chamber.

If we are to seize this generational moment and deliver the fair, low-carbon recovery that we need to tackle the climate crisis, which is imperative if we are truly to pass on a bright future to the next generation, many people will need to retrain in new industries as old jobs disappear, as the Secretary of State said. But in the Queen's Speech and in his remarks just a few moments ago, all that the Secretary of State could announce was a months-old commitment to a lifetime skills guarantee that simply is not guaranteed for everyone. It is not guaranteed because people cannot use it if they are already qualified to level 3; they cannot use it unless they are getting a qualification that the Secretary of State has decided he thinks is valuable; and they cannot use it if they need maintenance support while they are learning. If they are already qualified to level 3 in their existing field but need to retrain for a new industry, there is nothing on offer for them. Ministers have chosen to close the door on millions of people who need to retrain, and who need to do so now. I am at a loss to understand the Secretary of State's position on this. Can he tell the House why a promised guarantee will not in fact be available to some of those who will need it most?

On maintenance funding, we are awaiting Ministers' response to the Government's Augar review, which is now over two years old. Augar said that those in further education should receive the same maintenance support as those in higher education. Does the Secretary of State agree with that proposal? If he does, why is it absent from the Queen's Speech? While everyone will agree that employers have a central role in creating jobs and training opportunities for young people, they do so in the context of local economic and regeneration strategies

driven by metro Mayors and local leaders, who seem to have been sidelined in the creation of the local skills plans and with the Government having abandoned a national industrial strategy.

After a decade of Conservative damage to the sector, I desperately want the Government to get skills policy right. Labour believes in a high-skill, high-wage economy that offers fulfilling, rewarding work and jobs in which people will take great pride. That is why, for years, I and my colleagues in the Labour party, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition in his speech opening the debate on the Loyal Address on Tuesday and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) during her time as Shadow Secretary of State for Education, have championed lifelong learning, further education and all those who learn and teach in this sector.

In contrast, in a startling, if only partial, conversion in the Conservative party after a decade spent in power, including times when the Education Secretary and the Prime Minister sat around the Cabinet table and nodded through cuts to further education and a loan-based funding model that, by the Government's own admission, directly reduced the number of adults in education, we have reforms that offer, at best, a mere reversal of some of the worst excesses of Conservative ideology over the past decade. It is a desperate attempt to polish the windows, having taken a sledgehammer to the foundations.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The hon. Lady will know that I was a school teacher who started in 2011, just after the Conservatives took power. I want to remind her of the situation that I, as a teacher, inherited on the frontline. Between 2000 and 2009, England fell from seventh to 25th in reading, eighth to 28th in maths and fourth to 16th in science in international league tables. In addition, we had 350,000 young people aged 16 to 19 who, according to the independent Wolf review, received little to no benefit from the post-16 education system, which provided students with a diet of low-level vocational qualifications—[*Interruption.*] It is interesting that the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) is angry that a former teacher is speaking about education; I am interested to hear what he knows better than I. Is the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) proud of the record of the Labour party in that decade?

Kate Green: We should never accept less than the highest standards for young people in this country. I will compromise with nobody on being ambitious to deliver a world-class education and achieve world-class standards for our young people, but let me remind the hon. Gentleman of the progress that we made under Labour between 1997 and 2010. In London, for example, we massively narrowed the gap in attainment. Will he acknowledge that what we are seeing now, under his party's Government, is the attainment gap once again widening? Our young people deserve better than that.

There are so many measures that I believe the Government could and should have included in the Queen's Speech. Ministers could have gone beyond the platitudes on early years that we heard a few minutes ago and set out a plan to reverse the damage their decade of cuts has produced and to ensure affordable, accessible, high-quality early years education and childcare for all children.

They could have set out how they will transform the national tutoring programme, creating the space for children to socialise and recover the time they need to develop and grow, and ensuring that no child loses out because of the damage that Ministers' failure to manage the pandemic has created. They could have addressed the horrifying rise in child poverty—not mentioned once in the Queen's Speech, although it is the driving cause of the widening attainment gap. They could have ensured that education professionals' and school and college leaders' expertise and hard work during the pandemic were recognised with a fair pay rise.

Instead, the Secretary of State has decided that it is more important to focus on free speech on university campuses. Free speech and academic freedom are important, but suggesting that we should use up valuable legislative time while the employment Bill has been quietly dropped and while, nearly two years after the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street telling us that he had plans for social care ready to go, nothing has appeared, will make people up and down the country think that this is the wrong priority.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Green: I will not at the moment, if the right hon. Member will forgive me. I wish to make some progress.

We need to get this in perspective. Only six out of 10,000 events on campus—I repeat: 10,000—were cancelled, four of them simply because of lack of paperwork. One was a pyramid scheme. Now, I do understand that Conservatives responsible for a decade of economic mismanagement may struggle to recognise a pyramid scheme when they see one, but I am surprised that the Secretary of State wants to protect the ability to promote such schemes on our university campuses.

Much more concerning, though, is that the Minister for Universities was forced to admit on radio yesterday that this flawed legislation could have dangerous and troubling consequences, including potentially protecting holocaust deniers.

Gavin Williamson: The Universities Minister never said that this would protect holocaust deniers, and it would not protect holocaust deniers because this party does not stand for antisemitism, unlike the Labour party. This party recognises that we need to eradicate antisemitism and racism of all kinds, and this legislation will never, never, never protect holocaust deniers, because that is something that should never, and will never, be tolerated.

Kate Green: Antisemitism is intolerable in my party, and in any organisation and any part of this country, but I am very sorry to tell the Secretary of State that the legislation does appear to offer protection, potentially, to antisemites and holocaust deniers; and the Universities Minister yesterday was not able to gainsay that.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware, having listened to the interview on Radio 4 yesterday, that the Universities Minister was explicitly asked whether this legislation would cover holocaust denial and she explicitly said that it would. This is appalling. There is no academic merit whatever in debate, distortion or denial of the holocaust. I hope

my hon. Friend will agree that the Secretary of State should correct the record, because what he said just then has misled the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure that the hon. Lady would say “inadvertently misled the House”.

Kate Green: Let me read a transcript of the broadcast yesterday. The Universities Minister says:

“What this bill is designed to do is to protect and promote free speech which is lawful so any free speech which is lawful”.

The interviewer, Evan Davis, says:

“It is lawful isn't it? Holocaust denial in this country is lawful isn't it?”

The Minister says:

“So what I'm saying, yeah, so that's”

Evan Davis asks:

“So holocaust denial is okay, you'd defend a holocaust denier being invited to campus because that is part of the free speech argument?”

The Minister responds:

“Obviously it would depend on exactly what they were saying”.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it never depends on what a holocaust denier is saying.

Gavin Williamson: Let us be absolutely clear that this legislation will never protect holocaust deniers. It protects free speech within the law. It protects the fact that—we know that antisemitic activity and antisemitism are not to be tolerated. It is clear in the Equality Act 2010. We will never tolerate it, and this legislation will not allow holocaust deniers to be able to spread their hate and misinformation on our campuses.

Kate Green: I am grateful for that assurance on the Floor of the House from the Secretary of State. I hope when we are able to debate the Bill again on the Floor of the House and in Committee that we can work together to make sure that we have absolutely watertight provisions to ensure that there is no place for antisemitism anywhere on campus.

I also say very gently to Government Members, many of whom have a proud record of defending free speech, that handing over the power to determine whether free speech complaints on campus are justified to the Office for Students—a Government regulator, with an unqualified former Conservative MP appointed as its chair—smacks of the kind of thought control that we would rightly condemn in authoritarian Governments around the world. But it is not the way we do things in this country. I hope the Secretary of State will also think better of those proposals.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the Queen's Speech was the absence of anything meaningful for one of our most precious assets—our children—and their learning and wellbeing in school. Although we know that the Secretary of State is determined to send more schools down the path of academisation, he says that there will be a “try before you buy” model for schools contemplating this route. I have no idea how that will work, so perhaps the Secretary of State will be able to enlighten us.

Most parents do not care that much about the structure of their children's school, and they are quite right. It is not structure that determines a school's performance,

[Kate Green]

but high-quality teaching and excellent school leadership, and we see that in both the maintained and academy sectors. Prioritising favoured structures at a time when the role of schools in helping children to bounce back from the pandemic could not be more important once again shows that the Secretary of State has the wrong priorities, especially when schools are struggling with a stealth cut to their budgets because of changes to the pupil premium, while it is rumoured that the national tutoring programme is being taken out of the hands of experts and given to Randstad, a multinational outsourcing company. Can the Secretary of State confirm the media reports that Randstad will be running the national tutoring programme next year, and if so, can he tell the House what expertise in education, teaching and learning it will bring? In fact, can he tell us why it was able to win this tender at all? Was it because his Department decided to lower the quality of provision required to cut corners on price?

Those are questions that the Secretary of State should answer, but let me conclude by addressing the perfectly reasonable question: what would Labour do to guarantee a bright future for children and young people? Let me tell the House what would have been in a Labour Queen's Speech this week. We would have started with a credible, radical plan to enable children and young people to bounce back from the pandemic—a plan that created time for children to play, learn and develop, that gave the teaching profession the recognition and support it needs to guarantee a world-class education for every child and that ensured the national tutoring programme reached all children who need it. We would have detailed proposals for children's wellbeing, catch-up breakfast clubs guaranteeing every child a healthy breakfast and creating more time in the school day for children to recover lost learning and time lost with their friends and teachers.

We would have delivered a credible plan to support young people into work. We would have implemented policies outlined earlier this year by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) that would have guaranteed every young person not in education or employment a job or training opportunity to end long-term youth unemployment. We would have ensured the apprenticeship levy was used to create opportunities for our young people, as we suggested with our proposal to use the underspend from the apprenticeship levy last year to create 85,000 youth apprenticeship opportunities. Most importantly, we would be working right across a Labour Cabinet to end the scourge of rising child poverty, which is scarring the lives of millions of children. Tackling child poverty will always be a priority for Labour, and I am proud that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) will be leading our programme of work on this within the shadow Cabinet.

Before I came into Parliament, I spent a decade of my life working for and championing a brighter future for young people, because while children make up 20% of the population of this country, they are 100% of our future. They are ambitious, optimistic, imaginative, creative and excited about the world they will grow up to. They have so much to offer, and our job as adults is to give them every opportunity to make the most of their childhoods and their future, so let us not let them down

with empty rhetoric and hollow promises. Today, let us commit to truly deliver a programme of change that transforms children's lives, fulfils the promise that this will be best place to grow up and, in creating a brighter future for young people, gives the promise of a better future for every one of us.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am now going to put a six-minute time limit on Back-Bench contributions, which will be on the screens and on the clock in the Chamber. We now go to the Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon.

12.18 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I am excited by this Queen's Speech—excited that, for the first time in many years, skills and further education are a core part. My maiden speech in 2010 was about apprenticeships, and I have yearned for the skills agenda to be embedded within Government. If the heart of levelling up is about education and skills, then we are truly in a good place. If levelling up means providing a ladder of opportunity for millions of our countrymen and women to learn, train and reskill, providing job security and prosperity for themselves and their families, then we will both meet the skills need of our nation and equip ourselves for the coming fourth industrial revolution. As the skills and FE Bill passes through Parliament, we will of course examine the finer details, but the vision of a lifetime skills guarantee providing all adults with the opportunity to retrain and skill for a lifelong learning entitlement is a huge step forward. The offer of free level 3 courses for those without A-levels could do much to retrain those who do not have the right qualifications to advance in key professions. My only wish is that this would come much sooner than 2025. I hope that in time the Government can build on this by providing an adult community learning centre in every town and by giving businesses a skills tax credit for every worker they retrain in vital skills.

We need to address the huge fall in part-time learners for higher education with maintenance support and greater financial muscle for institutions such as the Open University that do so much for disadvantaged students. The Open University is one of the great education inventions of the 20th century and an institution that puts levelling up first and foremost. For too long further education was denied the opportunities given to higher education, both in terms of funding and prestige. Over many years, there has been a culture of snobbery about FE. This has been all the more astonishing given that further education colleges meet our skills needs, provide a ladder of opportunity for thousands of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and are places of social capital. I have seen this myself in over 70 visits to Harlow College in my constituency. I have urged the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), or the Secretary of State to visit our wonderful college to see the work that it does as a showcase for the importance of FE to our country. The proposals look to build the prestige of further education and create more employer-led qualifications. As the Secretary of State, who has demonstrated a real passion for FE, has acknowledged, this must be backed up by a real-terms increase in funding. Further education has often been described as the Cinderella of our education system, but we should

be reminded that Cinderella became a senior member of the royal family and could banish the two ugly sisters of snobbery and underfunding once and for all.

In the longer term, the Government should, alongside the remarkable kickstart programme of financial support for businesses that hire apprentices and young people, look at reform of the apprenticeship levy to ensure that more disadvantaged would-be apprentices can climb the skills ladder. Degree apprenticeships should be rocket-boostered with the ambition of having at least half of all students completing degree apprenticeships over the next 10 years.

Alongside FE, I would like the Government to do more to support university technical colleges. They have some superb outcomes and our ambition should be to have a UTC in every town across the country. Sixty-one per cent. of UTCs were rated good or outstanding in the past year compared with a national average of 50%, while in 2020 55% of students went on to university in contrast to 50% nationally, and 13% went on to do an apprenticeship whereas the national average is just 6%.

The White Paper mentions careers guidance. We will not transform skills unless we change careers guidance fundamentally. There is too much replication, duplication and overlap with the Department for Work and Pensions. Department for Education careers advice must be about skills, skills, skills. It must ensure that all the way through schooling pupils are taught about apprenticeships and FE and given more opportunities for work experience. Ofsted should focus on this kind of careers guidance, in short implementing the Baker clause—a much stricter criterion of inspection. Our curriculum should be changed to embed work and skills all the way through children's, pupils' and students' learning.

The Government have put out the levelling-up skills ladder of opportunity. I am really optimistic that this Queen's Speech will bring people to that ladder and help them climb to the top.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now go to the SNP spokesperson, Clare Monaghan.

12.23 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but Clare is my big sister.

There are no surprises in this Queen's Speech but there is much repetition of many of the Prime Minister's favourite phrases. While Parliament was prorogued, the SNP campaigned in and comprehensively won an election on a manifesto that included, as well as the obvious clear commitment to holding a referendum on independence, a commitment to our young people—to their education, their health and wellbeing, and their routes to work. In Scotland we already have the highest number of school leavers going on to positive destinations anywhere in the UK. To invest in the next generation the SNP Government will invest £1 billion over the course of this Parliament to work on narrowing the school attainment gap and recruit 3,500 additional teachers and classroom assistants.

The Secretary of State earlier boasted of maths success, but maybe he should take the time to read what has been said by Professor John Jerrim of University College London, who wrote England's official 2015 country report for PISA—the programme for international student

assessment. Professor Jerrim said that some low-achieving students in England have been “systematically excluded” from the PISA data for England, which undermines England's global rankings. It is suggested that if the data were adjusted on the basis of a more representative sample, England could plummet 11 placings in the maths ratings. Perhaps the Secretary of State should be aware of that.

While this Tory Government have to be forced into providing some school lunches for children, the Scottish Government will provide free school breakfasts and lunches to every primary school pupil throughout the year. Why have we not seen a similar commitment for children in England? For all their talk of levelling up, this Government ignore the fact that children cannot learn effectively when hungry.

The Tories threaten to rip away the lifeline of the £20 a week uplift to universal credit. The new SNP Government will double the game-changing Scottish child payment over the lifetime of this Parliament. The most needy families in Scotland are already receiving an additional £10 per week for every eligible child; doubling this to £20 will make a real difference to these families. That is a Scottish Government delivering on the people's priorities—what a contrast to what we see from the Tory Government, who are content to continue imposing poverty on the most disadvantaged.

The context of the covid crisis makes choices such as these all the more critical, because in seeking to build economic recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic it is vital that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. The Budget in March and this Queen's Speech are clearly laying the grounds for more austerity and Tory cuts.

It is also important to point out that no party and no Government who forced through a devastating Brexit in the middle of a pandemic can credibly claim to be focused on recovery. With the powers we have, the Scottish Government are doing everything they can to mitigate the damage and protect our businesses. A fair recovery must be investment-led, so at the centre of our recovery plans is an economic transformation with fair work and the climate emergency at its heart. It includes an investment of £500 million to support new jobs and to retrain people for the jobs of the future, as well as funding the young person's guarantee of a free university, college, apprenticeship or training place for every young person who wants one.

What a contrast that is to what the Prime Minister has announced in the Queen's Speech. Colleges in England have been severely underfunded for a decade, leading to a £1.1 billion gap in real-terms funding for 16-to-19 education, and this Tory Government have done very little to address that. The announcement on lifetime access to education cannot be truly considered access; all it does is pave the way for increased financial liability. No longer will educational debt, which is on average £50,000 on graduation for students in England, be reserved to the young; now the Tories want people of all ages to be saddled with debt for their education. This Tory Government need a different approach to post-16 education funding, providing long-term security and putting the interests of learners at its heart. Education is a public good and as such must be publicly funded to provide real lifelong access for all.

The Prime Minister continues his talk of the UK as a science superpower and makes impressive promises regarding research and development funding, but the

[Carol Monaghan]

story on the ground is much less rosy. Researchers are finding themselves in an eternal circle of grant applications, trying to get scraps of funding from various different bodies—one here, another there.

If the Prime Minister makes good on his announcement on additional funding for this sector, many will be relieved, but over the past six months, we have seen much that casts doubt on his promises and, as we have come to expect of this Prime Minister, absolutely no detail. There have been questions and delays over the funding of Horizon Europe, and cuts of £120 million from the ODA budget. The UK's status as a science superpower is underpinned by international research collaboration. A while back, the UK Government announced, with much fanfare, 12 flagship hubs that were to run projects of five to 10 years for the achievement of the UK's sustainable development goals. As a result of the ODA cuts, projects halfway through clinical trials cannot continue unless funds are found. That is jeopardising both jobs and research. Is that the action of a science superpower: withdrawing funding in the middle of human trials, in violation of medical ethics?

Also as a result of ODA cuts, universities have reported that research contracts have been terminated, in some cases with just hours' notice. That has fundamentally undermined trust between universities, researchers and UK Research and Innovation. The system of research commissioning is now one where the first risk assessment that must be done is on the UK Government's ability to honour their own contracts. Do the UK Government's promises mean so little that they must now be risk assessed?

I am delighted that the Secretary of State was so enthusiastic in his praise for my home city of Glasgow and he is welcome to join me here in Glasgow at any point. I wonder whether he would also be enthusiastic about meeting the researchers who as a result of the ODA cuts are now struggling to continue with their research. Nothing in this Queen's Speech provides any certainty for international collaboration. Instead, we have seen that young people's ability to travel freely to 27 other countries has been curtailed. Opportunities have been lost. Despite his praise of the Turing scheme, it is a poor relative of the Erasmus scheme and our young people can see right through this.

Scotland is a confident nation, one that celebrates diversity. Although the electorate in England might buy the Prime Minister's promises, young people in Scotland can see through them. They want a different path, one with opportunity, and they want to choose their own future as an independent nation. The Scottish Parliament elections have shown that the young people of Scotland are clear: they know that the SNP Government have their interests at heart and they look forward to re-joining the independent nations of the EU.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do apologise to the hon. Lady for the slip-up at the beginning with her name.

12.32 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con):
Madam Deputy Speaker:

"When we're born, our mothers show us compassion. This is a natural response without which we wouldn't survive."

Those are the words of the Dalai Lama in celebrating Mother's Day, and he is absolutely right. Babies who experience the compassion and love of their care giver, be it mum, dad or another caring adult, have already won first prize in the lottery of life, because it is someone's earliest experiences in the period from conception to the age of two that can shape their entire lifelong physical and emotional health.

To understand that point better we need look no further than the great Harry Potter. When he was born, his parents loved and cared for him. His mother gave her own life to save his. When evil Lord Voldemort killed Harry's parents, Harry was only just over a year old. He was taken to live with his abusive aunt and uncle, and forced to grow up in a cupboard under the stairs, yet not only did his secure early beginning enable him to survive and thrive through all those early traumas, but his secure sense of self enabled him to go on to become the greatest wizard the world has ever known. So, to me, the stand-out part of the Queen's Speech that really will ensure a bright future for the next generation was when the Queen confirmed that

"Measures will be brought forward to ensure that children have the best start in life, prioritising their early years."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 2.]

Ensuring that every baby has a chance at the best start for life has been my passion for 25 years, from experiencing post-natal depression myself with my first born, to chairing a number of charities that provide mental health support for families who are struggling to form a secure bond with their new babies, to now being the Government's early years healthy development adviser. The work carried out by so many over all those decades has been hugely rewarded by those few words in the Queen's Speech.

I thank the Prime Minister for his personal commitment to the best start for every baby when he and I launched the Government's vision for the 1,001 critical days together at the Monkey Puzzle Day Nursery in his constituency. The agreed actions in our vision will address inequalities across England, contribute hugely to the Government's levelling-up agenda and can, in a generation, transform our society for the better. I fully intend to collaborate closely with colleagues in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Administrations to share learning and best practice, to make this a positive story for our whole United Kingdom.

Why does support in the early years change lives for the better? Humans are unique in the animal kingdom in the extent of our underdevelopment at birth. What other offspring cannot fend for itself at all until it is at least a year old? But the physical underdevelopment is only a tiny part of the human story. At birth, the brain is only partially formed, and the way in which it develops is profoundly affected by an infant's earliest experiences. Mental ill health, drug and substance misuse and domestic violence in the home can all create trauma in a developing brain that can have a permanent impact on both physical and emotional health, with not only long-term consequences for the total well of human happiness but the financial cost to society of poor early relationships. Depression, homelessness, drug taking, violence, self-harming, knife crime—too many of these costly problems can be laid at the door of poor early relationships.

The vision for the 1,001 critical days includes a joined-up start for life offer for every family in England; the development of multidisciplinary family hub networks

that are open-access, universal and include both physical and virtual support; a digital version of the red book; a newly empowered workforce; improved outcomes measurement and evaluation; and strong leadership at both the local and national levels. It is an incredibly ambitious programme of measures, and I am so proud to be leading their implementation on behalf of the Government.

The commitment of the Government should be music to all our ears. I thank the many Members right across the House who have been so supportive of this agenda for so long. A focus on the 1,001 critical days may just be the most important thing we will ever do to ensure a bright future for the next generation.

12.37 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) [V]: I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). It has been a true pleasure to work with her for over a decade on early years policy and, most recently, on the Government's early years review, which she kindly invited me to sit on. I am pleased that she has once again raised this very important issue today and at the commitment she has secured in the Queen's Speech, which I hope, as she does, delivers all the recommendations in her review. It has also been a pleasure to co-chair with the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), who I shadowed when he was the Children and Families Minister, the Early Years Commission, which is set to publish its findings soon.

As we know, the first 1,001 critical days are so crucial to a child's development, and I will continue as long as I have breath in my body to campaign for the early years to be prioritised and properly funded, as I am sure the right hon. Lady will. However, I want to focus the bulk of my remarks on another very important issue. While the pandemic has been more than a challenge for all policy areas, nowhere has it impacted harder than in our health services. I want to raise this today because the legacy of any legislation now will have a lasting impact on our recovery towards the brighter future we all want to see. We have the opportunity now to rebuild our NHS after this devastating blow, so that generations to come have world-class healthcare there for them when they need it. Yet sadly, there was no mention of cancer services in particular in the Queen's Speech, which is a terrible omission.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer, I work closely with other cancer APPG chairs to raise the devastating issues facing our cancer services. Never has that work been of greater importance than across this last year, yet, sadly, BBC statistics shared today suggest there are 45,000 missing cancer patients, meaning fewer people are going to their GP to be checked out or seek referrals. They are also missing vital screening services. Of that number, almost 10,000 are missing breast cancer patients. People need to know that it is safe to go to get checked. Not only is it safe; it is encouraged.

Despite fewer people presenting to their GPs in the first place as a result of the pandemic, worrying trends have appeared along the treatment chain. Macmillan's research demonstrates that, as of February this year, the number of people being seen by a specialist after an urgent referral had dropped by 8% from February 2020.

The disruption to services across the last 14 months has created a backlog of people receiving their first treatment for cancer, which currently stands at 38,500 people. That is despite the strongest efforts of our tremendously hard-working NHS staff.

Despite the urgent nature of the 62-day period from diagnosis to treatment, thousands of patients have had to wait longer. The lowest number of people missing that waiting time period was 16,111, and that was in November last year, but that was still 44% higher than pre-pandemic numbers. We all know that NHS staff have worked their hardest and could not have done more, but even if cancer services could now operate at 110% of pre-pandemic capacity, we are looking at more than 15 months to clear that backlog, and that is without the 45,000 missing cancer patients all turning up all of a sudden. So this just is not possible or sustainable with the extensive challenges that lie ahead. The Government must do everything they can to put patients first, clear that backlog, find those missing patients and bring down the growing waiting lists. But how?

Concerns have been raised by the Royal College of Radiologists that delays to scans have been worsened by a 33% shortfall in that workforce. It is unfortunately growing clearer that our cancer workforce are suffering and need immediate attention from the Government. Alongside other cancer APPG chairs, I was happy to sign a funding statement in March which called on the Government to recognise that NHS services need resources to super-boost capacity above pre-pandemic levels. The Government really must act now to make sure that this does not spiral into a greater health crisis and to protect lives. The way to achieve that is with a plan that ensures the long-term resuscitation of the cancer workforce—a plan that will recruit and train, bring jobs and maintain the standards of care that people deserve nationwide.

Cancer was left out of the Chancellor's Budget in March. The backlog was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech. I ask the Government to make sure that the other c-word is not forgotten once more.

12.43 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) [V]: I welcome the breadth of measures in the Queen's Speech, which are necessary and welcome. We are talking today about the plans for further education, which right an anomaly that has been there for too long. Someone can go to university and receive subsidised loan support from the Government, but someone pursuing a vocational course in the FE sector is all too often largely left to fend for themselves. That reform is really important.

I also single out the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill, which I hope will put an end to the anomaly of house builders selling properties that should be freehold with a long-term lease that they then use to exploit their buyers to get more money. I have many constituents who have experienced that, and the behaviour of companies such as Persimmon has brought discredit on the sector.

I want to focus my remarks not on a new Bill but on an old one, but one that is vital to the future of the generations we are talking about today. The Environment Bill has already passed through most of its stages in this House, but carrying it over into this Session provides an opportunity to make further improvements to what is already a good and important Bill. I really welcome the steps taken to address deforestation and the use of

[Chris Grayling]

deforested land to grow products that might end up on sale here. The loss of forested areas around the world in recent decades has been disastrous for our planet, impacting on habitats, biodiversity and climate change.

The Environment Bill will make it much more difficult to use illegally deforested areas to produce products for sale in the UK, but that leaves a big challenge where the deforestation is not illegal. We have seen in Brazil, only in the past few weeks, moves to introduce new laws that would permit greater exploitation of the Amazon rainforest, which our planet simply cannot afford. This country cannot and should not stand idly by while that happens. The Amazon rainforest is a global asset of vital importance to all our futures. I pay tribute to the retailers who last week sent a clear message to the Brazilian Government that they will not source products from a country that behaves in that way. I ask the Secretary of State to talk to the Foreign Secretary to make sure that his Department also makes clear our Government's disapproval of what is proposed in Brazil, to ensure that these damaging laws are withdrawn by Ministers there.

Many environmental groups have rightly raised concerns about the fact that the Environment Bill takes action on illegal deforestation but not on legal deforestation—given what is proposed in Brazil, they have a real point. Of course, it is difficult to criminalise products in the UK that have been produced legally in other countries, and it is often very difficult to prove that this has happened, even in a court of law. We must take every possible step to prevent damaging legal and illegal deforestation where it does serious damage to ecosystems. Where countries need deforestation for economic reasons, we should help them where necessary and provide aid to help them find alternative ways.

There are two steps that I want to see taken in the Environment Bill or by Ministers in the coming months, to a clear timetable and with a clear commitment. First, I hope that the Government will accept amendments, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), that would prevent UK-based financiers from supporting investments in businesses that exploit forest risk products. I think that is absolutely essential. Secondly, I want to see the introduction of a clear system of sustainable food labelling in this country. I have tabled an amendment that would mandate the Government to do that. If it is difficult to make agricultural products coming from areas of legal deforestation illegal, let us at least give consumers the power to reject those products themselves. If we do so, retailers will inevitably also reject those products.

Another change that I would like to see in the Environment Bill relates to something rather closer to home. I am the parliamentary species champion for one of our favourite, but sadly now dwindling, species: the hedgehog. Some of the measures in the Agriculture Act 2020, and now in the Environment Bill, can make a real difference. I want to see greater protection for the hedgehog against the wanton destruction of habitats. We still have to conduct newt surveys, and small creatures such as the lagoon sand worm are protected, but a developer can simply rip up a hedge without even checking whether there are hedgehogs or other endangered species in it, and that needs to change. When the time comes for that debate, I will be pushing Ministers either to provide that protection immediately or, perhaps more

realistically, to move rapidly to create a new framework that provides proper protections—updated, modern protections—for hedgehogs and other species with dwindling numbers.

This Government are already providing more wildlife and animal protection than almost any of their predecessors, and this Queen's Speech contains a range of very welcome measures to improve the legal protection we offer, and I commend Ministers for that. The Environment Bill takes us further than virtually any other country in taking responsibility for our planet and our ecology. There is more to come from this Government as they look at some of the issues, such as live animal transport, that must be addressed for animal welfare in this country. These are very welcome, overdue and necessary. I hope that Members on both sides will agree that, based on these measures alone, the Queen's Speech should have—I fear that it probably will not—the unanimous support of the House.

12.49 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) [V]: The last year has been one of tragedy for the tens of thousands of relatives of those who died from covid, such as Jane Roche of Castle Vale in my constituency. Her dad, Vince, died, and five days later her sister Jocelyn died. She has campaigned fiercely for an independent inquiry into why tens of thousands died who should never have died. Yesterday she once again wept tears when the inquiry was announced. She said three things. First, she and the relatives from Birmingham will meet the Secretary of State shortly, and they want their voice to be heard in the drawing up of the terms of reference. Secondly, they want to be able to give evidence on behalf of the families from Birmingham—Britain's second city—which saw such a terrible price paid. Thirdly, 2022 is simply too late for the inquiry to start if painful lessons are to be learned.

I want to focus my remarks on manufacturing, which matters to the success of the United Kingdom. The genius of manufacturing, science and the national health service was responsible for the development and roll-out of the vaccine, and 30 million people have already been vaccinated. That success teaches us two lessons, which I fear the Government have not sufficiently learned. First, it was the coming together of the state, businesses and workers that delivered one of the greatest feats that this country has achieved in recent times. Secondly, British manufacturing, having shown its worth to the country in its hour of need, deserves and requires a Government who think strategically about how to support the sector to reap the rewards of our world-class manufacturing. However, the Queen's Speech and the events of recent months demonstrate that the Government are failing to learn these lessons. The scrapping of the Industrial Strategy Council, the ending of the industrial strategy policy and the Treasury land grab of industrial strategy have been received with dismay by many in the world of manufacturing—employer and trade union alike.

Time after time, we have seen the Government shirk their responsibility to support British industry. All the while, our international competitors are making strides forward. Last year, the French invested £15 billion in the aerospace industry and £8 billion in the automotive industry to put them at the forefront of the next generation of green planes and cars. The German Government have invested £4 billion in German automotive production

to ease the transition to electric vehicles. In America, President Biden has secured a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package to kickstart the economy. The failure in our country to do likewise on the necessary scale means that we run the risk of Britain falling behind, and that must change.

The Government need to act now on three fronts. First, they need to recognise that it is absolutely key to our economic recovery that we invest in manufacturing, which is central to our economy, creating good, well-paid and stable jobs when too many people are now in insecure and low-paid employment.

Secondly, on the challenges of net zero, this is the year of Glasgow, with the immense potential that that brings. However, if we are to rise to that challenge, demanding—rightly so—that we end the scandal of global warming, and then take advantage of that, it means investment in our world-class manufacturing and research and development. One example of where the Government simply fall behind continental Europe is investment in gigafactories, and another is investment in infrastructure.

Thirdly, if the Government mean what they say about the levelling-up agenda, it is crucial that much of manufacturing is located in seats of high deprivation, such as Erdington. I always describe Erdington as being rich in talent, but it is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. At its heart we have the jewels in the crown of manufacturing, such as Jaguar Land Rover and the GKN factory—we are battling right now to save that from closure. Manufacturing is key if the Government are to come anywhere near achieving their objective of levelling up.

In conclusion, let me return to the success of the vaccine roll-out. It has demonstrated the enormous and endless potential of the state, businesses and workers coming together to deliver, in our hour of need, one of this country's greatest achievements. It also demonstrates just how important manufacturing is to Britain. The Government need to learn those lessons, but I fear that they will not. They are proceeding with nowhere near the ambition that is necessary. Is it true that some welcome initiatives have been taken? Yes, it is, but not at the scale demanded. If France, Germany and America can do it, Britain demands and deserves better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have been told that some Members have withdrawn from this debate, so, unusually, I will put the time limit up for a bit to seven minutes.

12.55 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

After 12 months of challenge, this Queen's Speech needed to do two things: tackle the aftermath of the pandemic and lay firm foundations for a brighter future. It does exactly that. Bills tackling investment in our health service and social care sit alongside town deals, the higher education Bill and the Environment Bill. This clear vision for optimism is based on the Government's levelling up agenda for the whole country. It is really about unleashing the full potential of the whole country. That was the message that ignited the electorate in the elections last week. From Hartlepool to the west midlands and to Basingstoke, voters profoundly rejected negative campaigning and embraced the positive message that

we, as a Conservative party, had to give—nowhere more so than in my own constituency of Basingstoke, where we took back control of the council with a resounding majority.

This Queen's Speech is all about levelling up and unleashing that potential, and it is an optimistic message for the country. It is about investing in our towns and in the infrastructure in the midlands, the north-east, the north-west and, indeed, around the whole of the United Kingdom. It means that reaching one's full potential does not mean moving away from one's home town. That has a personal resonance for me, because in the late 1960s, when my family left the Black Country where I had been born and bred, they did so to seek a better job and to be able to move from council accommodation to a private house. I would like to see a change in the need to do that, and I welcome the focus of this Queen's Speech in allowing that to happen. That message is also important for places such as my own constituency of Basingstoke, because growth has been concentrated in the south-east for too long at the expense of other parts of the United Kingdom, causing extraordinary pressure on housing, transport and the local environment. Making sure that we level up across the country is important for every single citizen in the United Kingdom.

The Queen's Speech is also about levelling up for those groups everywhere who are still not achieving their full potential, particularly through education and work opportunities. The education and skills Bill will be an essential ingredient in this, as lifelong training is the reality for all of us wherever we work.

When it comes to work, the past 12 months have been an enormous challenge for employers. They have been tested more than ever before, and the overwhelming majority have worked with their employees to find new ways to work and support their families, and to support staff suffering from the mental health challenges of the pandemic. If we are to enable everyone in this country to reach their full potential, we need to be actively levelling up in the workplace, too. Within the Government's legislative programme, we need to tackle some of the issues that we encountered with working practices during the pandemic. We must be optimistic about ensuring that everybody—every woman, in particular, and every parent—in this country can reach their potential.

Since 2010, this Government have made it an important priority to help women to level up in the workplace. There has been progress in recording and cutting the gender pay gap for women under 35, in increasing childcare and in extending the right to request flexible working, but a truly bright future for the next generation will take these steps further. Ensuring that everyone in this country can reach their full potential in work is important not only because it is fair, but because it is essential for the prosperity of our entire nation. Making all jobs flexible by default has become the reality for the past 12 months, so let us not slip back into the old ways of working. Let us use the challenges of the past 12 months as a platform for a more positive, flexible way to work from now on. And let us level up for pregnant women at work, too, because too many of them have suffered from their employers' lack of understanding of the law during the pandemic, being put on sick leave when they should not have been.

[Mrs Maria Miller]

The Government already know that 50,000 women a year leave their jobs when they are pregnant because of discrimination, often covered up by the use of non-disclosure agreements, many forced out of work at a time when they cannot get another job. Too many women still see a lack of a level playing field at work, so let us level up for them too, and let us have within the Government legislative programme plans to stop pregnant women being made redundant and stop the use of non-disclosure agreements covering up unlawful activity, particularly sexual harassment and discrimination at work. Let us have proper shared care for dads, too, because it is better for everyone. All jobs as flexible by default unless there is a good reason not to—that is what levelling up has to look like for everyone in the future.

Finally, I welcome the online harms Bill included in the Gracious Speech, published yesterday for scrutiny before being formally debated in this place. A groundbreaking piece of legislation—the UK truly leading the world in tackling online harms. An important part of a bright future for the next generation needs to be an internet that benefits, not detracts from, our lives. As well as regulating that industry to ensure that it does not create harm, we need laws to give victims protections, too. So either within or alongside the Online Safety Bill, the Government need to tackle the deficits in the law, especially on sharing intimate sexual images without consent. The Law Commission review is now finished and will be complete before the Bill comes to the House, and I hope the Government will undertake to insert into the Online Safety Bill important changes in criminal law to protect victims of that heinous crime of intimate image abuse.

The Bills in the Queen's Speech start to rebuild our country after the challenges of the pandemic. Its optimism and vision to level up are exactly what our country needs.

1.2 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: In the local elections last week, Oxfordshire Liberal Democrats campaigned with a positive focus on the environment, improving the lives of our young people and supporting health and social care. It was a vision that resonated with people in Oxfordshire, and resulted in record gains against the Conservatives and our largest ever group on the county council. For the first time in 16 years, we are hoping for a leading role on an administration that will make that agenda a reality.

We believe that investing in our country is not just about physical infrastructure, but is also about investing in our people, especially our children. By contrast, in Oxfordshire under the Tories, youth services and children's centres had been cut to the bone. In fact, most of our children's centres closed in 2017 and they disbanded the Oxfordshire youth service in its entirety. Liberal Democrats want to bring youth services back, because we believe that there is no better way to create a bright future for the next generation than to help them engage with all the amazing opportunities available to them in our area, and we want to see real investment in children's centres and early years support.

Two years ago, Lib Dem Abingdon councillor Neil Fawcett managed to persuade the council to reopen South Abingdon's children's centre. Despite Oxfordshire's relative affluence, Caldecott is in the 10% most deprived

wards in education, skills and training in the country and the 20% most deprived in income. Children's centres change lives, but especially so in such places as South Abingdon. He should not have needed to campaign so hard for that, but I am pleased to report that with the support of the local community, that centre is now thriving.

It is that focus on fairness and long-term investment that completely exemplifies the approach that Liberal Democrats will take, should we help to form the new county council administration. To do that even better, however, we do need more central Government funding. Budgets for all councils were stretched before the pandemic, but it is even worse now. Add in the £1.6 million lost because of the former administration's incompetence over a botched car park contract and £8 million lost from the social care budget because of short-sighted decisions, and it is fair to say that times are tough.

It is the non-statutory services that have suffered, but that is surely a false economy. Our children's social care budget is in crisis. For every child who ends up in the system, we must remember the anguish and the enduring damage that getting to that point can cause, but it is also bad value for money. Investing in our children and their families early is not just the right thing to do morally, but the right thing to do for our taxpayers, too. We have only to look at the example of charities such as the Abingdon Bridge or Wolvercote Young People's Club to see what an incredible difference these youth services make to the lives of our young people, but we need to be able to help everyone, and there are far too many gaps. When the Vibe youth club in Didcot was closed, the young people who relied on it just did not know where to go.

I welcome the aims set out in the education recovery plan, but I hope that in developing these plans, the Government will not overlook the role that local government and youth services can play. The Liberal Democrats have proposed devolving money away from the National Citizen Service and the youth investment fund to local authorities so that they can expand youth service provision and provide educational recovery programmes. That would make such a difference to my constituents; I ask the Minister what thought has been given to doing it.

For many young people, apprenticeships provide that practical bridge between education and work, and towards fulfilling independent futures where they are masters of their own destiny. In Oxfordshire, we want to do even better. We have incredible local providers such as Abingdon & Witney College and Activate Learning, but the Government do not make it easy.

In her answer last month to a question that I tabled in March, the apprenticeships Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan)—revealed that more than £1 billion in apprenticeship levy funding paid by employers had expired unused between May 2020 and February 2021. That was a 22% increase on the year before, which just shows that there is far too much bureaucracy and too little flexibility in the system. It has disadvantaged young people, who are missing out. Nationally, the Liberal Democrats have campaigned for the apprenticeship levy to be expanded into a wider skills and training levy to help to prepare the UK's workforce for the economic challenges ahead.

Finally, there is great appetite to engage with the kickstart scheme, but I was deeply concerned to hear, in a business roundtable organised by our local enterprise partnership, that data on the kickstart scheme is gathered only at a regional level by the Department for Work and Pensions. If the Government want it to succeed, I plead with Ministers: give us the data at a county level—let us help you.

Our children and young people deserve a brighter future. As we emerge from this pandemic, it is the impact on the next generation that really concerns me the most. We need serious investment in them—in early years, children's centres and youth services, as well as schools, colleges and universities. Only if we do that will the dream of a brighter future become a reality.

1.8 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on the passion with which she speaks on behalf of early learning.

I feel a bit bereft by this Government, because normally I like to make constructive criticism of my own side, but I have to say that there is very little in this Queen's Speech that I disagree with—perhaps I had better sit down straight away, but you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I say a few words.

To compare that with previous Governments, I found it very difficult to agree with a single thing that the Government of David Cameron were doing. He took the view—some in the Labour party may take it now—that his party was unelectable and he had to veer towards a kind of liberal agenda. He did do one thing right, which was calling a referendum on Europe, although of course he never thought for a moment that it would ever happen. He thought that he would still be in coalition with the Liberals and that if it did happen, there would be just a few right wingers, as he would have termed them, arguing for Brexit and he would win easily—but Brexit has changed everything. That is now the problem for the Labour party in reconnecting with its voters in northern and midlands seats such as Gainsborough, which I represent.

The Government are in a strong position, but I counsel against hubris. If we are to hold on to our gains in areas such as I represent, we must not just talk the talk but walk the walk and take the action. That applies particularly to immigration and housing. Brexit was won not because people like me were wittering on about parliamentary sovereignty for many years, but on the issue of immigration, and people in the midlands and the north of England feeling that their Government were out of touch on immigration.

I welcome the new Bill that is being promoted. The fact is, though, that there are perhaps a million people in this country whom we do not know about who are here illegally. That is a real issue and of real concern. What really angers people is seeing these daily pictures of illegal crossings on the channel. I believe that the only way to stop that is to make it a criminal offence to try to enter this country illegally—one that, if proven, would entail a custodial sentence and deportation. If we do not take action, this trade will continue; it will get worse and worse, and sooner or later there will be a horrible tragedy in the channel and people will drown and they will die. The Bill is welcome, but we have to be robust on this. We cannot protect ourselves simply by creating a wall around the country.

Why do people come here? These are not bad people; they are good people. They just want a better future. They come here because their own countries are in chaos. Therefore, we have to commit ourselves to international aid and overseas development. I will not labour the point, but I have been critical of the way the budget has been cut. We have promised to restore it, but we have to concentrate aid in a practical way, on the poverty that is motivating this mass migration. Immigration is a vital issue.

The next issue is housing. Some of my colleagues who represent prosperous seats in the south-east are rightly worried about the planning Bill. Personally, I see no point in encouraging developers to build on green-belt land. They always want to build executive housing on green land; we want to build housing in the cities, the towns, the north of England and the midlands. I think we should reconnect with people by committing ourselves to a Macmillan Government-type programme of building 300,000 houses a year. His mistake, perhaps, was to build council houses. I want to build housing for young people that they can afford so that they can convert rent into purchase. That will really connect with young people, who, in places such as the south-east, simply cannot get on the property ladder. That is how this Government will be a success—by giving people a stake in their own society, so that they are not just renters. That is a true levelling-up agenda.

I am also grateful to the Government for taking on the issue of free speech in universities. It is none of my business, really, but if the Labour party is to reconnect with so many of its natural supporters in the north, it has to turn its back on this woke, politically correct agenda of denigrating our past. The past is the past. I understand that, on my mother's side, my grandfather was born in Barbados—he was the son of a missionary—but it is quite probable that his grandfather and great-grandfather were involved in the slave trade and may even have owned slaves. Am I to denounce my own family? The fact is that the slave trade was so endemic in the 18th century that there are probably hundreds of thousands of people in this country who are descended from slave owners. Slavery is wrong. It was wrong; it is wrong. We led the world in abolishing it, but the history is as it is.

Similarly, when I go up to the Committee corridor, I see a picture of Queen Elizabeth I—a glorious picture of Gloriana. She ensured that my ancestor Richard Leigh was hung, drawn and quartered for no other reason than that he was a Catholic priest. But do I condemn Elizabeth I? No; it is part of our history. We have to be proud of Britain. We have to stop tearing down statues, stop denigrating our past, and accept that the past is the past, with all its benefits and regrettable occurrences.

Charlotte Nichols: I agree with the right hon. Member on some level about the need to protect our nation's history. If he is so concerned about ensuring that the nation's history is protected, will he condemn the comments made by the Minister for Universities on Radio 4 yesterday about holocaust deniers and people who wish to debate the facts of the holocaust being protected under the new free speech in universities legislation that his Government are bringing forward?

Sir Edward Leigh: I did not hear the interview. All I can say is that antisemitism, like Islamophobia and all the isms, is completely wrong, regrettable and horrible.

[Sir Edward Leigh]

I would have hoped that it would not have not been necessary to bring in such a Bill because there will be all sorts of unintended consequences. I heard a university vice-chancellor say yesterday, “How are we going to police it?” I understand all this. Therefore, it is down to the leadership of the universities and the schools to ensure free speech, within reason.

Free speech should be governed by good manners. It should not be governed by laws. We should therefore protect free speech, and it is down to headteachers and vice-chancellors to ensure that this ridiculous no-platforming stops. I do not want to get into the whole transgender issue, but a well-known feminist writer should not be barred from speaking in a university just because she has made a few comments on transgender issues.

Finally, I want to talk about the Union, which is the single most important issue we have to deal with—even more important than immigration and housing. We have to fight for the Union. I counsel the Government in saying that it is just an economic issue. Of course, we have to take on the SNP on the economic issues, but we must not make the mistake of the remainers in the EU referendum by saying it is all about money. We must not play Project Fear. We must say, “We love being together with Scotland. We love the Scottish people. We love the Union. We have achieved so much together. Let’s keep it going.”

1.16 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Right on cue. I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for that love bombing, but I assure him that that in itself will not be enough to save his Union. When it comes to young people, their choices, their rights and their futures, once again we have a tale of two Governments, with one here who refuse to give 16 to 18-year-olds the vote and are trying to suppress voting with the electoral register Bill. We should note that when the SNP first extended the voting franchise for the 2014 referendum, both Labour and the Tories were opposed to young people getting their chance to vote. Why was that? They feared that the young would vote for independence. However, it was a long-standing SNP policy and a principle of ours, and we extended it to parliamentary elections. We believe in democracy and maximum participation. That is why EU citizens also have the vote and why we have now extended it to refugees.

We live in a parliamentary democracy. Pro-referendum and pro-indy parties have 72 seats to the Unionists’ 57 seats, and the SNP achieved the highest constituency vote share of any party ever at a Holyrood election on a record turnout. The Tories made it clear at the election that the referendum was a key voting issue, yet they secured only 23% in the list vote, with pro-indy parties achieving over 50%. Why does Westminster therefore think they should have a veto on our democratic choices? What message does that send to young voters? Young people have had to face the brunt of Brexit. Surely they deserve a chance to choose their own path, with a different future: a chance to consider the merits of an independent Scotland within the EU and a Government that people voted for, with the full economic levers of independence and able to make their own decisions. That is a normal country. It could, for example, choose to implement a new green deal. It is therefore no wonder that 70% of 16 to 24-year-olds favour Scottish independence.

When it comes to climate change, we know that young people are more engaged and recognise it as the biggest threat to their future. They know that the Scottish Government have declared a climate emergency, but so far the UK Government have not followed suit. The young want to see a green recovery, which is only possible with Scottish independence. Why should Scotland remain in a Union where energy policy is reserved to Westminster? It means that in effect we do everything with one hand tied behind our back. While we were forging ahead with ambitious renewable energy targets, down here David Cameron was trying to “cut the green crap”. That led to the blocking of onshore wind development in Scotland, which is also stuck with a grid charging system in which operators in Scotland pay the highest connection fees in Europe. Despite that, in 2020 Scotland still managed to produce over 97% of its electricity demand from renewable energy—truly leading the way.

Why should we be stuck with an energy policy that is wedded to new nuclear power stations and is piling costs on to our electricity bills? The £20 billion Hinkley Point C project is 45 times more expensive than the current offshore wind prices. We do not need nuclear for base-load—the National Grid chief executive officer debunked that myth in 2015. It is utter madness to commit further billions to new nuclear power stations or small water reactors and nuclear fusion. It is just creating another nuclear waste legacy, when the existing one is already costing us over £130 billion.

It is obvious that renewable energy is the future. We need to grasp the opportunities to create green jobs and the potential to provide rewarding careers that offer people opportunities to travel around the world. But there was nothing—absolutely nothing—in the Queen’s Speech on renewable energy policy. For base-load, in our energy policy we need to go ahead and price the mechanism for pumped hydro storage. For just around £1.5 billion, we could get the Cruachan dam extension and the new Coire Glas scheme constructed, which would create much-needed high-quality job opportunities in rural Scotland. Even better, analysis by Imperial College suggests that investment in pumped hydro storage could save us £700 million a year in system costs by 2050, so let us get that done.

When will the UK Government do something to get the Peterhead carbon capture and storage project over the finishing line? Equinor and SSE Thermal say it could be operational by 2026, so it could be part of the just transition and provide vital job opportunities for our young people. The same is true for hydrogen. Agree a contract for difference mechanism and get the St Fergus project up and running.

Why, oh why, are the UK Government not doing more to get wave and tidal projects to a stage where they can be scaled up? This really is the way that Scotland can lead the world. Instead, we are constrained by UK Government policy and procurement processes. We have already missed out on green jobs in manufacturing and fabrication hubs because of flaws in the CfD process for offshore wind procurement. This is further proof that Westminster does not work for Scotland.

Where is Westminster’s policy for scaling up heat pump production and installation to the 600,000 installations a year that the 10-point plan tells us are going to happen? There are only 20,000 installations a

year at the moment. When will Westminster get a grip of energy efficiency policy? They need to treat it like a national infrastructure project, the way the Scottish Government do. The Scottish Government spend four times what Westminster does per capita, creating jobs and the required long-term investments.

In tree planting, Scotland by far leads the way: 85% of the trees planted in the UK in the past decade are in Scotland. In the Queen's Speech Bill document, the UK Government brag about planting 13,500 hectares of trees last year. What they do not say is that over 85% of the trees were planted in Scotland under the Scottish Government. It was nothing to do with Westminster. That is greenwashing of the highest order.

Westminster cannot con us with greenwashing. They cannot con an electorate who knew full well what they were voting for in the Scottish elections last week. They knew that voting in the SNP and the Greens was a clear indication that they want an independent Scotland, leading the way to net zero and creating a bright and optimistic future. Westminster should not stand in their way, and I suggest that Labour should not back the Tories on that, either.

1.23 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): It is fair to say that the pandemic has made many of us re-evaluate our real priorities in our own lives at home, in our communities and across the country. What do we truly value? How can we nurture all that is needed for future generations to thrive and not falter? It could well be a crowded field, but I am in no doubt that providing every child with the best possible start in life should sit at the very top of that priority list.

That is why I was delighted to be involved in the seminal early years healthy development review carried out by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), to whom I pay tribute, and I understand that it is her birthday today. The review was published in March this year and, pleasingly, forms a key part of the Government's legislative and policy programme set out in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech.

I very much support many of the key action areas that came out of the review through a lot of work, deliberation and evidence gathering, in particular the start for life offer, which mirrors in some ways the local offer that we introduced in relation to special educational needs and disability when I was children's Minister; the formulation and growth of family hubs—again, I welcome the Government's commitment and investment to date, but there is plenty more that we can do to realise the huge potential of the family hubs model; the development of a more modern and skilled workforce to meet the changing needs of children and families, ensuring that it is relentlessly child-focused, so that we can build the proper support around children and their families that we know works; and, crucially, improving accountability and data and understanding the impact of the interventions and the interactions that we have with families, particularly in those very early years, when we know we can make the biggest difference.

If we do not get it right in the critical early weeks, months and years, we are simply storing up deep-rooted difficulties for decades to come. That is why I have also, alongside the always sunny hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), been co-chairing

the Early Years Commission, which is looking at the nought to five age group. We will soon publish a cross-party manifesto, in recognition of the fact that we need to come together to seek to address the long-term challenges associated with the early years and to set out a long-term plan that has the capacity to endure beyond the changing faces of Government.

Many of those findings and conclusions—with some relief, on my part—chime with and complement the early years healthy development review, while at the same time stretching some of the core offer to children up to the age of five. The review is unequivocal in its recommendations that, when it comes to the levelling-up agenda, which we have heard so much about, particularly for those children living in households with high levels of deprivation, the education, health and development of young people must be society's top priority, as must community and professional support for parents to help them make their homes a nurturing, safe environment where babies and toddlers can take their first steps towards a healthy, happy and productive life. By putting children at the centre of their community and public services and by prudently and effectively investing in early years education, we can together start to transform the life chances of many more children in our country, wherever they happen to live.

I very much support the education recovery plan being led by the commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, who I know is working hard to find the right formula to help bridge the gaps and build a system that gives better and fairer opportunities for children as we come out of the pandemic. That is against an important backdrop of £1.7 billion of support through the education recovery plan, the catch-up package, the tutoring programme and the recovery premium, as well as the £400 million to improve access to remote learning, given the digital divide that we saw play out in the last year, including in Eddisbury. The increase in support for schools needs to be replicated in the early years.

I want to touch quickly on two other aspects of school life on which we need to continue to do more and have better focus. The first is school exclusions. I led an independent review of school exclusion two years ago, and there has been some progress—for instance, the £10 million on behaviour hubs—but there is still much to do, including a practice improvement fund, ensuring that schools are responsible for children they exclude and moving alternative provision into the mainstream as a centre of excellence. I hope to meet Ministers soon to discuss the progress of all my recommendations, so that we can make further, important progress.

Since finding myself on the Back Benches, I have also found time to chair a taskforce on the future of physical education, with support from the Association for Physical Education and others, including Jason Robinson, the England rugby union star and world cup winner who saw PE as the thing that changed his life from a road of failure to one of success.

One consequence of the pandemic has been a deeply concerning drop-off in physical exercise and activity among children of all ages. Now that schools are back and sports and activities are reopening there are signs of improvement, but I am afraid that evidence is also emerging that some schools are reducing physical education time in order to focus on catching up in other subject areas. So we need to look specifically at physical education,

[Edward Timpson]

and one key life skill in that is swimming—we saw 150,000 children leaving primary school without being able to swim 25 metres. That situation clearly needs to be addressed urgently, both as part of the welcome catch-up programme and more systematically through physical education by ensuring that all of its irrefutable and lifelong impact on physical, social, emotional and cognitive development is at the very heart of school life. In doing that we can take another step forward in our shared ambition of giving every child the best possible start in life.

1.30 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: I am very pleased to be able to respond to Her Majesty's Gracious Speech and to highlight the issues facing my constituency of Wansbeck, and of course, the north-east as a whole.

Nothing is more important than this nation's young people—our children—but, sadly, millions of them are being left behind as we speak. I want to focus on the real world of child poverty, not some rose-tinted parallel universe that many people appear to be living in. This issue needs to be addressed as a major Government imperative; for any Government, child poverty should be of extreme importance, if not top of the agenda.

The Queen's Speech proclaims

“Measures will be brought forward to ensure that children have the best start in life, prioritising their early years.”

It also says that the Government

“will address lost learning during the pandemic and ensure every child has a high quality education and is able to fulfil their potential.”

Those are noble aims, but the Government could do a lot worse than look to reverse their own dismal record over the past 11 years.

The Government cannot dare talk of levelling up unless they tackle the gross inequalities in opportunity affecting our young people right across the length and breadth of this country. A decade of brutal austerity and cuts has taken its toll. When children in my constituency look around at communities that are spoken about with such pride and nostalgia by their parents and grandparents they can be forgiven for scratching their heads and wondering why. The schools are overcrowded, underfunded and in many cases absolutely falling apart. The high streets are ghost towns, and the traditional industries that once fostered such a strong sense of community are ghosts of the past, leaving these young people with no clear idea of what to do with their futures. We also lack reliable systems of support and these young people often look around and find they simply have nothing to do.

These are serious issues. In part of Wansbeck, in my constituency, almost half the children grow up in poverty. That is not acceptable—it really isn't. In 2019 we decided with the National Education Union to produce a child poverty report including the testimonies of teachers and others on the frontline. It found that teachers were routinely providing food and basic supplies to children, and their testimonies were heartbreaking. There were tales of children without winter coats, without proper shoes, with holes in their shoes, with different sized shoes, with different shoes and of course issues with school uniform. What does that actually mean? What does it mean for child poverty? It means that kids are

going to school without any food in their bellies, and that really is not fair, and politicians of all colours and of all political persuasions need to push this to the top of the agenda. I am sure in my mind that, despite the fact that some people decided to vote against free school meals, there is not one Member of Parliament who wishes to see any kid going to school hungry—starving, in fact. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the teaching profession and everyone in the education system who has worked tirelessly to help the kids.

We live in the fifth richest economy in the world, and our children should not be forced to live like this. Rickets is on the increase. In the north-east area, over one in four—35,000—children are living below the UK poverty line and are not eligible for free school meals under the current criteria. More than one in 10—about 13,000—north-east children who are currently eligible for free school meals do not take up the offer, and another 4,000 schoolchildren in the north-east are not covered by universal infant free school meals. There are families with no recourse to public funds, many of whom will be living well below the poverty line, but they are not usually eligible for means-tested free school meals.

To make things worse, this Government have changed the way funding is allocated to schools, which is leaving them thousands of pounds worse off in missing pupil premium funding, while those same schools are unable to take advantage of the Government's catch-up funding. In the north-east alone, this amounts to a cut of between £5.16 million and £7.26 million—all this after a decade of cuts to our schools that has really hammered our schools and the school infrastructure. School funding in the north-east is down 2.6% in real terms since 2013-14, and class sizes have greatly increased.

To turn the tide, we need bold Government intervention and initiatives to breathe life into our schools, communities and industry to give our children a fighting chance and a fair chance to move on to honest work so that they can build a life for their families and break the cycle in the next generation. Our asks are modest: a fair chance for our children to find good, decent, dignified work that they can build a life and a family around. We should accept nothing less in a country as rich as ours in the 21st century. Levelling up will mean nothing if our kids continue to go to school hungry. Everyone has a right to food: it is a human right.

1.37 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), and to speak in this debate to welcome the measures outlined in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech.

I want to put on record my thanks to everyone here, everyone in West Worcestershire and everyone across the land who has helped us get through such a difficult year. It has been a truly testing time, and it is wonderful at this moment that we can look forward to seeing an end in sight. I thank everyone who has worked so hard to get us here.

In the local election results last week, we saw support across the land for so many Conservative candidates. In the Queen's Speech as well, we saw that we have a Government nationally who really listen to what people want, pledge to deliver what people want and then get on with the task of delivering it. I think the measures in the Queen's Speech cover a wide range of those pledges, and the job is now to deliver on them.

I want to cover three disparate topics in today's debate, all of which are related to a brighter future for the next generation. The first is to do with further education in my constituency of West Worcestershire, and specifically the situation with Malvern Hills College, which was taken over in a merger by Warwickshire College back in 2016. Unfortunately, during the last year Warwickshire College has announced that it is going to close the site at Malvern and start delivering the courses elsewhere, sometimes as far as 40 miles away. I back the local initiative to take over Malvern Hills College with a community-backed offer. We could use the college, for example, to deliver some of the courses under the lifetime skills guarantee and the important training that we are going to need for our flexible economy. The board of Warwickshire College is meeting next week, and I urge its members to engage very seriously with this community bid. Malvern really wants to keep this college in our community. It has been there for over 100 years and performs an incredibly important function. Now is surely not the time to be closing that college.

The second topic I want to talk about is the important commitment to the world's poorest that we made in our manifesto. The Whips know my views on this subject; they know that I am sad that we are breaking our promise to the very poorest in the world. However, I welcome today's announcement about a plan for girls' education, and the leadership that the UK Government are showing to ensure that every child in the world can get 12 years of quality education. Surely there is nothing better that we can do for our world than to ensure that every child, wherever they are born in this world, is able to have an education. Doing so will make our world so much more prosperous, so much healthier and so much safer. It will also tackle so many of the issues that we are facing in this country.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) alluded to, so many desperate people are fleeing parts of the world. If they can get a good education where they are born, surely that would be the better way forward for the world. I welcome the leadership that the UK Government are showing on this issue, as they co-host with Kenya in July the replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education, which is asking for \$5 billion of funding over five years. I hope that the UK—albeit with the reduced amount of UK aid—will be able to contribute very significantly to that sum. We are asking the UK Government for \$600 million of that \$5 billion over five years.

There is a third, rather disparate, topic that I want to touch on as we talk about a brighter future for the next generation. I will just play the role that I am afraid I played in the Budget debates: a bit of a Cassandra regarding the bond markets. As someone who traded the bond markets—I do not even like to mention how long ago that was, but it was a long time ago, when we had bear markets in bonds—I know that the bond markets can turn on a dime. With the amount of fiscal stimulus and monetary stimulus that we have in this country, I think there is quite a strong risk that we might spark inflation. We saw inflation in America in the statistics that came out this week, and we saw the way in which the markets react to it. We are running quite a large risk in terms of our deficit, with the potential for interest rates to go only one way from here: upwards. That could really damage the brighter future for the next generation.

I urge those who are looking at the leading indicators for our economy, and the Chancellor, as he thinks about some of the fiscal choices that he is going to make, to remember that often a stitch in time saves nine when it comes to fiscal decisions. To ensure a brighter future for everyone and for future generations, I want to see us bring our deficit back to being a manageable one that gives bond markets confidence that the UK gilt market is one of the best places in the world to invest.

1.44 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

Often, parents or guardians of new children re-evaluate their priorities and dedicate themselves more fully to creating a better future for those children—a better world for their children to grow up in. It is clear, though, that this is not always the case. What parent would stop their children living and working in other European nations? What parent would not act on the climate crisis? What parent would make elections less fair? What parent would keep nuclear weapons? No amount of interior decoration can make up for a future blighted by unfairness, inequality and restricted freedoms. This Queen's Speech could have set a direction for a better future; it turned out, sadly, to be anything but.

Food and drink exporters have borne the brunt of the Brexit burden as their European markets become inaccessible to them, as customs hold-ups saw their produce rotting away in the backs of lorries, and as rules that have been in place for decades turned out to be a surprise to the UK Government. Where, in this mess before us, is the supposed help for them? Where is the boost to help their families plan for a financially secure future? It is not there. These businesses, employees and communities have been left swinging in the wind. The future is being failed for these communities, and that means that children are being failed.

That is not the only way that children are being failed by this Government. Today in Glasgow, immigration officials raided the peace of asylum seekers, restarting the horror of dawn raids—the state acting to blight a bairn's life. The neighbours stood up for the asylum seekers. Scots in other parts headed in to support them. Scotland and her people have shown time and again that care for your fellow human beings can trump suspicion and ill-feeling. The UK Government, meanwhile, reinforce the hostile environment. Where in this Queen's Speech are the measures to reverse that hostile environment and to restore some humanity to the immigration system? There are none.

Last week, Scotland and Wales exercised an extended franchise that let refugees and young adults vote; this week the Government want to limit the franchise to those who have photo ID—something the poor are less likely to have and the young poor even less so. Top that all off with a sour dose of the Government's favoured few communications companies twisting misdirection into politics through their social media tricks, and it is a bit of a steaming great mess. That does not build a better world.

Of course building a better world only works if the world is still habitable. I can think of no issue that engages young folk today more than the climate crisis. In a year when the UK is hosting COP26, it took the

[*Deidre Brock*]

US President to arrange a summit to agree some action—not enough action, to be sure, but some. Contrast the UK efforts with the global diplomatic effort France put in back in the day that resulted in the Paris agreement. UK Government Ministers should be embarrassed—ashamed—about the pitiful efforts towards finding solutions. It is not even greenwashing; it is just a faint suggestion of pistachio. It would not have been too hard to look at the example set just across the channel and seek to at least match it, but ambition has been posted missing.

We are told again that the Environment Bill is coming. A little like the tooth fairy, though, it comes in the night and is gone again. After three years in the legislative process, and promised for much longer than that, I get the impression that it is more about keeping the window dressed than addressing the issues. It is more important for England than the rest of us and it puzzles me that the Opposition parties in England cannot find it in themselves to demand that it moves faster, for the sake of the children breathing the dirty air, if nothing else.

I welcome the measures to enhance animal welfare. I wish they had been matched by measures to enhance human welfare, but I welcome them for what they are. Live exports for fattening should be banned. Proper welfare policies for animals in the wild should also be introduced. I assume that the intention, then, is to ban the shooting of game birds and deer for sport. I look forward to seeing the content of those Bills and checking whether the truth lives up to the spin. Always check the receipts, I say, even when the donors are paying.

As I cast one last look at this Queen's Speech, five years after the Brexit referendum, I wonder, is this all that taking back control amounts to? Is this it: all that upheaval, all that bitterness, all the failures of Brexit so that we can have this insipid, uninspired stuff? Taking back control—aye, right.

1.49 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It will not surprise you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to hear that I will be taking a rather more positive outlook on the Queen's Speech than the one we have just heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (*Deidre Brock*). After the difficult events of last year, of course it should be true that across the House we all want to guarantee a brighter future for everyone. We must think particularly about the children—and about the university students, for that matter—who have had massive disruption to their schooling, not only because the pandemic has damaged their education and potentially their life chances but because they are going to be paying much higher taxes for the rest of their lives to deal with the consequences of it.

I want to reflect on the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (*Harriett Baldwin*). She is absolutely right to say that we can spend only the money that we collect from taxpayers, whether it is the taxpayers of today or the taxpayers of tomorrow. There is a risk, if confidence in our economy falls, that there will be consequences for the markets. We all need to be conscious of that, particularly when, in the wake of the pandemic, it is very easy for us to ask the Government for more money for this and for that. It is not without consequence, and I think we have to be very careful.

I want to make a plea not just for the taxpayers today and tomorrow, but for everyone, because if we end up in the situation that my hon. Friend described, interest rates can only go one way, everyone will feel impoverished, everyone with a mortgage, and we really need to be careful about that. It is a number of decades since we have had that experience in this country, but that does not mean it will never return. We must always be vigilant about protecting our money and having a sensible monetary and fiscal policy.

It is also fair to say that the quality of our public services should not be measured by what we spend on them; it should be measured by what they actually deliver. I have huge confidence in all our public services and all the workers in them. They are as determined as we all are to get us out of the position that we are in, and I am sure that there will be great amounts of innovation, imagination and leadership to get us back to a new normal.

It is also worth saying that the impact of the pandemic has not been borne equally, and our focus on building back better must be inclusive. It needs to be fair to all generations and all communities. We need to govern as one nation where everyone has a stake. I have to say, having been an MP for 11 years, that I am now happier than ever that we are doing just that. There are communities out there who thought that the political classes were not speaking for them. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (*Sir Edward Leigh*) referred to the issue of immigration as having influenced Brexit, but that was just one issue. There was a general feeling among the public that all politicians really were not talking about the world they lived in.

We know that we live in the greatest country in the world, but every time we switch on the news, we hear how terrible everything is. That is neither true nor what people want to hear. Communities do not want to be told they are being left behind. Our citizens are proud of the communities they live in. They do not want to be talked down to. They want hope, they want to be able to realise their ambitions and they want their communities to be the best they can be, but they want to lead that. They do not want to just take what has been given to them and be grateful. They want to be assured that their Government are working for them, and that is why I am so pleased with this Queen's Speech, because those communities will be very pleased to see the investment that is being delivered by this Government.

In Thurrock, we are hugely excited to be delivering the Thames freeport. Tilbury, in my constituency, is the poorest of the 100 poorest towns in this country. I am proud that it is a one nation Conservative Government who are showing their confidence in Tilbury through the freeport and through the towns fund. It has been a long time coming. After years of neglect from a Labour Government and a Labour council, I am proud that it is a Conservative Government and a Conservative council that are investing in Tilbury and making sure that we realise that ambition. Generally, it feels very much that the Labour party has historically neglected its core voters in its traditional communities, taking the view that those voters would have nowhere else to go. Well, they do, and the results of the last week prove that they are now voting Conservative because we are giving them hope, and we are talking about the things that matter to them.

Turning again to how we build a better future for all our young people, we absolutely must grip this issue of building more homes. I know that will not be welcomed by everybody on these Benches, but this is something where we must show responsibility and leadership, because for too many young people the ambition of owning their own home seems to be a pipe dream. We need to properly invest, with imagination, in the ability to deliver housing solutions, to which they can then respond.

I really welcome the strategy on tackling violence against women and girls. We have had a moment of revelation in this House about the issues women face today, although it was not a revelation to women Members of this House. We must make sure that we are able to take action that enables women to feel empowered and not threatened as they go about their lives.

Similarly, I welcome the online safety Bill. It is fair to say that the legislative environment has not kept pace with the development of social media and the internet, which has become weaponised as a tool for abuse and bad behaviour. Sadly, that abuse and bad behaviour are now spilling out into the real world. We must take advantage of that Bill.

In the short time left available to me, I wish to mention one of the things the Chancellor of the Exchequer said in approaching this pandemic, which was that the NHS would have all the money it needed to deal with it. Largely, that has been true—in fact, in some respects it has had too much; Track and Trace has a huge budget for perhaps not being as effective as we would like it to be. I just want again to give a shout out for our pharmacists, who stepped up to the plate during this pandemic. They were open when GPs were not. But we know that the financial costs of that are leading a third of them to face potential closure. I do not think we can afford to lose that valuable part of our NHS and I hope the Government do something to address it.

1.56 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I concur with the last point that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) made about community pharmacies.

When I listen to the rhetoric about levelling up, increasing opportunities and improving life chances, I agree: that is what many families and communities all over this country now yearn for. They want a future for their children, a home, a job and hope for the future. So I do not challenge the Government in what they say, but the question is whether the programme matches the rhetoric. There are Bills in the Queen's Speech where we could go further if we want to address the levelling-up agenda. I hope that we will see a willingness, which has been absent in the past, for Ministers to accept amendments to their plans in this Parliament: amendments designed to improve legislation and address the real concerns and worries of our constituents.

If we really aspire to a bright future for the next generation, we need to start with the early years, so I welcome proposals for family hubs and the 1,001 critical days plan; it has taken 10 years for the Government to get here, but I welcome this none the less. We need to identify children with difficulties or disabilities at an early age and give them the help they need. We need to reduce the spiralling costs and numbers of children being taken into care, increasingly because of family

poverty. Our custodial settings are full of people with speech, language and communication difficulties which have gone undiagnosed for years. We have to address this. If we want to improve life chances, we need early intervention, structured support and vastly improved provision for those with speech, language and communication difficulties. I acknowledge recent support for children's hospices, but I urge the Government to look again at core funding for palliative care for children with life-limiting conditions. We need to do more for carers, both through paid leave and through respite care provision.

I am glad to hear the Government address the question of the skills gap, which is a big problem in the west midlands, and I welcome the idea of the skills accelerator programme. I hope that we will take advantage of employer involvement to look again at a more flexible and imaginative use of the apprenticeship levy, which is in danger of becoming a jobs tax. I am afraid that I am sceptical about the idea that a man or woman who is made redundant in their mid-40s will be motivated by the prospect of a £10,000-plus loan. We should be using the National Insurance Contributions Bill to see whether there is a way in which people who have a long record of contributions and are facing such choices can be entitled to an advance to help with retraining. We also need more local commissioning for job programmes in areas of high and stubborn unemployment, especially to help disabled people back into work.

The planning Bill may improve the supply of housing—I welcome that, but where are the measures to address the illegal conversion of family homes into houses in multiple occupation? When coupled with the current exempt accommodation market, it is creating a gravy train for crooks, spivs and, in some cases, organised crime. How have we ended up in a situation where women and children who are fleeing domestic abuse find themselves housed alongside ex-prisoners with a history of violence or people with major substance abuse issues? We have the victims Bill, the draft Building Safety Bill and the planning Bill. We could halt the dangerous and dodgy conversions that turn family homes into HMOs, we could guarantee safe, decent and reserved accommodation for victims of domestic violence, and we could ensure that supported accommodation means exactly that.

Although I welcome proposals for the online harms Bill, I wonder whether we need to address the situation in which paedophile porn is legal if the actress—dressed as a child, looking prepubescent and filmed in a child's bedroom—is actually over 18. What market are these films aimed at? They glorify incest, rape and abuse of minors. How can a man who openly acknowledges his appetite for this legal material be regarded as safe to work with children and have unsupervised access to his own young daughters? What bright future is there for the children who fall prey to perverts fuelled by this legal filth?

I will back the Government when they bring in measures to offer people a brighter future. I hope that Ministers will back my constituents by allowing us to amend legislation to address the issues happening right now that are destroying the future prospects of far too many people.

2.3 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Queen's Speech. I am delighted that the Prime Minister has yet again said that he will back

[Mrs Pauline Latham]

12 years of quality education for girls, which will affect millions of girls around the world. It is a very important and ambitious pledge, and I would love to think that it will all be achieved. Sadly, because developing countries have faced such savage cuts by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to the official development assistance budget, it is unlikely to happen. The cut from 0.7% to 0.5% has been a double whammy as our economy has gone down.

The same ambition is very important in this country, too, but unless marrying under the age of 18 is banned, it is highly unlikely to be achieved. The law by which children can marry at the age of 16 or 17 with their parents' consent dates back to 1929, and I think that should stop. The law was appropriate for a time when marriages could be as much about family dynasties as about being in love, but today it is responsible for the misery of hundreds of girls across the UK every year who are coerced into child marriage by their parents. The Bill that I tried to introduce in the last Session would have removed that exception, but, sadly, it fell.

The scale of the problem is very difficult to estimate, because many such marriages are clandestine. While fewer than 100 marriages involving children aged 16 and 17 are recorded in official statistics, the volume of calls received by charities such as Karma Nirvana and the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation, which support victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage, suggests that the true number is much greater. The majority of these girls do not consent to the marriage into which they are being pressured, but they cannot articulate that to their parents or access help. I have been informed that the problem has been exacerbated by the coronavirus, because the closure of schools has meant that teachers and trusted people cannot be, or have not been, accessed.

The harms of child marriage are significant. Victims of child marriage can expect to suffer from rape, domestic abuse, and controlling and coercive behaviour. They are frequently taken out of education early and isolated from their wider community. Those who are extricated from this situation experience considerable difficulty in improving their employment and earning prospects because of the lack of education. By contrast, the only cost of the proposition to stop this from happening would be to ask a small number of young lovebirds to wait a year or two before they commit the rest of their lives to each other. Compared with preventing years of exploitation and abuse of the most vulnerable girls, this is not a weighty consideration.

The benefits of our criminalising marriage under the age of 18 will be felt internationally. The UK is a leading country in women's rights issues, and I welcome the Prime Minister's very strong personal commitment to ensuring 12 years of quality education for girls across the world. In that global context, the exemption that allows girls aged 16 and 17 to marry with their parents' consent appears curious. Following the first Girl summit in 2014, the Department for International Development allocated up to £39 million to support global efforts to prevent child marriages. The UK also signed two international human rights conventions, which demand that signatories end child marriage in their jurisdictions, yet we in the UK permit child marriage, and that

undermines those international efforts. Furthermore, proposals to stop that happening would strengthen the Government's existing provisions on honour-based abuse and domestic violence.

Forced marriage was criminalised in 2014 and the Forced Marriage Unit established to protect those at risk. However, I have become aware through conversations with charities that the Forced Marriage Unit often feels unable to act in cases involving children, because the victims have been groomed to appear to be willing. A clear statement in law that children aged 16 and 17 can never consent to marriage would strengthen the hand of the Forced Marriage Unit and lead to the vulnerable being protected and criminals being punished.

Removing the child marriage exception in UK law would send a clear message to other countries, including Bangladesh, which look to our leadership on child marriage and the fact that it should not be tolerated. With the international aid budget cut, it would also be an efficient way for the UK to show global leadership on children's rights and girls' education. I am very disappointed that that opportunity was missed in the Queen's Speech, but there is a chance to do this with a Bill that is going into Committee, and I will be tabling amendments to it. If that fails, I shall table amendments on Report. I feel passionately that girls in this day and age need to be given the opportunity of education, of living a life and of getting married when they can choose at the age of 18 or later.

Although there are some very good things in the Queen's Speech and I look forward to supporting them through the House of Commons, I do believe that this is a wasted opportunity. I hope that the Government will look at a way to incorporate my embryonic Bill into another Bill so that it becomes law without any further delay.

2.10 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): If I may, I will take this opportunity to get something off my chest. One of the most consistent and intriguing aspects of my tenure as the Member of Parliament for St Helens North is having constituents and communities such as mine endlessly analysed and labelled, and sometimes even—God forbid—patronised, by politicians and commentators alike. Those designated and much-vaunted working-class northern communities, such as the one I live in and represent, are en vogue at the moment. There is what I call a single transferable speech—or pamphlet or article—doing the rounds about why the Conservative party has made gains in those sorts of places, and what Labour needs to do to win them back.

The problem for both parties, actually, is that the debate we are having and the terms we use have completely passed the people who live in those communities by. No one in St Helens thinks that they live in a wall—red, blue or otherwise—and they do not go about their daily lives feeling “left behind”. They do not understand what “levelling up” means—something I suspect they have in common with most Government Ministers—and they certainly are not the homogenous, lumpen proletariat that is their caricature. Most importantly, they are not stupid. They know that the rhetoric of what the Government say and do does not match the reality of their lives, with promises undelivered and their lot getting worse, not better, over the last 10 years. Thankfully, from the Government's perspective, I suspect there are

not even that many promises to break in this Queen's Speech. But neither are people in these communities turned on by rose-tinted nostalgia from those who patronise their past instead of offering anything for their future.

The last year has tested every citizen and community in our country. The impact on older people, who are more susceptible to the ravages of the virus, more isolated and often lonelier, has been tragic and obvious. But the impact on children and young people, and their families, has also been profound. Here is what we know. A fifth of children in my constituency now live in poverty, up by 25% on the figure recorded five years ago. The number of apprenticeship starts in St Helens has halved over the last five years. Disadvantaged pupils are now the following number of months of learning behind their peers: in early years, almost six; for primary school pupils, nine; and for secondary school pupils, a shocking 21. We have also had an 80% rise in unemployment for 16 to 24-year-olds in St Helens in the last year. Behind all those figures—this is a point I have made before—is a person, a family and a wider community.

That is a shameful record for the Conservative party after over a decade in power, but me just making another speech attacking the Government, however justified, will not change things, and it does not cut the mustard for the people I represent. Instead, what I, and political, community and business leaders in the St Helens borough and across the Liverpool city region, have done is to work together to support the ambition, creativity, resilience and vibrancy of our young people, by protecting the most vulnerable, ensuring opportunities for all and encouraging excellence while giving hope for the future.

That approach was endorsed last week when the Labour party in St Helens increased its vote by 15% and retained control of the council. It is why we have directly invested in young people now but are also planning for the longer term, from £750,000 on free school meals and record support for children's services this year, to a £200 million partnership with the English cities fund to radically regenerate our borough over the next 20 years. We have said that ensuring that children and young people have a positive start in life is the top priority for us. We have also said that we want to make St Helens the best place to live, work and visit in the north-west of England. Those are complementary and, I would argue, co-dependent aims.

The next generation need and want to know about our past—our proud traditions and heritage—but we have a responsibility to ensure that they realise that they, and we, have a future too, and it is theirs to build and shape.

2.15 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). He talks with great experience about his community, and I hope that I can do likewise for the community that I am proud to have represented since 2015. It is really important that we are opening this debate about young people and what we must do to ensure that we deliver a brighter future for the next generation. Although the pandemic has impacted all generations, it has had a huge impact on the youngest, and it is absolutely right that we look at how we can give them the opportunity to get some of the lost year back.

People tend to forget that for those around my age, this has been a difficult time but we will get that time back—it has almost been a time of hibernation—but for young people, a year of their life is a year when they develop, they are nurtured and they grow, and that cannot be given back. That is why we must do everything—we must put all the resources in—to ensure that we invest in young people to give them the skills that they may have lost in the past year. That is why I really welcome the Queen's Speech and its commitment to education, skills, and a lifelong requirement for people to be given that skill base.

I also want to touch on the reference in the Queen's Speech to the need to fix our housing problem, because that relates to younger people, and it always has done. For so many young people now, getting on the housing ladder is not something they aspire to; they think that generations before them had that opportunity and it will not be there for them. To me, that is a tragedy, not least since we on the Conservative Benches have always given people the dream, the aspiration and the incentive to work hard because we will reduce their taxes and give them a home that they can afford to own for themselves. Many feel that is out of reach, so I absolutely welcome the target to deliver more homes.

The target of 300,000 homes per year is absolutely right. That does mean that more homes will have to be built in areas of the country where people perhaps would rather not have them, but let me say this. I have pointed out on the doorstep, and I have had doors in my face as a result, that the house that is going to be built on the field adjoining the property whose owner I am talking to must be built because a young person needs the same opportunity as the person for whom their property was built on what was previously a field, so that every generation has the opportunity to own a home of their own. But with the housing must come the infrastructure, so that not just those moving to the area but those already in it have all the schools, the medical facilities and the roads that they require in order for productivity gains to be delivered across the entire community.

Again, I will reference my corner of the country, the south-east. It is notable that there has been a 19% increase in the population of the south-east, whereas in the corresponding period the population of the north-west has dropped by 6%, yet the spending per head on transport is exactly the same in both regions, at £370. That is evidence that there has been more house building in the south-east, but there has not been the spend on infrastructure. It is also notable that of all the major transport projects that are part of the Government's welcome £640 billion of investment in infrastructure over the next five years, only one is in the south-east.

My message to those on the Front Bench is that if we want to see more houses—and I absolutely do—in the south-east, including in my constituency, we need hundreds of them per year, to give young people in my constituency the chance of a home of their home. Can we also ensure that the infrastructure spend is focused on those areas that will deliver the houses, not the other parts of the country that might be a little more fashionable than Bexhill and Battle when it comes to politics these days?

In the two minutes I have remaining, I want to focus on another issue that has a huge impact on young people's lives: violence. The shocking increase in knife crime over the last five years is something that we in this

[*Huw Merriman*]

House have not spent enough time talking about. It is outrageous. There has been an 84% increase in knife crime since 2014, with almost 50,000 offences caused by a knife or bladed instrument in the last year. It has gone down a little in the last year, but we do not know whether that is a result of greater Government focus, which I have welcomed, or the lockdown. It is essential that the legislation promised targets those offenders who ruin people's lives, families' lives and, indeed, their own lives by the use of a bladed weapon. I want to see the Government come down hard on those perpetrators but also look at this from a health and a community perspective, to ensure that people know that they cannot continue to do this.

I also want to focus on the other end of the spectrum. We talk about the younger population, and social care reform will impact on the young who need social care, but I represent a population that is ageing. Their numbers continue to increase, and those people need more than just a few words and a commitment that proposals to reform social care "will be brought forward." They need the reform of social care to start this year. In the six years I have been in this place, we have talked a great deal about it, but we are not seeing the action. Successive Governments have not delivered the reform that is badly needed. I hope that this is the year when we find out what those proposals are and the Government start to legislate for it, because it is essential that older people are given dignity and care in their advancing years.

Finally, I will always implore the Government to remember that it is a question not just of legislating but of good legislation, given the unforeseen consequences that can come from good intentions but bad legislation. Let us ensure that we use the brains of this place and the other place to make legislation better and deliver a proper period of reform.

2.22 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate on the Gracious Speech, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (*Huw Merriman*). I pay tribute to all those across my constituency who have worked throughout the covid-19 pandemic to provide support to our children and young people. Early years staff, teachers and youth workers all kept working throughout the pandemic with such dedication in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, often fearful for their own health. Our local councils, Lambeth and Southwark, stepped in at key times to provide free school meals when the Government refused to fund them, and laptops and broadband access as month after month the Government dragged their feet.

Our children and young people have borne the brunt of the pandemic, missing out on learning, extracurricular activities and time with their friends. Their mental health has suffered, and the disadvantage gap in education has widened. Last year's exam scandal heaped yet more entirely avoidable misery on an already difficult year, with thousands of young people plunged into weeks of turmoil, with their dreams at risk, because of the Government's botched algorithm. This year's exam students have also been put through months of anxiety due to dithering and uncertainty about how they would be assessed. I met this morning with year 10 students at the

Norwood School in my constituency, who asked for urgent clarity on how they will be assessed in their GCSE and BTEC exams next year and how the Government will take account of the two years of disrupted education they have suffered.

Children and young people have been an afterthought for the Government throughout the pandemic. They must be the first priority for the recovery. We cannot allow the disadvantage and inequality exacerbated by the pandemic to define the future of this generation of children and young people, and that is not inevitable. With political will and resources, we can get our children and young people back on track, yet this Gracious Speech is simply not good enough.

In London, the vacuous phrase "levelling up" means no such thing. We have seen, time and again, the Government cutting the funding for our schools to make politically expedient funding choices elsewhere in the country. The full additional costs of the pandemic have not been covered for London schools and they now face a stealth cut in the pupil premium—a cynical change in the calculation date, which the Government hoped no one would notice. This will cost schools in Southwark £1.2 million, and it is a similar sum in Lambeth. It is utterly reprehensible to cut essential funding from the most disadvantaged children, wherever they live in the country. That is not levelling up; it is deliberately dragging our children down.

It is not only schoolchildren in London who are at the mercy of this Government's cynicism. There are no proposals at all for the desperately underfunded early years sector, and the Tories are scrapping the London weighting component of the teaching grant for higher education, too. This funding recognises the increased costs of delivering higher education in London. It improves access to higher education for lower-income students in London, wherever they come from in the country. This cut of £64 million will have devastating consequences for London's universities and those who choose to study at them. Once again, the Tories are levelling down London to the detriment of the whole country.

Children and young people in my constituency care passionately about our planet and about their peers elsewhere in the world. They know the importance of the UK's contribution through international aid to tackling climate change, global poverty and supporting women and girls across the globe. The children and young people in my constituency do not understand why the Government would choose to make swingeing cuts to aid during a global pandemic and a climate emergency, the consequences of which are being most severely felt by the world's poorest nations.

The commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on international aid was enshrined in law as the democratic will of the House of Commons, on the basis of a manifesto commitment that the British people voted for and have voted for time and again. Reneging on that commitment is not a matter for the Chancellor alone. It is a matter for this Parliament, so I ask the Minister to confirm whether the Government will bring forward legislation so that the many Members in this place who believe slashing UK aid to be profoundly wrong can vote against it.

Each one of our precious children and young people deserves a brighter future, but the meanness and poverty of ambition in the Gracious Speech will only let them down. They deserve a bolder and more ambitious plan

for our country than this meagre offering. I call on the Government to reconsider their cynical cuts to our schools, universities and councils in London and to international aid, and instead to equip, fund and empower our local communities to deliver for everyone.

2.27 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in the Queen's Speech debate, and I very much welcome the Government's commitment to protect the environment and invest in our new green industries to help us to reach net zero by 2050. I am very fortunate to represent a very green constituency. My constituency starts in Exmoor, goes down through the Blackdown hills, and down at Seaton we reach the sea on the south coast of Devon. It is a very beautiful constituency, which relies on a lot of farming, a lot of growing and a lot of tourism, so a green recovery is so important, and as we come out of covid, I look forward to the Government pursuing that.

In particular, I look forward to the return of the Environment Bill to Parliament. It will set a range of binding targets to be enforced by a new world-class Office for Environmental Protection. An interim OEP is expected to be operational by July. It is essential that we get that up and running as soon as possible so that it can lay the groundwork for the full body to be established.

The Bill also sets out ambitious targets for tree planting, which I welcome. I am keen to see what I describe as smart tree planting, which means planting the trees in the right places to maximise the benefits. For example, trees can not only capture and store carbon, but they also keep soil from eroding, and in the right places can form natural flood defences. We can achieve this by making sure we properly reward farmers for tree planting. It has to be financially attractive to them to ensure that take-up is strong and that we can deliver the trees we want to plant in this country. If we can properly join up agriculture and environmental protection, we will be able to protect and enhance biodiversity while maintaining a good level of food production.

It is not just action here in the UK that we need to take; we must look at our global footprint. It is right that the Environment Bill includes measures to protect the world's forests and to hold companies accountable for illegal deforestation they cause. The measure can be even stronger in two key ways. First, it must ensure that financial companies are also held to account and are not excluded from carrying out due diligence. The UK global deforestation footprint is coming not only from the products we buy as consumers, but from UK banks providing money to companies driving illegal deforestation in places such as Brazil and Malaysia. Secondly, indigenous peoples are often being exploited by corporations and in many cases are seeing their lands and livelihoods destroyed. I want us to protect these people by ensuring that their consent is obtained before any development takes place. Taken together, these measures will ensure that the UK has robust deforestation laws that we can be proud of and that set a high bar for the rest of the world to follow.

The final point I want to make is on air quality. Tackling climate change and cutting our carbon emissions is rightly a Government priority, but poor air quality is affecting people's day-to-day lives and has serious impacts

on their health. Poorer air quality is linked to an estimated 64,000 premature deaths a year. It was earlier this year named in a coroner's report as directly contributing to the loss of life for the first time. We need to improve air quality across the country, but it is a particular issue in our cities and big towns. I know that the Government have laid out targets for air quality in the Environment Bill, but I would like to see that go further. I would set more stringent targets, including, for example, bringing limits to the pollutant PM_{2.5} into line with World Health Organisation standards.

Overall, the Government are taking great steps to protect the environment and ensure a greener recovery from the pandemic. In hosting COP26, we have a prime opportunity to show global leadership on these issues. We can also move forward with ensuring that we have a good agriculture sector and a good horticulture sector and that we are producing high-quality, environmentally sound and animal welfare-friendly food. We can balance that with producing a very clean and green environment. I hope that the Government will take this opportunity to make our environmental laws as robust as possible.

2.33 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this hugely important debate and to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who led the debate for the Scottish National party earlier. She was absolutely right to frame her contribution against the backdrop of the SNP's stunning victory in last week's Scottish parliamentary elections—a victory that saw the SNP re-elected for the fourth consecutive term, with the most votes ever received by a party in a Scottish parliamentary election.

It was also a remarkable election, because it saw the Government party, after 14 years in power, increase its share of the vote and take seats from both main Opposition parties. It was an election in which parties standing unambiguously on a platform of allowing the Scottish people to decide their constitutional future in a referendum won a clear majority of seats in our Parliament. I hope and I expect that, having received just 22% of the vote for their ill-conceived "Vote Conservative to stop another referendum" campaign and now having had time to reflect on the scale of their defeat, the Tories will accept that there is no legitimate or democratic reason for them now to stand in the way of the will of the Scottish people when it is expressed by our Parliament.

Apart from the remarkable result, what was striking in last week's poll was the level of public engagement, with a record number of people turning out to cast their vote in those elections. These things do not happen by accident. It was the Scottish Government in 2014 who led the way by extending the franchise to include all 16 and 17-year-olds. More recently, I am proud to say, all refugees living in Scotland and foreign nationals with leave to remain were also added to the voters roll. As a result of extending the franchise and actively encouraging as many people who live in Scotland to have a say in the future direction of their country, we now enjoy a thriving, healthy and robust democracy.

It is telling, and indeed very worrying, that while Scotland builds that thriving, healthy and robust democracy, here this Government are trying to introduce the electoral integrity Bill—legislation which they will try to pass off

[Brendan O'Hara]

as nothing sinister but a benign attempt to eliminate voter fraud by getting people to turn up to polling stations and produce photo ID, but which we know is nothing more than a crude and transparent attempt to cleanse the register and disenfranchise millions of people, mainly from minority, disadvantaged or already marginalised communities. This is a shameful proposal—one that comes straight out of the Donald Trump alt-right playbook. First, conjure up a demon. Then, convince people that the demon poses a threat to them and that something has to be done. Finally, introduce draconian and totally disproportionate legislation to slay the demon that you have just invented. Before you know it, millions of people who you know would rather eat their own toenails than vote Conservative are removed from the electoral register.

What is most chilling about this is the transparency of it all—the fact that the Government do not even feel a particular need to hide what they are doing or why they are doing it. They know that it will not be the well-heeled, affluent middle classes who will struggle to produce a passport or a driving licence at the polling station. They know that disproportionately it will be the young, the poor, the marginalised and members of the minority communities who do not have a passport, or who do not drive, or who have not managed to pick up or register for their voter ID card who will be affected by the legislation. They know that in the UK between 2.5 million and 3.5 million people do not have photo ID, and they know that many of them will be added to the list of the 9 million UK citizens who are already missing from the electoral register.

Let me be clear: no one is saying that voter fraud is not a serious crime. Of course it is, and it has to be treated as such. No one is saying that those who commit such a crime should not be punished for it. Of course they should. But the fact is that voter fraud, particularly personation at polling stations, is such a rare occurrence that to have the Government legislate for it should set alarm bells ringing among those of us who believe that all Governments should be trying to remove barriers rather than to raise them.

Quite simply, there is no evidence whatsoever that voter fraud is a widespread problem in the United Kingdom, so why are the Government pursuing this venture to tackle a problem that even Ruth Davidson, of all people, admitted on “Peston” last night was virtually non-existent? Why would they seek to introduce legislation to make voting more difficult at a time when more and more people are electing to vote by post? The only conclusion one can draw is that this is not about protecting the integrity of elections at all—this is an exercise in voter suppression. The voter-suppressing electoral integrity Bill is something we would expect to see from the right-wing Republicans in the state of Georgia, not from this Parliament. Indeed, this anti-democratic piece of legislation has not gone unnoticed among civil rights groups in America: the Southern Poverty Law Center, Common Cause and the American Civil Liberties Union have all expressed concern that such measures are being imported into the UK. They can see that the Bill is nothing more than a crude tool of voter suppression. We can see it too. We know it is being introduced to slay a demon that the Tories invented, and to provide them with a fig leaf that they can hide

behind while they cleanse the register. It is wrong, it is fundamentally anti-democratic, and if they pursue it, we will oppose it at every stage in this House.

2.40 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to be speaking in this debate on the Gracious Speech, and I absolutely welcome the agenda for national recovery that the Government have set, but in that recovery we must not forget the south-west. Clearly the north needs help, but levels of deprivation are as severe in the south-west as they are in many parts of the north, and that needs to be taken account of. The rural areas need support, especially support on infrastructure and broadband, which should be focused on those areas currently most exposed in the rural heartlands of the south-west.

Two key planks of the Gracious Speech have been education, and health and care and our NHS. The proposed suite of legislation to deliver that world-class health and care is extremely welcome, but I believe that a number of issues have been missed. First, mental health clearly must have parity of esteem with physical health, but nowhere on the face of the health and care Bill is that clear. There is no provision for representation on the new integrated care system boards for those providing mental health services. That is a must. There are no provisions for measuring outcomes for mental health measures.

Secondly, covid has demonstrated beyond doubt that medicines and devices are as much a key part of delivering good health and care as doctors, nurses and hospitals, and yet they too are absent from this legislation. If we are talking about integration, it cannot be just about integrating health and care; it must be about integrating health, care and the provision of medicines and devices. We know that access to medicine and devices has been one of the most challenging issues generally, not just during covid, and unless we look at the commissioning arrangements in the new legislation and ensure that they relate to all four parts of the system—health, care, medicines and devices—we will sub-optimize, and will not deliver the health and care that people need and deserve.

Thirdly, the inclusion of social care in the Gracious Speech is very welcome, but we need to remember that it is not just about money, but about the system itself; and again it is about parity of esteem. Social care has for too long been the Cinderella service. That must change. We must see proper recognition. We must see a proper career structure. We must see training for those entering social care, alongside those entering our health system. Nurses must be able to transfer across and between those two systems; and the pay of both must be equal, transparent and fair.

We also have a very sensible focus on public health. I am delighted by the focus on obesity, which is clearly a key issue of our time, but I would suggest that there is more than obesity. We need to recognise the increasing interest that individuals have in purchasing all sorts of substances across the counter and from beauticians, pharmacists and other professionals, which at the moment are not regulated to the same level as a medicine would be. There is a committee under the auspices of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency—the Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances. Between

that Committee and the Food Standards Agency these sorts of substances are evaluated for their efficacy and also their safety, and in light of the Cumberlege report I suggest that the Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances and the FSA be reviewed to establish whether the systems they have in place are adequate for the increasing demand for these new substances, nutritional and otherwise. This is important and urgently needed.

Finally, I turn to the legislation proposed for victims of abuse, and again in the health context. These victims need all the support we can give them. At the moment their first port of call is very often the police, but the reality is that they would deliver far more valuable information and would get far better support in the context of general practice within our NHS system, yet at the moment no training is provided for GPs and there is no expectation that they should deal with this as a front and centre concern coming through their doors on a day-to-day basis. I am delighted that Devon has the only clinical commissioning group pilot with a lead officer on domestic abuse and sexual violence, but that should be rolled out. Such offences are best detected and treated within our general practice and within our NHS. That needs to be looked at urgently if we are serious.

The issues I have raised are crucial if we are to deliver a best-in-class health and care system. These issues need to be covered not in secondary legislation, but on the face of the upcoming series of legislative provisions, because what is legislated for will be done.

2.46 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): We all want a brighter future for the next generation, but the experience of this Government over the last 10 years—although they try to kid us that they are brand-new—shows an abject failure in support for our young, which the contents of this Queen's Speech do little to fix.

Levelling up should encompass intergenerational readjustment rather than simply reward gerrymandered Tory-voting territories. Coronavirus has been cruel to all of us, but its effects have been no more acutely felt than by the young. They are already reeling from the effects of an imbalanced housing market and stuck in precarious employment—generation rent now forced back into the bosom of the parental home; boomerang generation. With rocketing youth unemployment, an education system in disarray and a mental health crisis, all those natural expectations of youth in the carefree phrases, “You're only young once” and “Your lot will always be better than your parents’”, have been shattered. And in the middle of all this we have a Queen's Speech of missed opportunities and broken promises, viewed with disbelief by young people for whom, for instance, a flat of their own costing £200,000 might be something they dream of but who then see refurbishment by a Prime Minister in very questionable circumstances for the same price.

There is no renters' rights legislation here and no new cladding protections: so much for no one losing their home to covid—another discarded assurance from a Prime Minister “never knowingly undersold”. We all remember him lying down in front of the bulldozers to stop Heathrow expansion, but there is nothing here to combat climate change. It is the most important issue of

our generation and everyone's generation, and is particularly championed by the young, as we have seen with Greta Thunberg and the school strikers—although all schools have been away for the last year.

We have no employment Bill here to tackle zero-hours contracts that the young are so familiar with from the gig economy, and nothing to tackle the repugnant, immoral practice of fire and rehire that companies exploiting the crisis have been up to while we have all been distracted by the virus. There is nothing on child poverty. The sectors and working ways of the young have been hardest hit, such as hospitality and start-ups; they have been shafted and punished for their courageous forays into self-employment and freelancing. Some 3 million people have had no Government support for over a year because they fall between the cracks. At every turn of coronavirus, it feels as though the young have been an afterthought, forgotten or even sacrificed, as seen in the exams shambles of last year or the unhappy situation of undergraduates hoodwinked into paying full fees for a barely functioning student experience compounded by their usual lifeline of casual work being gone, too.

The artificial situation of millions of the young on furlough is another bubble soon set to burst when that is withdrawn as we lurch from cliff edge to cliff edge. Where is the commitment to the jobs of the future that Labour's green new deal would deliver or any kind of jobs guarantee? Instead, people are paying more and more to be less and less secure.

I must be getting old, because I am looking fondly at my own youth—I think we were called generation X in those days. We were able to benefit from Erasmus, which is no longer open to generation Y—now called the millennials—and generation Z, who instead have the inferior, more monoglot, distinctly Anglophile Turing scheme. It is a startling fact that nobody born after the year 2000—21-year-olds and everyone younger, which is a sector set to grow and grow—has had any say on Brexit, and they are the most opposed to it.

What do we get instead in this Gracious Speech? An imagined war on the woke, with solutions to non-existent problems. It is funny how the usual parroted line we get about casework on universities—they are autonomous institutions—is ignored for this so-called academic freedom legislation when figures show that the number of speaker events that it would apply to is less than 1%. In other words, it is more than 99% not needed. However, there is no action on student hardship, mental health support or education cuts.

I actually agree with the Scottish high Tory Ruth Davidson on a second non-existent problem, also mentioned by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), which I wish to identify—the Trumpian tactics of voter suppression via the need for photo ID. I believe the adjective she used on TV last night rhymes with Jackson Pollocks. We had an electorate of 47 million at the last general election. How many cases were there of personation—the thing this measure is meant to tackle? One solitary case. This is a youth issue, because they are the people less likely to have a driving licence. It is also an equalities issue, because black people and non-binary trans individuals are the kinds of people who will fall foul of it, and they are already over-represented in the 3.5 million voters who currently have no photo ID. Cut-to-the-bone councils already have enough on their plates to be dealing with that as well. We have seen how

[Dr Rupa Huq]

they have had to axe low-hanging fruit such as libraries and youth services. It is another wrong priority, and there is nothing at all for the biggest item of local government expenditure everywhere: social care. We were promised a clear plan—oven ready, I think it was. We have a demographic time bomb coming down the track, but there was nothing on that specifically. Life cycle means new generations. People my age are talked about as being the sandwich generation, caring at one end for offspring and, at the other, for parents.

Look, I want to end positively, so I will quote Dua Lipa from the Brit awards. Things are opening up and the vaccination programme is rolling out, but she identified another thing missing from the speech: an NHS pay rise. There is still time for that, and the Government could do it if they wanted. To really level up, we should look at intergenerational rebalancing and not just pitting people and regions against each other. The other thing that was missing was Dennis Skinner.

2.54 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), although I take a much more optimistic view of our country and this Queen's Speech. If there is one thing that the Labour party should consider from the results of the election last week and of the last general election, perhaps it is that the people of this country want their representatives actually to believe in their country and have a positive view of the future of their country. I think the voters have had enough of all this negativity and continual talking down of our country.

I count myself doubly lucky—if you will excuse the pun, Madam Deputy Speaker. First I consider myself lucky because I was born in Cornwall. If to be born British is to win the lottery, then as far as I am concerned to be born Cornish is to win the EuroMillions. Secondly, not only was I born Cornish, but I have managed to stay in Cornwall for all my life and to build a reasonable life for myself and my family while remaining there. Sadly, too many of my contemporaries did not have that choice; they had to leave Cornwall to fulfil their ambitions, and too many who chose to stay had to make compromises, reduce their ambition and miss many opportunities that other parts of the country take for granted.

One of the key reasons I got involved in politics in the first place was that I wanted future generations, such as my children and my grandchildren—I will reveal to the House that I will become a grandfather in just a few weeks' time—to have the opportunity to have a good job and a career, and to be able to stay in Cornwall. That is why I welcome many of the measures contained in the Queen's Speech. The Government's commitment to level up and strive for equality of opportunity across our country is at the heart of the legislative programme for this parliamentary Session, and I absolutely welcome that.

I want to mention three particular things. First, I am delighted to see the emphasis being placed on further education, which is so important to ensure that our young people and adults can gain the skills they need for the future jobs market. I welcome the lifelong skills guarantee, which will enable those who have sadly lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic to obtain the new

skills that they are going to need so that they can take advantage of the new jobs that are coming. That is a very positive step.

Secondly, job opportunities are essential for Cornwall. We need to create the well-paid jobs of the future. For too long, average wages and productivity in Cornwall have been among the lowest in the country. Average salaries in Cornwall are more than £10,000 a year below the UK average. I gently say to Ministers on the Front Bench and to the Government—no, in fact, I strongly say to them—that any plan to level up our country must have Cornwall at front and centre. It cannot just be about the north. I welcome the commitment to bring forward the UK shared prosperity fund, and remind the Government of clear commitments to Cornwall made by the Prime Minister and others—that we will receive a dedicated fund of similar quantum to that which we previously received through EU funding.

The new opportunities exist in Cornwall: the emerging space sector with Spaceport Cornwall; the development of lithium extraction; our ambition to have a gigafactory in Cornwall to manufacture batteries for our future electric vehicles; and renewable energy, particularly geothermal. Cornwall can become a real powerhouse of the future jobs in this Government's green growth ambition and contribute to our nation's prosperity, but we need the Government to back us in order to realise those opportunities.

The third point I want to mention is an issue that really needs urgent attention, and that is the growing housing crisis in Cornwall. It has been difficult for Cornish young people to be able to buy their own home for decades. The gap between our low wages and high house prices has been increasing for many years, but one of the results of the past year has been that it is now more difficult than ever; we have seen a staggering 140% increase in demand to buy property in Cornwall. In the first quarter of this year alone, there have been 15.2 million online searches for purchasing property in Cornwall.

I fully appreciate why so many people want to move to the most amazing part of the country to live in, but it is not a sustainable position for local people. Average house prices in Cornwall are now £311,000—an increase of £38,000, or 14%, over the past year. It is simply putting buying a house even more out of the reach of local young people.

I recognise the Government's desire to reform planning to make it easier to provide homes for the future, but we need to be cautious. There is great concern in Cornwall that making it easier for developers to build new homes will see vast swaths of Cornwall built over, changing the unique character and nature of Cornwall, and that these new homes will still be out of the reach of local people and will simply continue to fuel the second homes and buy- to-rent markets.

I am well aware that this is a complex challenge, but I would say to the Government that a one-size-fits-all national approach is not going to work for every part of the country. We need to find tailored solutions for places such as Cornwall, where demand far outstrips supply. Simply building thousands of new homes that only people from outside Cornwall can afford is not going to be the answer. Schemes such as Help to Buy, the new homes discount, the 95% mortgages and community housing trusts can all play an important part.

I want Cornish young people to have a bright future in Cornwall, to have a great education and a well-paid job, and to be able to buy their own home. Last week, the people of Cornwall put their trust in our party like never before. In a historic election, they elected a Conservative majority council for the very first time. The Queen's Speech contains many measures that will help us together to address these challenges. Cornwall is ready to level up. What we must now do is repay that trust and deliver the funding, support, investment and economic growth that the people of Cornwall need so that our young people can enjoy a prosperous future in the place that they love.

3.1 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) in this important Queen's Speech debate. A brighter future for the next generation—what better gift can we give to our young persons than the gift of determining their own future? Of course, in Scotland, we already offer the young adults in our country the right to vote, having extended the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. In the recent Scottish general election, and that across England and Wales, we saw parliamentary democracy in action. The people we on these SNP Benches represent in greater numbers than ever before made their views known. Scotland has spoken and our democratic will has been made abundantly clear. I am in no doubt that the strong voice of the Scottish people has echoed right through the heart of these Chambers and into the Government offices.

Scotland has had enough of being disrespected. Brexit was and is the final straw. While the recent election was different in many ways, the results in Scotland were once again the same. The UK Government's programme was roundly rejected, Tory ideology was rejected, and once again the good people of Scotland put their faith in us, the SNP, and returned Nicola Sturgeon as our First Minister. The SNP has been re-elected for a historic fourth consecutive term of Government in Scotland. The Scottish people have chosen to ensure that Scotland's future is firmly in Scotland's hands. The Tories must not, cannot and will not stand in the way of our democracy.

The last time Scotland let the UK Government take our sovereignty hostage, we were ripped from the European Union against our will. With that came uncertainty for the lives and livelihoods of everyone across these nations, but particularly for our next generation and their chance of that brighter future. Is it any wonder that our next generation in Scotland are completely fed up of Tory regimes and their overlords that they did not ask for, and certainly did not vote for? They are a generation fed up with the lack of accountability and lack of integrity of successive, continual Tory Governments, a generation who grew up hearing from the supposed Opposition that they were going to stop the Tories and going to win, in the hope that it might be less bad for Scotland, and a generation fed up with hearing their representatives who are sent here to these Benches being roundly ignored time and again and our democratic views and constructive suggestions to safeguard Scotland being utterly rejected. They are a generation who are fed up with a Prime Minister who simply bumbles from one ill-considered strategy to the next, leaving only a trail of woe in his path.

It is no wonder that recent polls from Ipsos MORI Scottish Political Monitor show huge support for independence among the young people of Scotland, with 79% of 16 to 24-year-olds and 68% of 25 to 34-year-olds now saying that they would support leaving this Union, for it is only a Union in name. They know that we are not on a two-way street but on an endless path of right-wing destruction.

The question therefore must be: why are the UK Government looking for any which way to block the wishes of Scotland's electorate and of new generations to have their say on Scottish independence? If the Government really wanted to reform the voting franchise that this place uses, why not empower young persons across the United Kingdom by extending the vote to them? Instead the Queen's Speech proposals in this area will lead only to further disenfranchising of the young people across these nations, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said.

With 16 and 17-year-olds now able to vote in Scottish elections, seeing many of our young people engaged and energised truly inspires real hope for our future. In the recent Holyrood elections, for the very first time, foreign nationals and refugees also had the right to vote and take part in our democracy. That is a tangible symbol of the inclusive country that Scotland is.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman could confirm that the majority of voters last week voted for parties opposed to a second independence referendum, and that therefore, if the Scottish Government respected Scottish democracy, they would realise that there was no such appetite.

Steven Bonnar: I thank the Minister for his contribution. It is worth noting that the SNP winning 62 first-past-the-post constituency seats is comparable to one of the UK parties—the Conservatives, Labour or the Lib Dems—winning 552 seats in this place. Would that be a mandate for a Government? Yes. I think I have answered the question.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically excellent speech. Does he agree that it is a remarkable achievement in our proportional electoral system to achieve the result that the Scottish National party did last week? In that proportional representation outcome, the proportion of Conservative and Unionist MSPs to Scottish National party MSPs was 1:2. The SNP achieved over twice the number of MSPs that the Conservatives did.

Steven Bonnar: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I think everybody in Scotland sees the results for what they are, everybody sees democracy in action in Scotland, and everybody sees the actions of this Conservative Government.

In this Queen's Speech, the Tory Government intend to introduce voter ID at Westminster elections. As has been said, that is a Trump-like action against the rights of refugees and others, and an utterly blatant form of voter suppression of those whose voices matter most, yet who are continually suppressed.

The Tories are repeating the same mistakes that they made after the last economic crisis, blighting young people's futures by forcing through damaging cuts and damaging policies that are threatening Scotland's recovery. Instead of building us all a fairer society to live in and

[Steven Bonnar]

to allow our youth to flourish, this Government are entrenching inequality and pushing people deeper into poverty by imposing a public sector pay freeze, cuts to universal credit and an efficiency review in the public services. Young people in Scotland want the opportunity to have their say on their own future, and the UK Government cannot and will not justify blocking them.

With that independence, Scotland would have the ability to become a more prosperous nation, holding the power to create bespoke and sustainable economic growth strategies. The SNP is already leading the way and showing us exactly what a progressive society in Scotland can look like. The Conservative Government do not offer free tuition; the Scottish SNP Government do. The Tories do not offer any child payment; the Scottish SNP Government do. The Tories do not offer a real living wage; the Scottish SNP Government do.

The Prime Minister and the Government he leads must respect the will of the Scottish people, who voted overwhelmingly to re-elect the SNP with a cast-iron mandate for a post-pandemic independence referendum. The Prime Minister must come to accept that the people of Scotland know that their constitutional status does not depend on the decisions of a supposedly sovereign Parliament here in Westminster, but lies on the wishes and the sovereignty of the Scottish people. This country cannot afford any more dithering and dodging by the Prime Minister.

We in Scotland were forced out, or dragged out of the European Union against our will, in direct contradiction, as I say, to the majority in our country. We in Scotland were totally neglected, of course, in the negotiations, with no regard to our interests or our future prosperity during the negotiations with our European counterparts, yet it is we in Scotland and it is our next generation of young people who will pay the price for the storm that is brewing. That is why the choice of the young people in Scotland has been made clear: the young people of Scotland, the electorate of Scotland, have chosen the SNP to represent them, they have chosen to take their future into their own hands, and they have chosen to be asked a question on Scottish independence.

3.10 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar). I am sure he is much more fun over a beer than he is in the Chamber right now, and I look forward to enjoying one with him next week, as we reopen.

Areas such as Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke had been forgotten, but this Queen's Speech reaffirms that, under this Prime Minister, we are delivering on the people's priorities and levelling up our United Kingdom. Like the geothermal potential that lies beneath the Potteries waiting to be unleashed in the green industrial revolution, Stoke-on-Trent is a hotbed of potential and talent. For levelling up to mean something in Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke, we need to make sure that people can get access to the skills they need and the opportunities to use them.

As a teacher, I saw the impact a good education can have, but, sadly, Stoke-on-Trent currently has one the lowest take-up rates of level 3 and 4 qualifications in the

country, with too many children not reaching their full potential. So the introduction of the skills and post-16 education Bill and the new lifetime skills guarantee is transformative, offering access to skills across the country that will allow people to reskill or upskill for the jobs of the future.

While education is crucial to levelling up, so too is the opportunity to access high-skilled and well-paid jobs in our local area. That is why I continue to campaign for the Home Office to make its second home in Stoke-on-Trent as part of the Places for Growth programme. I hope my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, a Keele University graduate and former Stoke-on-Trent resident, will hear my calls once again this afternoon and deliver for her adopted city.

We can also deliver jobs through the fantastic Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill in this Queen's Speech. The new agency ties in neatly with the campaign of Lucideon's chief executive, Tony Kinsella, whose global headquarters is based in Stoke-on-Trent, for £36 million of Government investment in an advanced ceramics campus, which would unlock £150 million of private investment and create up to 4,200 jobs. This campaign is being led by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), with the full support of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and me.

This Government are also investing millions in previously forgotten towns through the levelling-up fund and the towns deal fund, creating new jobs—all in the name of levelling up. Under a Conservative Staffordshire County Council, Conservative-led Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and a Conservative Chancellor, we have managed to secure £7 million of funding collectively, which will see this important community asset revived in 2022. In total, the £17.6 million towns deal fund for Kidsgrove is unlocking the opportunity to regenerate our high street, upgrade our railway station, create up to 2,000 new jobs at the Chatterley Valley site and invest in activities for young people, such as the 3G astro pitches at the King's School or the soon-to-be completed pump track at Chinky Park. That is in comparison with when Labour ran Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council from 2012 to 2018, when it spent the grand sum of £15,000 over six years. It is a Conservative Government, a Conservative county council and a Conservative borough council—all of them are blue—that are delivering for local people.

In the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, again we have legislation that delivers on what the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke want—tougher sentences for child murderers, tougher sentences for the sex offenders, tougher sentences for the killer drivers, tougher sentences for drug dealers and tougher sentences for knife carriers. It also adopts the private Member's Bill brought forward by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), introduced almost 12 months ago, which creates a distinct offence and punishment for anyone who desecrates war memorials and war graves to our glorious dead. How anyone can object to this baffles me, and I hope Opposition Members will have seen the recent local elections as a wake-up call and will now back the Home Secretary in passing this vital piece of legislation. I also hope that they will recognise that people want us to sort out the immigration system, and that they will back my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary as she brings forward

the new sovereign borders Bill. This legislation is positive, long overdue and important to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke.

What I have mentioned today is only a snapshot of a bold and ambitious domestic agenda. It is therefore a shame that the Labour party has adopted such a negative attitude to this Queen's Speech, but it is not a surprise. The Labour party is simply a party that represents the views and opinions of the few, not the many. In jest, I described it on BBC Radio Stoke as having become the party for the avocado-eating, chai latte-drinking elites, but I think that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) was much more succinct when he tweeted that the Labour party had become a "London-based bourgeoisie, with the support of brigades of woke social media warriors".

That is no better evidenced than by the former Labour leader of Amber Valley Borough Council, Chris Emmas-Williams, who said after his electoral loss:

"The voters have let us down."

That mentality shows that the Labour party has adopted a master and servant complex. The champagne socialists of north Islington carry on tweeting their ideology, violently denouncing anyone who does not agree with them, while Government Members proudly listen to and serve the hard-working men and women of this country—the silent majority who make our United Kingdom the best country in the world.

3.15 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis).

This year has been like no other for young people in Luton North. Last summer, when the Government nearly snatched away offers from the brightest kids in Luton, I met 16, 17 and 18-year-olds who felt that the Government were holding them back because they were seen as coming from the wrong town—because this Government saw them as coming from the wrong background. They felt as if they were a total blind spot for a Conservative Government who do not speak for them. I know what it feels like to be judged by what my parents did and what school I went to, and I do not want that for Luton's future, because we should take pride in our roots and pride in our town. I am optimistic about Luton's future, but I ask Ministers: when they talk about levelling up, why are they not talking about kids in Luton North?

Schools and parents have done everything they can over the past year. Challney High School for Boys reached out to provide digital support for parents. Chiltern Learning Trust continued its fantastic professional development of teaching staff. Lea Manor High School made sure that no child went without, and it purchased digital equipment when the Education Secretary fell short again. Lealands High School fiercely advocated on behalf of its students when there were mental health impacts from the exam chaos. Cardinal Newman Catholic School kept its pupils' minds and bodies active with a combined walk of over 11,000 km. Luton Sixth Form College provided additional support for its staff and students throughout.

Schools and parents work their socks off to provide the best future for Luton's children, and it is time the Education Secretary did the same. Our primary schools

and early years providers went above and beyond to ensure that life was as normal as possible for young ones, but it breaks my heart that they are forced to do as much to tackle the impacts of child poverty as to educate our children. They now provide the very basics, because this Government have failed. If a child is hungry, they are not learning. What kind of society is this, where a food bank in a school is now the norm? Where in this Queen's Speech was the plan to lift 4.5 million children out of poverty?

It is a shame that these children are not a priority for this Government, because they are for the rest of us. Every child deserves a bright start, and I will unashamedly fight for the ambitions of young people in Luton North to be met. In this Gracious Address, the Government seemed more obsessed with attacking students and student unions than with improving access to higher education for young people.

The postcode of where someone is born should never determine the opportunities that they get in life—if we are for anything as a Labour party, it is that. Why should a child in Luton North not have the same opportunities as a child who goes to Eton or Harrow? Contextual university offers and skills training offer a genuine chance to level the playing field. It is about who the student is, what they are capable of and what they know, rather than who they know. We need this to equalise the life chances of children between Luton and other parts of the country, or even between one end of Luton and the other.

Is any of us genuinely shocked that an arguably talentless Education Secretary wants to cut by half funding for teaching for those with real talent? Cutting support to the arts is economically, culturally and in so many other ways complete and utter nonsense. Before covid, UK creatives contributed almost £13 million to the UK economy every hour. Our artists' talents should be valued for their input to our culture, as well as to our economy.

Fantastic people at the Youth Network in Luton told me loudly and clearly that our arts and cultural sectors deserve to thrive, and they are absolutely right. If the Conservative party really thinks that our musicians, artists and performers should face 50% cuts to teaching, I say to any bands, artists, actors or DJs who are listening that I will back any campaign to charge Tory MPs 50% more when they try to get into concerts, theatres, galleries, festivals or even clubs.

This very thin Queen's Speech showed a Government failing to match the ambition of young people in Luton North, who want good, secure jobs with better rights at work; decent training and improved access to higher education; an end to inequality; and the ability to live happier, healthier lives in a place in which they can take pride. That is what we needed in this Queen's Speech. I am optimistic about Luton's future and I will be standing alongside young people, parents, charities and schools as we fight for a bright future for every child in Luton North. I hope that one day, we will get a Government who do the same.

3.21 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for affording me a few minutes to contribute to this Gracious Speech debate on a bright future for the next generation. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). This

[Henry Smith]

Queen's Speech very firmly laid the foundations for the next generation to build our country back better from the challenges of the covid-19 pandemic.

I start by welcoming the legislation to support our NHS and to make sure that it is the most innovative health service in the world, using the most up-to-date technology. When it comes to the future of education for our young people, and, indeed, for people of all ages, I welcome the announcement of the skills and post-16 Bill in the Queen's Speech. Just this week, I welcomed the fact that Crawley College, working with the Universities of Sussex and Brighton, had got to the next stage of introducing an institute of technology on its site.

I very much welcome the "building back safer" announcement in the Gracious Speech. As right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, the worrying rise in knife crime—particularly here in the capital—needs to be addressed, as does the scourge of county lines drug dealing, which is affecting my constituency and many others. I welcome the Government's commitment to increasing support and resources for law and order so that those issues are tackled, because young people are all too often the victims of criminal behaviour.

I greatly welcome the announcement of an Environment Bill, as it will secure the UK's place in the world as a global leader in the new green industrial revolution as we recover from the pandemic in a sustainable way. As chair of the all-party group for the future of aviation, I welcome the fact that British airlines last year committed to net zero carbon by 2050, and the Government have committed to the Jet Zero Council to ensure that we are at the forefront of technology to deliver on that.

I also wanted to mention the animal welfare legislation that was announced in the Gracious Speech. Again, I declare an interest, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare and a patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation. It was wonderful news when a fortnight ago, in the last Session of Parliament, the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill went on to the statute book. A whole raft of measures have now been announced in the Queen's Speech to deliver further on that animal welfare pledge.

The introduction of sentience into UK law is very important. Anyone who has grown up with animals or works with them knows that they are sentient beings, and it is vital that that will be enshrined in our legal system, with an animal sentience committee to ensure that the legislation is delivered in the best way.

I have campaigned for many years on ending live animal exports for fattening and slaughter. This incredibly cruel practice has been going on for far too long. Now that we have left the European Union and the European single market, it is possible for us to end this cruel trade, and I am delighted that that announcement has been made. This is a two-way process, and the Government need to do more to prevent cruelly produced products from being imported into this country. In the last Parliament, I spoke about the cruel practices involved in foie gras, including the force-feeding of ducks and geese to produce a fatty liver, which some people believe is a delicacy. The importation of that product should be banned, as should the importation of fur.

I welcome the announcement in the Gracious Speech of an international animal welfare Bill, which will strengthen measures against the importing of trophy hunting products into this country. In the last Parliament, I was pleased to sit on the Ivory Bill Committee. That Bill is now law, and we are going further still.

Domestically, I welcome the legislation announced in the Queen's Speech to ban puppy smuggling. That practice causes great distress and ill health to many animals, and it is a fraud often perpetrated on people who want to provide a loving home to a pet. It is important that that matter is addressed. I welcome the establishment of the pet theft taskforce, which the Government announced the other day. Pet theft is a horrible crime whereby pets who are much-loved members of families are taken, causing great distress. I also welcome the introduction of mandatory microchipping for cats, as is the case with dogs, so that lost pets have a much better chance of being reunited with their owners. This Queen's Speech represents a solid foundation for future generations, and I commend it to the House.

3.28 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important topic. The Queen's Speech is an important date in our calendar, but, sadly, this Queen's Speech was another missed opportunity to deliver the transformational change needed to enable every young person to reach their potential. It lacks ambition and is hardly the radical change we need to build back better or level up.

The proposed legislation laid out in the Queen's Speech does little to address the issues that threaten future generations: poverty, inequality, unemployment, debt, poor education, low skills, mental health strains, high costs of living and, crucially, an impending climate and ecological crisis. The returning Environment Bill is insufficient to tackle the climate emergency. I have concerns that it will not prevent regression on environmental standards as we leave the EU, especially with regard to air quality, waste management and the use of pesticides.

The proposed introduction of voter ID will disenfranchise and marginalise young people, alongside black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, by creating additional barriers to voting. The Government's failure to include the much-anticipated employment Bill will mean that when future generations enter the workforce, they will continue to be exposed to poor pay, insecurity, inequality and damaging and immoral fire and rehire practices. In Wales, we have done better and there is a lot the UK Government can learn from us. We are the only country in the UK to have a wellbeing of future generations Act, which places a legal obligation on all public authorities to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic wellbeing. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 includes seven wellbeing goals, which all policies should work towards. They are prosperity, resilience, health, equality, building cohesive communities, being responsible globally, and encouraging the vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language. Therefore, the need to protect future generations is in Wales embedded in law, and that has made sustainable development the organising principle of government. That means that the needs of the present should be met without compromising the needs of future generations, and the UN has described the Act as "world-leading".

The legislation is cross-cutting and underpins all the work of the Welsh Government. It has contributed to the introduction of bold, progressive and radical initiatives in Wales, such as the declaration of a climate emergency; the retention of the education maintenance allowance; a new, innovative school curriculum; free school meal provision for all school holidays up to and including Easter 2022, and a Bill that enables 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in Welsh elections, which they did for the first time last week. Under the leadership of Mark Drakeford, the newly elected Labour Government in Wales have committed to continuing this good work, which seeks to secure a brighter future for the next generation, including through a guarantee of an offer of work, education, training or self-employment for young people; a new framework for youth services in Wales; 125,000 all-age apprenticeships; a real living wage for social care staff; the enactment of the social partnership Bill; and the abolition of the use of single-use plastics.

Despite our progress, decades of underfunding and austerity imposed by successive UK Tory Governments continue to impact negatively on that good work. The Welsh Government budget set by the Treasury here is still lower per head in real terms than it was in 2010. The UK Government's attempts to bypass the Senedd with levelling-up and community renewal funding exposes their contempt for devolution and their lack of understanding of the real priorities for us here in Wales. The process is a complete shambles. Funding is limited and not properly targeted, and it excludes some deprived areas. To quote Jeremy Miles, the Counsel General, "this UK Government has an appalling record on providing Wales with even a fair share of UK spending, let alone the kind of funding needed to 'level up'".

This Government could have gone a lot further and followed the lead given in the alternative Queen's Speech by introducing a wellbeing of future generations Bill, a real living wage Bill, a climate and ecology Bill and the social security Bill. So it will come as no surprise that I am supporting amendment (a), tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), which calls on the Government to bring forward a climate and ecological emergency Bill; amendment (c), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), which calls for a people's green new deal Bill to provide a state-led programme of economic transformation with a green jobs revolution; and amendment (f), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), which calls on the Government to bring forward a Bill to introduce a progressive tax system, taxing the wealthy, and a windfall tax on companies making super-profits. The late Dr Imtiaz, once mayor of my constituency, Cynon Valley, sent me a Christmas card some years ago and it said, "We do not inherit the world. We only borrowed it from our children." We need to be sure that we leave it in a better place, for my children and yours.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next speaker, the time limit will reduce to five minutes, but it remains the same for Flick Drummond.

3.34 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I do not think that I have ever talked for more than five minutes in the Chamber, but I will see what I can do.

I am delighted to contribute to this debate on the Queen's Gracious Speech. The next generation is crucial for the future of our country, so I am very pleased that the Government have made it a major focus. It is such a pleasure to be part of this dynamic Government, with far-reaching policies that are changing the country for the better. The skills and post-16 education Bill is a great chance to upskill our country, as is the lifetime skills guarantee, so I look forward to working with further education colleges and local employers in Meon Valley on providing opportunities. The kickstart scheme, which is another great policy that we have introduced to help young people into work, has already been taken up by many organisations and is a success.

I am particularly interested in education, having worked as an Ofsted lay inspector, having been a school governor for many years, and of course as a parent. It is one of the reasons I pursued a political career, because, sadly, politics comes into education. I first want to praise all our school staff, who have worked so hard during the covid pandemic, and pay tribute to the leadership of every headteacher. They have had to work very hard in difficult circumstances, and I have listened carefully to all their views in Meon Valley.

Headteachers are now focused on helping every pupil catch up, and I am pleased that this is also a focus of the Government. We are rightly considering extending the school day to help young people catch up, but we must ensure that the additional time is used to broaden their education in the long term, and retain a longer day after the immediate challenge of covid recovery. I know that teachers welcome that as an opportunity to bring in outside specialists in areas such as the arts, music and sport, to name but a few.

Covid has also given us a chance to relook at our educational assessment system. I do not believe that we have the right assessment system in England for the modern day. The Secretary of State has kindly listened to my views, which I set out in a One Nation Conservatives paper, "The Future of Education", which I wrote alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory)—she wrote about early years education. I cannot say that the Secretary of State agreed with everything I wrote, but I hope that he might listen in future.

Our educational assessment system is no longer fit for purpose. It is not helping young people who want to succeed through vocational courses. Many vocational courses, such as apprenticeships and T-levels, are not seen as being as important as academic ones. But if they were all put into a different assessment system, such as an all-encompassing national baccalaureate at 18—although I hope we would call it something else—parents, teachers and young people themselves would be more likely to push for qualifications that fit the person, rather than pushing them in directions they might not be keen on. I welcome the work that the National Baccalaureate Trust is doing on this, and I hope that everyone with an interest in the matter will engage with its consultation.

We must ensure that this is seen as an opportunity to level up vocational and academic subjects, and help end the negative perceptions about vocational and technical education. For instance, on GCSEs, why are we still spending valuable education time on doing exams at 16 when young people stay in education or training until 18? We need an education system that provides a

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

wide-ranging curriculum from 14 to 18, and that enables young people to achieve their goals with recognition that their achievement is on the same path as others.

One issue that really struck me when visiting a further education college was the high percentage of young people doing maths and English GCSEs over and over again, failing each time but unable to move on until they passed them. We do need qualifications and examinations, but there are much better ways to assess people than allowing them to fail in an area that is not suited to them. We all know that education is the way out of poverty, but it does not have to be an academic education; it should be an education that is seen as valuable to employers and, more importantly, life chances.

My request to the Minister is to please listen to the many educators working in this field. Our levelling-up agenda is going to transform this country, and education will be part of that. I am incredibly excited about the future of this country. It is very clear from the Queen's Speech that this Government have the right policies, and I am looking forward to delivering on our promises.

3.39 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This Queen's Speech could have been an opportunity for the Government to show real leadership on the challenges that face not only current generations but the generations to come. Instead, it has been a lost opportunity. This Government are good at making promises, but they are poor on delivery. They scrapped the green homes grant and cut grants available for people to buy electric vehicles. Currently, it is predicted that we will not meet the fourth and fifth carbon budgets and that the UK will fail on 14 out of 20 biodiversity targets. Unquestionably, the Environment Bill, which has been delayed without explanation, must be brought back to Parliament as a matter of urgency, and it needs to be much stronger. The Bill needs to include a strong Office for Environmental Protection that has the powers and the resources needed to hold the Government to account on their climate promises, and legally binding interim targets so that the Government cannot continue to delay.

The climate and ecological emergency has the potential to be even more devastating than covid-19. In just under 30 years, we need to cut our carbon emissions worldwide to net zero. It may already be too late to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5° C. Given the promise that the Prime Minister made only a few weeks ago to bring forward the 2050 target for curbing emissions by 78% to 2035, why does the Queen's Speech propose no Bill to reflect that promise? Adopting a Bill specifically designed to cut most emissions by 2035, thereby mitigating the worst effects of climate change in the next decade, would set the UK up as a trailblazer at COP26. It would make the UK the first UN country to have such legislation, but it is not there—a missed opportunity.

While the Government should not lose focus on our national targets, we need to recognise that climate action begins at local level. Many local authorities, including my council of Bath and North East Somerset, were quick off the mark in declaring a climate emergency. Government must work with local authorities to ensure that net zero development frameworks are included in the net zero strategy, and that should be enshrined in law. We should empower local authorities so that they

can deliver green transport, homes, energy, infrastructure and waste management. Local authorities are best placed to understand the needs of their community, and they will be critical in delivering effective, coherent change on the ground.

Climate change is not tomorrow's problem, but consecutive Governments have failed to take meaningful action because its worst impacts stretch beyond the average election cycle. Issues that will have widespread consequences are too often neglected and matters that seem more immediate and are easier to see are favoured.

If the Government were serious about a brighter future for the next generation, they would support a wellbeing of future generations Bill. From climate change to nuclear proliferation, from risks from future technologies to future pandemics, we need to foresee and plan for growing risks so that we are properly equipped to tackle them. That would ensure that future Governments publish a long-term vision for a better UK, as well as a national risk assessment looking forward over the next 25 years, after every general election. An Act dedicated to safeguarding the wellbeing of future generations would set a gold standard for ensuring that preventive safeguards are in place before it is too late. After all, the experience of the covid pandemic has taught us that crisis prevention is even more important than crisis management.

This Queen's Speech is more than disappointing. We need a bold vision for this country that is long term and radical. We need a Government who are honest with the people—who stop making empty promises and instead deliver.

3.43 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Like many in this place, the last couple of weeks have given me the opportunity to speak to and listen to the views of my constituents. It is clear that levelling up and achieving a one nation recovery to the past year's events is on people's mind. In Keighley and Ilkley, and right across the country, people have yet again put their faith in the Conservatives to deliver that. I am pleased to welcome Julie Glentworth, Mohammed Nazam and Peter Clarke to our local team of Conservative district councillors, and to see Russell Brown re-elected to represent Worth Valley.

This Government have delivered a Queen's Speech that puts levelling up communities such as Keighley and Ilkley at its very heart. Levelling up is not just about pitting the north against the south or moving jobs from one city to another; it is about delivering solutions that will rebalance the economy towards communities such as Keighley and Ilkley, and bringing change that everyone in the United Kingdom will be able to see positively—a range of opportunities, a fair chance, and the ability to grow and thrive in a direction of their choosing.

Levelling up has been one of my key priorities since I entered this place. That is why I am proud to be parliamentary co-chair of the Levelling Up Goals campaign, alongside the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). Levelling Up Goals is a cross-party campaign that has identified 14 goals, ranging from strong foundations in early years to closing the digital divide. The goals will make levelling up a reality, not just a slogan, and will provide measurables for how policy will have a direct impact on making places such as Keighley—those classic forgotten-about locations—better

places to live, work and thrive. I am delighted that the Government have shown, through the Queen's Speech, that we are passionate and keen to deliver that.

Building the right infrastructure is key to expanding opportunities for my constituency. No matter how big or small the project, they are all very important. Take the footbridge between Silsden and Steeton. For far too long, there has been no pedestrian link between those two places; instead, people must cross a four-lane dual carriageway, with traffic coming in both directions. To many in this place, delivering a footbridge may seem a small project, but it is not small to those two communities, which want better access to their local train station in Steeton.

I am determined that the Government will also deliver on bigger schemes, such as the Skipton to Colne line, getting better connectivity from Silsden and Keighley to the west of the country. The national infrastructure plan outlined in the Queen's Speech will make such projects a reality.

Good health and wellbeing for residents in places such as Keighley and Ilkley is also a key part of the levelling-up agenda. Airedale Hospital is a community asset in our constituency. It has served the people of Keighley for many years—in fact, this year it has its 51st birthday—yet it was built with a life expectancy of 30 years. Three quarters of the hospital is built from aerated concrete, which is known for its structural deficiencies. Airedale Hospital needs and deserves a rebuild. That will ensure that my constituents get the best-quality healthcare that they deserve and will level up the whole community. It will be a great construction project that delivers jobs for my community.

In the past few months, the pandemic has been extremely tough for my constituents—on top of the three national lockdowns, they have been living with enhanced local restrictions since July—yet we in this place owe it to the entire next generation to ensure that their life chances are not defined by the pandemic. Levelling up and ensuring that young people have the right advice, open recruitment and fair career progression is crucial to ensuring that, and I am absolutely keen on delivering that. I commend the hard-working efforts of all the headteachers right across my constituency, and I must congratulate Jon Skurr, the headteacher of University Academy Keighley, who was recently recognised as headteacher of the year in our community.

I am proud that this Government have levelling up at the heart of their agenda, and I am pleased that the Queen's Speech was able to deliver that.

3.48 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). I share many of his sentiments about the Gracious Speech. There is much to welcome in the measures outlined, from those relating to our armed forces to those on refugees and our youngest children, but time requires us all to focus on a few key points. Today's theme is very much thinking about future generations, so my points will be specifically in that area.

First, there is a need to provide certainty for the future about a plan for social care. Although I have heard a good deal of criticism of the Government in recent days, all of us who are familiar with the social

care system will recognise that the solutions are not necessarily ones that require new laws. For example, the way in which we approach the funding and structure of the sector and the work between the NHS and local authorities do not require new laws.

However, what we do know—I am very pleased that the Government recognise this—is that our local authorities have consistently, in the work that we have already done on reforming the social care sector, been the most efficient at using the resources available, because they know their communities best. As we think about the future of social care in our country, it is absolutely vital—given that only a small part of the sector's work relates directly to what happens in the NHS—that we make that resource go as far as possible, so we need a council-led system that places people and communities at its heart, and I look forward to hearing the proposal that the Government are working on in that area.

The second area in which I am thinking very much about future generations is securing homes—home ownership and access to social housing and rented homes—for the generations that are to come. I very much welcome the fact that the Government have recognised that one size does not fit all across our country in this respect. It is important that we reduce the burden of national guidance, which leads to developers seeing sites as investments to sell on, rather than serving the interests of the community by building new homes. It remains my view that making the local authority decision final and ending the cycle of appeals and lobbying would see those homes delivered much more swiftly. However, it is really important that the freedoms and provisions that have been outlined in respect of forward planning and zoning are used by our local authorities, and that we focus not just on absolute numbers of units, but on the types of units, so that in communities such as Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, we see the development of more downsizer units so that communities can remain intact while we improve the supply of family-sized homes in a local area.

Moving on to the skills and post-16 education Bill, as someone who has spent much of my life in and around the education sector, I enormously welcome the provisions that have been outlined, and in particular, the flexibility to move away from a situation where it could feel like all or nothing at school-leaving age to one where, throughout their lives, people can continue to access the support they require to retrain and develop. The early years health development review, which I have been involved in, is again a fantastic opportunity to build on the work done by local authorities and local NHS providers to transform the life chances of young children and ensure that they get the start in life that sets them up for a bright future.

Finally, preserving nature and wildlife is close to my heart and to the hearts of many of my constituents in Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, which is a key part of the green lungs of our capital city and an important destination for leisure. I particularly welcome the proposals in the Bill on animal welfare. My constituents have expressed significant concerns that some of the elements would reduce the ability of conservation projects abroad to raise funds through charging people for hunting as part of their herd welfare and management activities. I am pleased to see that the proposal seems to strike a better balance between ensuring that hunting continues

[David Simmonds]

to make an economic contribution to conservation—transforming the resources available to support animals that would otherwise be risk—and enhancing the protection afforded to endangered species, which my constituents and I very much want to see.

There is a huge amount to commend in this Queen's Speech, and I associate myself with the support expressed for it across the Conservative Benches. I look forward to seeing the proposals implemented and making a difference to the lives of the people I am here to serve.

3.53 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), a fellow member of the Education Committee. It is also a pleasure to speak again in a Gracious Speech debate. The last time I did so was for my maiden speech, so at least it is slightly less nerve-racking this time around. I spent 16 years running organisations for young people before I became an MP in December 2019, so today felt like the right day for me to speak, on a brighter future for the next generation.

I start by welcoming what the Queen's Speech says about the importance of early years. It is right that we try to give children the best possible start to their lives. I do not think that is enough by itself, and I am reminded of what Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children's Zone says: "What is it you need to create escape velocity for a child that propels them through the rest of their lives?" I think early years is very important; I do not think that they take care of everything by themselves, but I welcome the Government's recognition of their central importance.

Secondly, I welcome the Government's focus on catch-up, because the closure of schools has had a profound impact on educational progress and mental health, which will take years to repair. I suspect that public debate will focus much more on how the economy is doing and what is happening to NHS waiting lists—both are vital—but I hope that we keep a focus on what has happened to children and young people and how we can repair the damage done through the closure of schools.

I very much welcome the commitment to a lifetime schools guarantee in this Gracious Speech. Countries that succeed tend to invest in skills and the policy will benefit potentially 11 million adults. That is welcome, and the further education White Paper is a recognition by this Government of the effects of the last Labour Government's focus on 50% of young people going to university. I supported many young people to go to university in my previous life and understand why it is so important and valuable for young people, but it led to a neglect of the more than 50% who did not go and suggested to them that if they were not part of that target being achieved they had somehow not succeeded. It is right that the Government are now devoting more time to those who do not go to university.

Here I would also bring in race and ethnic disparities. Two thirds of the young people that I worked with in my last job were from ethnic minorities because we focused on low-income households, and we saw those disparities across education and employment. Different ethnic groups performed very differently at GCSE and A-level and in rates of university attendance—particularly at the most selective universities—and the groups that

did well in education might not do anywhere near as well in the labour market. The unfairly maligned report from Dr Tony Sewell and the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities is full of data outlining this position and good recommendations that we should be focusing on to try and close some of those gaps.

That brings me on to my final point. These issues are, of course, very important for Government, and Government have a key role to play in what happens to the next generation, but this is not just a job for Government. What parents do, and what schools and colleges do, matters. We need universities to stop charging high fees for low contact time and poor graduate outcomes. We need our employers to invest in skills, and not just leave that to Government; we need them to provide work experience and internships and traineeships and apprenticeships and good jobs for young people, not work experience that only goes to the relatives of employees and clients, or unpaid internships, or focusing on recruiting people who are polished rather than those who have the most potential. If it was just a job for Government, then one well-designed Bill that we passed in this House would solve the problem, but it would have happened by now if that was the case. We need everybody who can play a role—individuals, charities, social enterprises, businesses, universities, schools and so on—trying to create a better future for the next generation, but I am hugely pleased that Government are committed to doing everything they can.

3.58 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this Queen's Speech debate on the theme of a bright future for the next generation, and I am particularly delighted as parliamentary patron of the YMCA. North Staffordshire YMCA in my constituency has recently received the Queen's Award for Enterprise for its outstanding work in promoting opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to aspire to and access, and I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our congratulations.

I have spoken often in this place about Stoke-on-Trent as a city with a big heart and a vision for the future, and this is captured in our love of STEAM—that is to say STEM, or science, technology, engineering and maths, plus art. It dates back to our very own Josiah Wedgwood, who in the 18th century performed the ultimate alchemy—a blend of science and art—to produce world-class ceramics.

More recently, the city was birthplace to the man whose planes won the battle of Britain, typifying STEAM. We all know how beautiful the Spitfire looks, as well as being a remarkable feat of engineering of its time. When he left Hanley High School, designer Reginald Mitchell worked as an apprentice at a local locomotive engineering works while also studying engineering and mathematics at night. With our lifetime skills guarantee, we will be encouraging a new generation of learners to grow their knowledge as the world of work and the job market changes.

From the heavy industries of the past to the advanced technologies and digital innovations of the future, Stoke-on-Trent is evolving, and the investment in our city-wide full-fibre network has paved the way for the next chapter of STEAM opportunities for future generations. A local entrepreneur said to me that when he went to school careers advice, they simply focused on getting a job—any job. The main thing was finding work to pay

the bills. Now the choices are far greater and more accessible to those who may not have flourished in the more traditional educational environment.

Many new industries and creative businesses are built on intuitive digital and media skills and aptitude, rather than formal qualifications. Parents who have worked in traditional industries may find it difficult to appreciate the exciting new career paths in the digital industries and their transferable skills. Some of the most successful businesses in the past year have been online businesses. We know that gaming is not just a hobby, but a pathway to great careers.

STEAM is important because it blends our heritage with our future—our heritage and creativity maintained today as the world’s capital of ceramics; and our future, which develops the limitless possibilities with ceramics as an advanced material and our ambition to be the most digitally advanced city in the UK, enabling a new generation of creative innovators to start and grow their businesses close to home. We have an advanced ceramics campus in the university quarter, as well as the roll-out of the “Silicon Stoke” strategy, which has been championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and will deliver great opportunities for the next generation. I will continue to ask for Government support for these projects.

STEAM acts as the glue cohesively to bring together infrastructure, education, skills and jobs with a vision for the future as Stoke-on-Trent continues to grow in ambition and capability. The city council’s recently published prospectus articulates the vision clearly, and through the STEAM agenda we will be powering up the city and steaming ahead with the delivery of our vision, which will position Stoke-on-Trent as the hub for new infrastructure, new skills and new jobs, and the new future.

The city’s history is as a transport hub through our canals and railway networks. Our plans reintroduce railway links, improve bus services and reconfigure routes citywide, which will future-proof Stoke-on-Trent as a great place in which to invest, to work and to enjoy a better quality of life, underpinned by our ambitious plans for digital connectivity and to be a gigabit connected city.

Stoke-on-Trent has experienced the third-fastest job recovery of any UK city, with pre-pandemic levels increased by 17%. We need to ensure that our young people have the right skills to fill vacancies in this new world of remote and flexible working. Those leaving full-time education should be able to stay in our city—a city full of enterprise, innovation and culture, where house prices mean they can aspire to owning a new first home.

Stoke-on-Trent is on the up and is levelling up. It is a vibrant, creative city that is experiencing a renaissance thanks to the investment of this Government, which will ensure a brighter future for the next generation.

4.3 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon). This week’s Queen’s Speech sets out a bold agenda to deliver on the vision to level up across our country with an ambitious programme to unlock the pent-up potential and talent lying within all our constituents as we emerge from the covid-19 pandemic.

I wholeheartedly support the Queen’s Speech, and in particular I support the Bills within it that will help to support some of those who have suffered most from the pandemic, including students who have missed out on education and individuals who have lost jobs and need to find work. The agenda on levelling up the education and skills offer available to our constituents is possibly one of the most important aspects of this Government’s programme. The skills and post-16 education Bill, which I welcome, will bring in the new lifetime skills guarantee, which will give everyone the chance to acquire new expertise at any stage of their life, so that they have the skills that employers need. The Bill will transform access to skills across the country, to ensure that people can train and retrain at any stage in their life, supporting them to move into higher-quality, higher-skilled jobs and equipping the workforce with the skills that employers need.

The focus on education and skills is hugely welcome, especially for my constituents in beautiful Hastings and Rye. This amazing constituency, my home, is located in the affluent south-east but suffers from some of the deepest deprivation in the country. Hastings is slipping further down the levels of deprivation, and is now the 13th most deprived out of 317 local authorities, based on the 2019 indices of multiple deprivation. In East Sussex, nine out of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods are located in Hastings and St Leonards. Baird ward, for example, is still among the most deprived half a per cent. in the whole country. It makes me angry to see these levels of deprivation becoming increasingly worse, after years of a Labour-controlled borough council. I am utterly delighted that in last week’s local elections the residents of Baird elected Conservatives at both borough and county elections. Our residents deserve better, so we will give them better, because we believe in levelling up, not driving down.

This Conservative Government are committed to developing opportunities for everyone at every place across the country, to fulfil their potential, to excel. As such, I was proud to stand on a manifesto commitment to level up, boosting jobs, driving growth and innovation, increasing opportunity for everyone, and ensuring that everyone has access to excellent public services, regardless of where they live.

I would like to take this stand for parts of the south-east such as Hastings and Rye, which must not be overlooked when it comes to levelling up. Yes, it is absolutely right that those in parts of our country neglected by Labour politicians and taken for granted for generations are given the opportunities and investment, but we cannot overlook parts of the south-east that are also in desperate need of investment in education and skills, transport infrastructure, connectivity and job opportunities. We simply must not neglect nor take for granted our core support; if we do, we are no better than the Labour party.

Turbocharging our economic recovery in every part of our country, increasing and spreading opportunity is vital, and I therefore welcome the landmark levelling up White Paper, which will set out bold new policy interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunity in all parts of the UK as we recover from the pandemic, grasping the opportunities of Brexit. The Government are right: a one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and nurturing different types of economic growth and building on the different strengths that different places and different towns have is vital.

[Sally-Ann Hart]

At a recent meeting with my local Federation of Small Businesses, its members were delighted, as am I, to find out that employers are being placed, and utilised, at the heart of the post-16 skills system, through the skills accelerator, enabling employers and providers to collaborate to develop skills plans aimed at ensuring that local skills provision meets local needs.

I welcome the investment in road and rail, and again would harp on about HS1: we really need that for connectivity. With this Queen's Speech, and the ambition, aims and legislation of this Government, we have much to look forward to and a bright blue future.

4.9 pm

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the Gracious Speech and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart).

As a new MP, I have seen at first hand just how committed this Government are to uniting and levelling up across the country. Here in Burton, since my election we have already received £750,000 pounds towards regenerating our high street, and are just about to start public consultation on our £22 million town investment plan. In Uttoxeter, discussions are under way regarding what we want see for the future of the town. We are also looking at how we might make best use of the £20 million levelling-up fund to invest in our community. These huge investments from the Government will help us to build back better after the difficulties we have faced throughout the last 12 months.

It is clear that if we want towns such as Burton and Uttoxeter all across the country to prosper and flourish in the long term, we must make sure that the next generation have access to the skills and education they need to help them succeed. Burton is fortunate. We have a low unemployment rate, which is testament to the hard-working nature of my constituents. However, businesses have reported a skills shortage, and a legacy of low skills in Burton means that the resident workforce are under-represented in high-paid, higher-skilled jobs.

We have more schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted than the national or regional average, but a lower percentage of students attaining good GCSE or A-level results. The lifetime skills guarantee must offer educational options that engage our children and give everyone the chance to train, particularly those who want to look outside of the traditional classroom route. JCB Academy in Rocester is a great example of how we can develop the engineers and business leaders of the future by offering a curriculum that is embedded in real industrial practice.

Burton's town investment plan recognises the skills gap that currently exists and sets out to address the challenges faced by the town. The creation of new learning facilities through Burton and South Derbyshire College and the University of Wolverhampton will provide: higher educational skills and training that responds to the need for clear progression routes; a health and social care realistic environment that will offer simulated learning for those on health and science pathways; and a digital hub that will offer learning facilities for creative digital learning, games development, mechatronics and cyber-security.

The next generation—our children—are going to be faced with some tough problems to tackle. How do we change manufacturing methods to reduce greenhouse gas emissions? How do we feed an increasing population with less land available to produce food? We must ensure that the facilities are available for them to learn those skills. To engage them in learning that inspires them to achieve and succeed, we need to offer them the opportunity to broaden their skills horizon and increase the routes to prosperity within our towns. By providing such opportunities, we can ensure that everyone in Burton and Uttoxeter has the chance to realise their potential, regardless of where they are from or their background.

4.13 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths) and several members of the Education Committee, which I am fortunate to sit on.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) in relation to aspiration. For three days, we have heard Labour Members talking down their towns and this country. The Conservative party truly is the party of opportunity and, more importantly, of aspiration, with the view that our best days truly are ahead of us. Let us not forget those great, well-known philosophers, the band Chumbawamba, who, in their hit single "Tubthumping", said: "We get knocked down, we get back up again, you'll never keep me down." This country has been knocked down by the pandemic, but we will never keep this country or this Government down as we level up our regions and build a truly global Britain.

Levelling up, however, cannot be achieved without education, which is what I wish to focus on for the rest of my speech. The skills and post-16 education Bill will allow residents of Prestwich, Radcliffe and Whitefield to retrain later in life, with the lifetime skills guarantee ensuring that everyone will be able to achieve a minimum standard of a level 3 qualification. As we bounce back from covid thanks to the vaccine programme, this Government are delivering a long-term catch-up programme so that all children across Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich can achieve to their fullest potential. However, catch-up cannot only be focused on attainment; it also needs to be focused on our children's mental health, with a more holistic view, so that they truly are catching up and achieving the most.

I declare an interest in that, having a very young daughter, I want the very best in early years, so that our youngest children can get the best start in life, setting up their education and careers for life. Acting on the early years healthy development review, we are truly able to do that.

The Government's free school programme is ensuring that the children of Radcliffe will no longer need to travel out of the town or, many times, even out of the borough to receive a world-class education. After many years of failed Labour promises, it is this Conservative Government who are achieving that. It is this Conservative Member of Parliament who has taken just over 12 months in this role to achieve just that.

However, to ensure a bright future, we need to address the elephant in the room: illiteracy. The BBC launched its programme this Monday to get the roughly 9 million people who have difficulties with reading talking about the issue and improving the country's literacy rates. Not

reading holds us all back in terms of health, employment, opportunity and family. If someone cannot help their own child with their homework because they are unable to read, they are holding their child back, too.

It has taken many years to overcome the stigma of mental health. With the help of the National Literacy Trust, which provides the secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group on literacy that I am fortunate to chair, we will overcome the stigma of illiteracy as well, because it cannot be right that in the 21st century one in six people in Britain, one in four in Scotland and one in eight in Wales are unable to read. My task is to ensure that the Government will continue to focus on that—I hope the Minister will be able to focus on it later, too—because it is a scandal that every single Member of both Chambers should be ashamed of. We will continue to do all the work we can to address that issue.

4.16 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, particularly given its focus on the next generation and looking to the future. I welcome much of the discussion so far on skills and education, particularly given how important it is for my part of the world and for the region of the east midlands. However, as so much has already been said about skills, I will focus my remarks on another key element of our future success, which is broader than just the acquisition of skills, knowledge or education, and extends into our confidence, both individually and collectively, to use those abilities.

When I talk about confidence, I mean the ability for us as a mature democracy, facing huge opportunities but also some challenge in coming decades, to identify, debate and determine our response to what without doubt will be massive change in the decades ahead. Bluntly, it is about our ability to have difficult conversations, the confidence to create space for robust debates about who we are as a country, where we want to go and who we want to be, and the willingness to engage in debate on—and subject our preconceived notions to—rigour, scrutiny and critique. That is why I particularly welcome the Government's commitment in the Queen's Speech to guaranteeing freedom of speech on campuses, not just from the perspective of fixing a growing issue in some parts of academia, but for making a clear statement about how this timeless notion should continue to be upheld across wider civic society as a whole.

That a Bill guaranteeing freedom of speech appears necessary should give us all pause in a free, enlightened and curious society. How has an element of higher education managed to get itself into a place where it argues precisely against notions it is supposed to uphold? Given that it seems to have slowly done exactly that in recent decades, it appears necessary to legislate. I say that as a Conservative who does not want to legislate against things unless it is absolutely necessary, yet one of the reasons I am a Conservative is because I seek to deal with the world as it is, not as I wish it would be. Whether I like it or not, it appears that some time-honoured enlightenment notions of rationality and free speech are being questioned. If that is the case, it appears that the Government will have to be clear and make an unambiguous statement that freedom of speech is a value that is non-negotiable and that, if it cannot be guaranteed by manners, tradition and convention, it will need to be guaranteed in law.

I remain astounded by the extraordinary—and extraordinarily deficient—vapid intellectual architecture that has grown within our universities in recent decades. I saw it starting off 20 years ago with the no platforming debates when I was at university myself; now it is a general lack of intellectual curiosity or an othering of inconvenient viewpoints, which results in the loss of swathes of perfectly reasonable debate, while rendering it almost impossible to draw conclusions across anything. It is the product of an obsession with a postmodern relativism that has created a toxic quagmire of up-ended logic and muddled thinking, where no one really knows what can acceptably be said, who can acceptably speak or what level of debate and discussion can actually be had.

The frames of the very concept of debate have been loosened to such an extent, through the fashions of Foucault, Derrida or their fellow travellers, that objectivity and rationality are discarded by some as if they were some kind of out-of-fashion, transient plaything. What follows is the dystopian reality that there is no real ability to draw any form of conclusion at all—"I have my truth, you have yours, this Bench has its own." The whole discussion is narrowed and then disparaged to the extent that up becomes down and feelings become king. My, what has it come to when a law—a law!—is now required, not to set reasonable boundaries on freedom of speech, but to ensure that people can go to the extent of using those reasonable boundaries?

People have the right to be heard. Viewpoints have the right to be challenged. Comfort must, by necessity, be discomforted. Our world demands pluralism of thought, deed and action as the price of progress and improvement. I welcome the Government's intent in this area.

4.21 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley). Today, we are debating the opportunities for future generations. As the Member for West Dorset, I want to make sure that we are in the best possible position to contribute our part to this considerable Conservative Government effort for our nation. It is also important, though, that the Government hear it loud and clear that we in West Dorset are a strong candidate for levelling up, too.

I am greatly inspired by Alan Turing, the inspiration for the Government's Turing scheme. He went to school in my home town of Sherborne and went on to crack the Enigma code of the second world war. As a farmer's son who has grown up on the land and watched my parents feed the nation, I am proud that we have one of the best land-based colleges in the country at Kingston Maurward. It plays a vital role in empowering young people to stay at home in their community, rather than having to leave it for a good job far away, as I had to in my 20s. That is a key priority of this Conservative Government, and one that I wholly support; I ask the Government, though, to ensure that we in Dorset, and particularly Kingston Maurward, can play a much bigger role in providing this opportunity, not just to young people in Dorset, but further afield.

There are two specific Bills that the Government have set out that I commend to the House and support: the Environment Bill and the animals abroad Bill. Because it is in such a beautiful county, people would not think that my constituency of West Dorset has the worst

[Chris Loder]

place for air pollution in the entire country, but environmental issues do indeed affect us all. The village of Chideock, between Bridport and Lyme Regis, has the highest levels of nitrogen dioxide in the entire country from traffic on the A35. The pollution is more than double the Government limit. The issue is not new—it has been ongoing for some time—but urgent action is required and progress can be made with the new powers that the Environment Bill will provide.

At the end of the last parliamentary Session, Her Majesty the Queen gave her Royal Assent to my private Member's Bill, which is now the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021. On Second Reading of the Bill, I outlined to Parliament my continuing mission for animal welfare in this country, and I am delighted that the Government have again responded to my petition for improved animal welfare in the Queen's Speech.

Our debates on animal welfare in this place have traditionally been about pets, but it is high time that we get a grip of the care of other animals as well. I want us to ban live animal exports, and I see that the Government's intended Bill will give us that opportunity. It is disgraceful that our well-cared-for farm animals can be loaded on to a lorry and sent thousands of miles by land and sea to destinations in southern Europe or further for hours and hours. As a farmer's son, I know that no decent, caring farmer wants to see their animals gets shipped abroad for fattening or slaughter.

I also want to see an end to non-stun slaughter of animals in the United Kingdom. I petition the Government that we could find an opportunity in the legislative agenda to stop this practice, which causes unnecessary suffering to our animals. The Food Standards Agency has shown that, in 2018, 94 million cattle, sheep and poultry were slaughtered in England alone in this manner. The Veterinary Policy Research Foundation says that, of those animals non-stunned for ritual slaughter purposes, some 70% are sold on the general market without labelling. We need a full debate on that matter in the House.

Her Majesty the Queen's Speech is an example of how this Conservative Government look to govern this country and bring opportunity to it, including Dorset and the south-west, and I wholly support the Government in their endeavours.

4.26 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): It is always a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder). I do not know why, but I always follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is the closest thing to a political poet I have ever heard. It was another wonderful speech; I say that every time I listen to him.

The agenda that this Government set is termed in many different ways, but if levelling up is to mean anything, it is about levelling up opportunity. We can have all the buildings, all the concrete and all the stadiums, and we can invest in infrastructure, but if it does not have positive outcomes for our citizens, we will certainly not have a bright future for the next generation.

At this point in the debate, every Bill and part of the Queen's Speech has been discussed, and I do not intend to read out a list of the bits that I support. It goes without saying that, as a loyal Conservative, I support

the Queen's Speech and what the Government are trying to achieve. When I saw that I was number 48 on the call list, I thought about what I could say. I want to take this opportunity to highlight a group of individuals who are bursting with potential and have all the skills and the things that we value in our fellow citizens: children with special educational needs and disabilities.

When I was preparing this speech, I thought about how we can at least have equality of opportunity for children with special educational needs, to give them the best chance of a bright future. My suggestion—I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will give this some consideration—is that, as part of the levelling-up agenda, we should seriously consider the necessity of SEND hubs, which would be a one-stop commissioning shop to support children and those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

As we all know, education, health and care plans are nationally recognised as being predominantly about the education experience that each child receives, but the health part is limited and, on occasion, not adequately underpinned with the required strategies and services; it is the same for social care. Special schools or community special schools are often in a position where they have to commission further bespoke services for a young person, but there is not a regular, unified commissioning body to provide those services. We therefore have a disjointed system, with commissioning beset by delay, which negatively impacts the young person.

For young kids with all the potential in the world who have special educational needs, in my view the answer is the establishment of SEND hubs in every council area in the country; that is one of the best ways to encourage them to have a brighter future. In those hubs, staff from various commissioning bodies would be working under one roof, and professionals and family members could turn to them for help immediately, if necessary, to find the support they need. That would mean that we, as politicians, were doing everything we could to support the potential individual needs of each young person in our country. The SEND hub would have a wider remit, however, in that it would provide tailored support through careers and employment services to ensure that kids, no matter their background, have opportunities to enter the workplace. Sadly, at present, the opportunities are limited for many.

SEND hubs—inclusive, with continuity of provision and tailored to the bespoke needs of each young person at a local level to support the overarching aims of their EHCP—would, in my view, be the very best way of closing the current aching gap, where children with SEND do not have equality of opportunity. We must address this issue as part of the levelling-up agenda and as part of the legislation contained in this Queen's Speech. I have asked my local authority to make an application by way of the community renewal fund to put together a business case for a SEND hub in Bury, and I hope it will then apply to the UK shared prosperity fund and other revenue streams to make that a reality.

I believe that this is a fine Queen's Speech. This Government are set on changing each and every part of this country and giving each and every one of our fellow citizens the best opportunity to thrive and succeed. For children with SEND, the proposal of a warm, welcoming and supportive hub is something the Government should strongly consider.

4.31 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I want to thank Members across the House for contributing to this important debate. In particular, I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for her continued work and the work of her team in fighting for a bright future for all children and young people across the country.

I also thank the following Members for their contributions. I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) really tackled the Government's waiting times for health and cancer treatments. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) talked about wanting the terms of reference for the independent inquiry into covid to be drawn up in consultation with the bereaved relatives, wanting them to be invited to give evidence and wanting get on with this quickly. That was an important message about the inquiry that we have heard strongly from bereaved relatives this week.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) gave a moving account of child poverty in his constituency, and he very much made the case for a decent, well-funded statutory youth service. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) is incredibly knowledgeable on this area, and he really held the attention of the House when he spelled out exactly what it means when adults can legally watch pornography that purports to be child pornography—it, is in fact, filmed by adults pretending to be children, and coming across that way—and continue to work with young people. I hope those on the Government Bench took particular note of those remarks, and that there might be an opportunity to work to ensure that people who watch this abhorrent pornography are not allowed to work with children and young people.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) said that there were not many promises for the Government to break in this Queen's Speech. Indeed, he is quite right: it was something of a thin gruel. I congratulate his Labour council on its re-election in St Helens. The council has championed children and young people consistently for a number of years. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) highlighted that children and young people were an afterthought in this pandemic, but they must be a priority in our country's recovery.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), following on from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), spoke about the requirement to show photo ID to vote. I regret that the Minister had, not unreasonably, taken a break at that point, but I urge her to read back those comments in *Hansard*, because I thought some very good points were made about those who might be excluded from our democracy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) spoke passionately for the children in her constituency and really praised the schools in her community for stepping up and filling the gaps where the Government have dropped the ball, be that with laptops and equipment, the exams chaos, or, shockingly, a food bank inside a school.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) shared with the House the progress made by the Welsh Labour Government. Indeed, they introduced

the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which has gone on to ensure that there is a bright future for the next generation in Wales. That means that we have seen voting rights extended to 16 and 17-year-olds, free school meals extended, and a new framework for youth services.

Children and young people have been left behind by this Government since long before the coronavirus crisis. The pandemic is set to have a scarring effect on an entire generation of young people for years to come. Radical action is needed to ensure that the next generation will reach higher, with better opportunities than generations before them. This week's Queen's Speech was an opportunity to take stock of the devastating year that we have all experienced and instigate that radical action. The past year has been like no other. Families have given up so much and many have lost loved ones.

Coronavirus has brought into sharp focus the inequalities and insecurities rooted in our society. After a decade of Conservative Governments, it is no wonder that our public services were underfunded and underprepared for the pandemic. But even at this time of crisis, the Conservatives' Queen's Speech was uninspired and unambitious. It fell short across the board, but particularly when it came to young people. As shadow Minister for young people, I do not get many chances to speak at this Dispatch Box about my brief, mainly because the Conservatives do not have a Minister dedicated to young people. Their disregard for young people comes so naturally that it is endemic in the way they organise their Government, leading to a disjointed, haphazard approach on many of the issues young people face today. So perhaps I should not be surprised that this Queen's Speech did not mention young people and that the Government have treated them as little more than an afterthought throughout this crisis.

For example, the Queen's Speech failed to mention the youth jobs crisis. Across this country, millions of young people needed the Government to announce solutions to their patchy kickstart scheme, which has created jobs for only 3% of all young jobseekers. The Government's kickstart scheme lacks the scale and ambition needed for a crisis of this latitude. Labour would deliver a guaranteed job or training opportunity to every young person who needed it and work to end long-term unemployment. Young people are the key workers of the future and must be recognised for their importance in our recovery from this crisis.

The Government also missed an opportunity to finally release the long-awaited youth investment fund, which was pledged more than 18 months ago by this Government but not a penny has been spent. Covid-19 has only worsened the crisis in our youth services, and yet over the past decade what we have seen from the Conservatives is a 73% cut to our youth services, leading youth services to be on their knees. Will the Minister confirm whether the youth investment fund will be released in full, as promised in the last Conservative party manifesto?

As hon. Members from across the House have mentioned, the Government could have used the Queen's Speech to set out how they will support the millions of children who have faced unprecedented disruption to their learning in the past year. Children's recovery should be at the heart of the Government's work, and yet the Secretary of State for Education has committed just £43 per pupil per day for catch-up. Does the Minister

[Cat Smith]

believe that this is sufficient, or will she be asking the Chancellor, or indeed the Secretary of State, to provide more support? This Government's scandalous failings on apprenticeships have stifled the prospects of the young people who are most in need. The drop-out rate is soaring and those from disadvantaged backgrounds have been locked out of opportunity. Will the Minister outline what action she is taking to rectify the 40% decline in new apprenticeships for young people since 2015?

As young people emerge from a devastating year, mental health must be a central focus. The relationship between financial security and probable mental health disorders is undeniable. This inequality is well documented, but successive Conservative Governments have failed to address it, and that has left less well-off young people falling through the cracks in the system. Will the Minister outline what steps she is going to take to reduce the waiting lists for access to child and adolescent mental health services?

The Conservatives' track record on young people has been a series of let-downs and broken promises. After a decade of austerity, young people are facing surging house prices, stagnating wages and rising debts, and all the while the Government have failed to grant 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote, silencing their voices. With votes at 16 guaranteed in Wales and Scotland, there is now a fundamental inequality of rights in this country, a situation that is morally and politically unsustainable for the UK Government.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston outlined in her opening remarks, Labour would have approached the Queen's Speech very differently to guarantee a bright future for all. Labour is committed to making Britain the best place in which to grow up, and preventing today's young people from becoming the lost generation. We would ensure that every young person had the opportunity to fulfil their potential; that affordable, accessible, high-quality early years education was available for all; and that childcare was there for parents who needed it. We have a radical plan that would create time for children to play, learn and develop and give the teaching profession the support that it needs to guarantee a world-class education for every child. We would deliver a guaranteed job or training opportunities to every young person who needed them, and we would work to end long-term unemployment.

We have repeatedly heard that this generation of young people is being called a lost generation. It is not inevitable that a whole cohort of young people will be negatively impacted by this crisis. Let us be clear; it is a choice by the Conservatives. It is a political choice, which will be remembered by the current generation of young people. As long as the Government continue to fail our children, the consequences will be felt for a generation.

4.41 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in today's debate. There have been many valuable contributions.

The year 2020 and the early part of 2021 have been a time of enormous difficulty, and our nation's resolve has been tested by the pandemic. There has been huge

disruption to the lives of young people, whose futures we are debating today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) rightly said, a lost year for us cannot be compared with a lost year of learning and development for them.

With the end of the EU transition period in January, the UK began a new chapter in its national story—one of great change and even greater opportunity. This must become the spur to do things differently and better, and, in doing so, create more opportunities for young people. We have to use this shift to shatter the stasis that has led to decades of underproductivity and disconnection between decision makers and communities. With UK politicians now being more accountable for delivery, we will pursue policies that work for young people across the UK, with huge investment in early years, post-16 education, skills, infrastructure and technology. With freedom of intellectual challenge, we hope to create a more outward-looking and dynamic economy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) made a compelling speech on the skills agenda, to which he has committed so much campaigning energy, and he welcomed our lifetime skills guarantee. I am grateful to him for the way in which he has engaged with me on civil service apprenticeships. I see those apprenticeship routes as fundamental to our talent pipeline for the digital and data specialist roles that we are creating across Government to lead our drive to improve online Government services for citizens. I appreciated the excellent suggestion by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) on special educational needs and development hubs, and I have just raised it with the Secretary of State for Education.

I was very interested to hear the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) criticise the English education system when Scotland's performance on the PISA league tables has drastically slipped and the attainment gap has increased. Meanwhile, UCAS data show that just 9.7% of those from Scotland's most disadvantaged areas have been accepted at university, compared with 17% in England.

I want to wish my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) a very happy birthday and thank her for her tireless commitment to the early years agenda over 25 years. As a relatively new mum myself, I can say that what she said this afternoon, especially on maternal mental health and support, resonated. That has been a real challenge for many new parents during the pandemic, and I wish her the very best on her work on "The 1001 Critical Days", which has now been recognised and supported by Government.

It is fantastic to hear of the input into that project from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), who draws on huge experience, and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). I am sure that the wisdom and warmth that the hon. Lady brought to that role was invaluable. She raised an extremely important point about cancer services, and I know that the question of NHS delays caused by the pandemic is an area of great focus for the Cabinet Office in its work on public sector recovery and reform. That will also be tackled in new health legislation.

This afternoon, I learned to my surprise that my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) is the House's No.1 champion of hedgehogs.

I was glad to hear of his support for the ambitious environmental and animal welfare measures in the Gracious Speech. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) raised the potential of COP26 to inspire and provide opportunities in green tech for young people. In our sponsorship of COP, the Cabinet Office agrees; we are tremendously ambitious in this area. The London Gateway freeport—in my region and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—will help to spur new green investment and jobs, and our work on new T-levels, apprenticeships and skills will help local young people to take advantage of them.

As others have said, levelling up is not only for the north.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) talked of retaining flexible working from the pandemic to help families. The Cabinet Office is actively exploring that in areas such as public appointments and civil service HR. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) spoke movingly about illiteracy, and I hope that our lifelong learning initiatives will help to address it. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) supported our education plan and our kickstart scheme, and raised the issue of apprenticeships. I hope she engages with our skills for jobs White Paper and recognises the enormous investment we are making in skills, including a £3,000 incentive for firms to take on apprentices.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is absolutely right about the emotional commitment we all feel towards the future of the Union. Our family of nations has faced the great challenge of the pandemic together, through protections to the economy, support from our armed services, the procurement of vaccines and more. This is not the time to tear us apart.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) is right to highlight the futures of young girls beyond our shores, where this Government are investing hugely in their education, as the key to tackling a whole range of global challenges, and the importance of stable public finances to all our finances, which was underlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock. She also made an oft overlooked point that outcomes and not money spent ought to define success in our public services. That is why the Cabinet Office wants to use procurement reforms and digital transformation to improve the performance of our services to all citizens. She also talked of our proposals against violence towards women and girls and to improve online safety in order to protect young people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) raised the important issue of forced marriage, and I really praise her for her campaign. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle talked of not only the importance of new homes and infrastructure to young people's futures, but the crucial new legislation we are bringing in on fighting knife crime, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) and the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). That issue affects far too many young people. It is with deep sadness that we lost Daniel Laskos to knife violence in my constituency on Friday, and his family have been in our hearts this week. I pay tribute to the work of local police officers on this case, and I hope that new powers will help them to do their vital work so that no more lives are lost to senseless violence.

A number of hon. Members referred to the levelling-up agenda and its importance to young people in their constituencies, and one rather dubious reference was made to Chumbawamba. The Government are committed to boosting funding for communities in all parts of the UK, with the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund and another £220 million to invest in local areas, ahead of launching the UK shared prosperity fund in 2022, and a series of infrastructure initiatives of the kind that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) mentioned.

We in the Cabinet Office are also committed to ensuring that the administration of government is less Whitehall-centric, by locating more civil service roles in the regions and nations of the UK, through our ambitious places for growth programme. The civil service needs to be visible in and representative of the entire UK, across all Departments, functions and professions. This will also play an important role in demonstrating our commitment as a Government to maintaining the integrity of the Union. The Cabinet Office has recently announced that our second headquarters will be located in Glasgow, with 500 officials to be located there in the next three years. A number of other Departments have also announced their plans to increase the UK Government presence across the UK. That includes the Department for Transport building on its presence in Leeds and Birmingham, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government establishing a second HQ in Wolverhampton, Leeds becoming home to second HQs for Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions, and new Treasury economic campus in Darlington. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will have heard the passionate bid for a Home Office HQ from my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), who have listed the huge investments already made in their city. We want opportunities for young people to go hand in hand with these moves. Again, I am particularly focused on using the tremendous talent in schools and colleges across the UK to get British students into exciting digital and data roles in the heart of government.

Of course the brightest futures can be built only on solid democratic foundations, which is why the Government are bringing forward our elections Bill, as set out in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech. This Bill will deliver on multiple manifesto commitments and hopes to ensure that our democracy remains secure, fair, modern and transparent. The potential for voter fraud in our current system strikes at a core principle of our democracy: that your vote is yours and yours alone. Any instance of or potential for electoral malpractice damages the public's faith in our democracy and has to be taken seriously. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and a number of other hon. Members use language outside this place to talk about straightforward proposals to request that voters prove they are who they say they are when they take up their sacred right to vote, calling that simple principle "voter suppression" in typically hyperbolic fashion designed to frighten and scaremonger. I completely agree that the vote is a precious right, which is why this Government believe that we should make it harder for those who seek to interfere with it.

Setting aside the fact that every voter will be able to secure a voter card from their local council for free if they want one, and that many people already have that

[*Julia Lopez*]

kind of identification in the form of a passport or driving licence, the demands for evidence that voter fraud is a problem do not show an understanding of what happened in Tower Hamlets when I was a councillor there. In that borough, disinterest and complacency from authorities about electoral corruption and fraud meant that it was left to four ordinary residents, risking legal bills of hundreds of thousands of pounds, to challenge the election of the mayor in 2015. It was not easy, and I pay tribute to them and people such as Councillor Peter Golds, with whom I worked at the time and who raised with the Electoral Commission our serious worries about voter fraud.

The tireless work of those residents and their barrister, Francis Hoar, exposed how easily the system can be exploited when authorities are just too nervous about taking action. Through their courage, they had the mayor's election overturned. I do not wish to see other communities go through that simply because of reticence on our part to introduce a very simple check that a voter is who they say they are. Indeed, I noticed that Mr Hoar himself tweeted last week that he had been subject to personation at the ballot box, so I regret that the idea that there is nothing to see here is wide of the mark.

The Opposition are not naive and inexperienced on this matter. They will know that in many council elections, the margin of victory at ward level can be exceptionally slim, yet we are electing people who will be stewards of public money and services for some of the most vulnerable in our communities. I know full well that Opposition Front Benchers understand the importance of identification at key votes, because they ask for it to be produced for their own party's elections and even to attend Labour Live, in so far as there is any demand. Our plans simply bring us into line with Labour's elections, and with the Labour Government's introduction in 2003 of voter identification in Northern Ireland, where participation has not been affected.

Cat Smith: We are discussing the importance of voting and democracy in a debate about the bright future for the next generations. Given that 16 and 17-year-olds have the right to vote in Scotland and Wales, how does the Minister defend the status quo in England, where 16 and 17-year-olds are not given equal voting rights to their Scottish and Welsh counterparts?

Julia Lopez: That is subject to lively debate, and I know that it is being explored by the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). I will take that point away to discuss with her while she is away.

I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions to this debate on future opportunities for young people. From huge investment in the skills agenda and early years to measures to keep young people safe in the street and online, work on issues of passion to younger generations such as the environment and animal welfare, and giving freedom for vigorous intellectual debate that challenges and hones ideas—our own in-house political poet, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), set that out superbly—Her Majesty's Gracious Speech sets out an ambitious legislative agenda to put young people at the heart of our national recovery and economic renewal. I commend it to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Debate to be resumed on Monday 17 May.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We look forward to 17 May, so that we can visit pubs and restaurants without fear of getting wet or, indeed, catching hypothermia—the glorious 17th.

Will those leaving the Chamber before we go on to the Adjournment please do so in a covid-friendly manner? I ask that the Dispatch Boxes are sanitised while Alexander Stafford opens the debate. The Minister is not going to touch the Dispatch Box until that has been done. Thank you very much, everybody—and thank you, Minister.

Levelling-up Fund: Rother Valley

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

4.54 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I feel privileged to rise to discuss the levelling-up fund and its crucial role in the regeneration of Rother Valley's high streets. It offers local authorities the opportunity to bid for up to £20 million of investment in projects that benefit the whole community.

Rother Valley has been identified as a priority 1 area, meaning that a strong bid submitted by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council could be rewarded with a grant of the full £20 million. Additionally, the Government have allocated £125,000 to enable RMBC to put together its bid and have assured the council that if its first bid, in June, is not successful, it can reapply in the future. There is no doubt in my mind that a project to regenerate my constituency's high streets would have the biggest impacts on the greatest number of people.

I will use this opportunity to discuss the transformative potential of the levelling-up fund and the levelling-up agenda in Rother Valley. I and many Members of this House were swept to victory in December 2019 as a result of the historical neglect of constituencies by a complacent Labour party. People felt left behind, disenfranchised and ignored, and they decided to bring about change. The local elections last week show that this sentiment remains as strong today as it was then. I point to the results in my area of Rotherham, where the Conservative party surged from zero councillors to an incredible 20 councillors, breaking Labour's decades-long stranglehold on the area in the process.

Why does the Conservative party enjoy such strong support among people in Rother Valley and similar communities across our country? There can be no doubt that a core element of our appeal is our levelling-up agenda. We can no longer allow our areas to decline and fade into obscurity. To remain a great, forward-looking nation, we must build back better and level up in all four corners of our United Kingdom. Levelling up resonates with the residents of Rother Valley because they want to be able to see with their own eyes tangible evidence of progress and real proof that their lives are being improved.

For my part, I am working tirelessly to ensure that Rother Valley collects every single penny of central Government funding. Today's debate joins a petition presented to Parliament recently as yet another way of doing just that. I am sure the Minister agrees with me that Rother Valley is now known in Parliament and Whitehall in a way that it simply was not before the last general election. My job is to be the cheerleader for my area, and I always want to shout the loudest when it comes to representing my constituents.

I will address first the repeated shortcomings of the Labour-led council in looking after the towns and village of Rother Valley. For years, hundreds of millions of pounds of investment have been funnelled into the centre of Rotherham for white elephant schemes such as the redevelopment of Forge Island, while the rest of the borough has been completely ignored. Another example is the towns fund, which only benefits Rotherham central and not Rother Valley. Often, it seems that the

Labour-led RMBC is a council for Rotherham town proper, as opposed to its adjacent hinterlands, and there is a fundamental issue with how RMBC approaches areas such as Rother Valley. It is not just that we do not receive any investment, but that there are few plans in place for these areas. The lack of development plans is particularly extraordinary when one considers that Labour has controlled RMBC since time immemorial. There were no council plans in place for Rother Valley's high streets, and everyone in Rother Valley has known that for years.

To fill the vacuum left by RMBC, parish and town councils have had to adopt neighbourhood plans to plug the gaps. Dinnington has just adopted its plan, and Maltby and Wickersley are in the process of devising their own. However, as commendable as our town and parish councils' work has been, individual and disparate neighbourhood plans are no replacement for a joined-up co-ordinated approach across the constituency, and our towns and parish councils recognise that fact. Their efforts cannot begin to match RMBC's financial resources and capabilities with regard to economic feasibility studies and planning law. Of course neighbourhood plans have their role in the context of the building of new homes in existing communities, but they cannot be expected to imitate an overarching vision and a strategy for our area. We need RMBC to lead on this by adopting an ambitious masterplan for Rother Valley's high streets and to work with town and parish councils to integrate their neighbourhood plans into a wider, unified scheme for the constituency.

Of course, it is not just RMBC that is responsible for the lack of plans in place for Rother Valley. The Labour-run Sheffield City Region has the power to transform Rother Valley's transport, to fund large infrastructure projects and to boost businesses and local skills—all with central Government funding. As a key part of the Sheffield metropolitan area, we should be benefitting from devolution, but very little comes our way. Whether it is RMBC's obsession with Rotherham town or Sheffield City Region's fixation with Sheffield city, we lose out time and time again.

The impact of this neglect by the Labour-run local authority on Rother Valley's high streets and our communities is stark. I shall take Maltby as an example, although much the same could be said of Dinnington, Thurcroft and towns across my constituency. In Maltby, a staggering 8% of residents are unemployed, 32% of households do not own a car, and travel time to the nearest town centre via public transport averages 42 minutes. Broadband speeds are almost half the England average, and the community needs score for Maltby is 167, compared with just 68 in England as a whole, indicating reduced community cohesion and civic connectivity.

Those disturbing statistics highlight how the chronic lack of investment in Rother Valley's high streets means that areas such as Dinnington, Maltby, Thurcroft and Kiveton Park risk withering on the vine under Labour's watch. That cannot be the fate of our wonderful towns, and I shall not stand for it.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Alexander Stafford: These are towns with immense potential, filled to bursting with warm, friendly, talented people. It is not the case that these are not great places; I can assure the House that they are some of the finest communities in our United Kingdom. However, in order to thrive they must be given a fair chance. That is all we are asking for—nothing more, nothing less. For the people of Rother Valley, this is the true meaning of the levelling-up agenda: ensuring that we have the same chances that are afforded to towns in Surrey and Oxfordshire, or to neighbourhoods in London.

First, it is important that RMBC ensures that money is allocated to rejuvenate all high streets, not just those of Dinnington, Maltby and Thurcroft. We must level up in every corner of Rother Valley, including Kiveton Park, Waverley, Aughton, Whiston, Wickersley, Aston, Todwick, Treeton, Wales, Anston, Swallownest and all our wonderful communities. RMBC must work with these areas and with me to embrace localism and deliver on these communities' priorities. There cannot be a top-down approach, and RMBC must not decide unilaterally what is needed in our areas.

In Dinnington, I have been in extensive discussions with Dinnington Community Land Trust and Dinnington St John's Town Council regarding what is needed to regenerate the high street. The sheer number of boarded-up, burnt-out and abandoned buildings is disheartening. Both organisations raise the point that Dinnington was for many years the area's main commercial centre. It had a broad range of shops as well as banks, a post office, a cinema, a theatre and the other commercial outlets that one would expect in a busy local town.

With money from the levelling-up fund, there are great possibilities for renewal on Dinnington's high street. There has always been a market in Dinnington, but over the years it has decreased in size and importance due to lack of vision from the council and poor-quality facilities for vendors and customers. Yet it remains the only traditional market for many miles and still enjoys a good following on market days. It needs rethinking in order to give a 21st-century offering to its customers and vendors, with specialist vendors encouraged to set up in the market area to win back customers who travel to Sheffield for products they cannot currently buy at Dinnington market. My constituents will know how important an improved access road into Dinnington is in order to facilitate that inward flow.

The presence of Tesco and Aldi attracts up to 1,200 shoppers each day to the centre of Dinnington, and pre-pandemic up to 200 people visited for performances at the Lyric Theatre. We need to ensure that those people stay on the high street, by way of an attractive and well-defined pedestrian route, such as a "town centre gateway" through Constable Lane; a complete rebuild of the indoor and outdoor market; and support for more restaurants and bars along the street to encourage a vibrant night-time economy.

The levelling-up fund must support business owners to renovate their shop frontages and tackle the preponderance of unsightly shutters. Similarly, Dinnington's high street is currently maintained by little more than one man and his brush. A small investment in street cleaners and waste bins would clean up our town centre and make it a more pleasant place to visit. Equally worth considering is a fully pedestrianised high street, which would tackle speeders and joyriders, and allow

vendors to spread out into the high street, permitting trees, street furniture, monuments and seating to be strategically placed in order to create a more open feel. We must not forget our heritage, either, so it is important that some money is allocated to a local history centre on the high street, which would pay tribute to our miners and serve as a destination for local schools and community groups.

Those needs and wants are echoed on high streets across Rother Valley. In Maltby, we need to preserve the historic and iconic Maltby Grammar School building and endow it with a new purpose. Likewise, Coronation Park needs a comprehensive revamp. My constituents would like to see a nod to Maltby's glory days, with any rejuvenation efforts paying tribute to the town's mining heritage, textile industry, brickworks, library and picture house. Traffic congestion on the high street is a serious problem, with RMBC taking no steps to address the promised motorway bypass, and in fact building more and more new houses without taking mitigating measures.

We need to make Maltby High Street a destination once again. That means clearing up the broken glass and introducing frequent sweeps of the road; supporting lots of new shops and restaurants; improving the road between Maltby and Dinnington; and ensuring that our high street complements local attractions such as Roche Abbey and our beautiful countryside and villages. Furthermore, we urgently need a reliable, frequent and fast bus link between Maltby and Dinnington, with the network extending throughout Rother Valley. It is a disgrace that we do not have that direct bus link in the constituency.

In Thurcroft, the parish council has suggested that initial improvements with levelling-up fund money could include the renewal of bollards, street furniture, litter bins, new street management and the creation of additional shop units on adjacent land. Likewise, the Aston Parish Council recommended that Swallownest High Street, Rose Garth Avenue in Aston and Aughton Main Street urgently need funding for the return of the lengthsman who cleaned the streets three times a week, alongside more dustbins, street furniture, footpath repairs and an increased police presence.

In Kiveton Park and Wales, residents wish to see the levelling-up fund used to renew the roads and pavements, spruce up the existing shops, finance more dustbins and street cleaning—yes, there is a theme—and back the introduction of flower boxes and grass verges, as well as facilitating the drainage of the Kiveton Park football club fields. On Whiston High Street, we must take measures to safeguard against flooding in order to protect homes and businesses.

Vandalism and antisocial behaviour are a scourge on all our high streets as well. We need the levelling-up fund money to be spent on CCTV, street lighting and crime prevention measures, which will dovetail with my campaign to persuade the Labour police and crime commissioner to have a police base on Dinnington and Maltby high streets.

In the light of this consultation with my towns, and with the title of the debate in mind, how will regenerating high streets in Rother Valley lead to better outcomes for my area and my residents? It is important to understand the role of the high street in Rother Valley. Our high streets are not just the centre of our towns, but the very heart and soul of our community. They are a reflection

of who we are as the people of Rother Valley— our heritage, our character and our aspirations—and serve as an illustration of the pride we have in our local area. And we are a proud people: proud of our industrial and mining past, which forms the foundation of every town; proud of our “roll our sleeves up and get the work done” attitude, which encapsulates our straightforward and uncomplaining nature; and proud of our ambition and talent, which we combine with our warm-hearted and friendly demeanour. That is who the people of Rother Valley are, and accordingly, we deserve high streets that match up to our rich history and our bright future.

That is why it is an absolute priority that the levelling-up fund money is used to regenerate Rother Valley’s high streets. We want to create the new high streets of the future, ensuring that they are the “places to be” and the “places to live”. This mixed usage will see provision for housing, health, business and transport, where residents can shop, work, access vital services and spend their leisure time. This funding really will transform our constituents’ lives, spreading jobs and opportunities throughout Rother Valley. It is clear that a prosperous high street means a prosperous town and a prosperous community.

I recently visited the regeneration project in Waverley, where there are plans to build a new, thriving, modern high street for the communities who live there, and I must say it sounds very impressive. There is no doubt in my mind that the principles being followed to build Waverley’s new high street must be applied to our historic high streets across Rother Valley: keeping residents local by ensuring that they have the amenities they need; building good transport links; clamping down on crime; and prioritising high-quality local employment and education.

Of course, the rejuvenation of our high streets with levelling-up fund grants will build on the work that I have undertaken to level up Rother Valley since I was elected. Recently, I presented a petition to Parliament on levelling up our area’s high streets that has been signed by over 1,800 constituents, and I have fought ceaselessly in the House for access to the levelling-up fund and increased investment for Rother Valley generally. The co-chairman of the Conservative Party—the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling)—and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government visited me on Dinnington High Street to support and discuss my high streets campaign, and over the past year, I have taken countless meetings with parish and town councils, constituents and RMBC concerning what Rother Valley needs most.

I have sponsored debates in my campaign to bring high-quality renewable energy jobs to our towns—for example, focusing on the hydrogen and critical minerals industries. I have vocally opposed fracking, which would degrade our communities at the expense of fossil fuel companies. I have stood against High Speed 2, which would cost huge sums of money for a project that destroys our landscapes and homes for no benefit to us, when we need the investment to be spent on transport locally. I have championed the reopening of the South Yorkshire joint railway to connect our towns and villages. I have led a bus campaign as part of the Rother Valley transport task force, as well as convening the Rother Valley rural crime task force calling for the reopening of

police stations to make our towns and villages safer. I have also spoken out against CISWO’s sale of our community assets, which have been paid for by miners and should have remained open for residents to enjoy. All of that work is part of my vision for safer, prosperous high streets and a truly levelled-up Rother Valley.

As I draw to a close, I am pleased that RMBC has noted my petition, and now agrees with me that high streets need to be prioritised in this bid. I ask the Minister to urge RMBC to level up for all our communities and for all the people in Rother Valley, by restoring our high streets to their former glory and making them a place of pride once again. The levelling up fund will be life-changing, and I look forward to seeing that change on Rother Valley’s high streets in the months and years to come.

5.10 pm

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing this hugely important debate. Since his hugely important and historic election result in December 2019, he has shown his passion and determination to secure the brightest possible future for his constituents. He has been a true cheerleader for the Rother Valley, as he has demonstrated today, championing the local issues that he has outlined, like Dinnington high street through the impressive 1,800-signature petition that he submitted to Parliament; like his campaigning on high streets with the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling); like his work on bringing net zero jobs to his constituency; like the numerous meetings he has held with his local council, with businesses and with stakeholders to ascertain and understand their levelling-up priorities, to ensure that those can be reflected properly to central Government.

My hon. Friend has already spearheaded the work to regenerate Swallownest High Street in addition to his work on saving Maltby’s grammar school building. I commend him for all his work as lead sponsor for a South Yorkshire joint railway, through the Department for Transport’s restoring your railway fund, which looks to reinstate the connection between Worksop and Doncaster, which includes a number of stops in my hon. Friend’s constituency. The revised bid has been submitted and DFT is currently assessing it; I expect that the Department will be announcing that before the summer. These are hugely important achievements to his constituency and his constituents, and I commend him for his work.

My hon. Friend aptly described the challenges and potential of many local high streets as lifelines for our communities, particularly over the past year, while so many people have had to base themselves at home and had to shop local in their high streets. They have been vital sources of jobs, prosperity, local pride, local identity and community and have great potential to be even stronger local assets than they are now.

The towns and villages of Rother Valley are rich in history, from their ancient beginnings to their proud industrial heritage. I remember very well my hon. Friend’s maiden speech, in which he explained how his constituents’ hard work, skills and resourcefulness are forged into the very heart of our democracy: the Palace of Westminster was rebuilt from limestone transported here from the

[Luke Hall]

quarries of Anston. However, of course we completely recognise that over more recent decades, the pace of industrial and economic change has created new challenges and barriers to growth, prosperity and social mobility in places such as Rother Valley. These challenges, which my hon. Friend has outlined, are the reason why levelling up is crucial to our vision, and why we have set out a clear commitment to unlock economic prosperity across all parts of the country.

Our landmark White Paper on levelling up will be published later this year. That will lay out bold new policies that will improve opportunity, support businesses and high streets and boost livelihoods across the country, including of course in Rother Valley. Levelling up is about providing the momentum to address precisely those long-standing local inequalities that my hon. Friend has so clearly articulated, and providing the means for people to pursue life chances that have previously been out of reach. We are backing up these levelling-up ambitions with considerable funding, helping to unlock the investments most needed in our communities—the investments that our constituents want to see—particularly as we support places to recover and build back better from the pandemic.

The spending review in November 2020 announced £27 billion of investment in transport, energy and digital communications to help level up the entire country. Through the restart scheme we are providing a further £5 billion to specifically help businesses, including on the high street, which my hon. Friend talked so passionately about, as the covid-19 restrictions are lifted. In April we launched our £56 million welcome back fund, from which my hon. Friend's council has received £470,000. That builds on our reopening high streets safely scheme, which has been supporting councils and businesses across the country, helping ensure a safe return to the high street. The high streets taskforce will also be providing expert advice to a number of towns around the country, including visiting local towns alongside stakeholders. That will be followed up by ongoing, continued support that can help the wider area, including through planning, advice, training and workshops. I am pleased to confirm that Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council covers one of the areas that will receive that tailored support; I am sure that it will work with my hon. Friend to deliver it in the places that he names, such as Dinnington and Maltby.

That targeted support for councils and their high streets comes on top of the extra local government support that has been received by local authorities this year, not only through the finance settlement, but in the covid grants. We have provided more than £9 billion directly to councils across the country, including more than £46 million for Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, of which more than £24 million has been un-ringfenced so that the council can spend it on local priorities such as supporting the high streets and economic regeneration, as my hon. Friend outlined.

Our reforms of the planning system are also set to further unleash the power and potential of local high streets by removing eyesores, transforming unused buildings and making the most of brownfield land. There will be more freedom to allow outdoor markets and dining, and longer opening hours. We will make it easier to

change the uses of buildings, to keep our town centres vibrant and to support more thriving businesses. In total, approximately £25 billion has been transferred from Government to businesses through covid support grants during the pandemic. Across South Yorkshire, that amounts to more than £487 million in support for businesses through local authorities, and more than £177 million for businesses in Rotherham.¹

Our £520 million Help to Grow scheme, announced in the Budget, will also provide help to small businesses right across the country to learn skills, reach new customers and boost their opportunity and reach, while the furlough scheme continues to protect those workers who are most affected by the ongoing impacts of the pandemic as we successfully move through our road map towards the reopening of local economies.

My hon. Friend talked about levelling up and the levelling-up fund. The White Paper on levelling up will be a natural continuation of our commitment to support local places, building in particular on the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, which was announced in the last spending review and will allow local areas right across the country to invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life. That will include regenerating town centres, upgrading local transport networks and investing in cultural heritage assets—exactly the kinds of project that my hon. Friend talked about.

The prospectus that we published for the levelling-up fund in March explained how we are welcoming bids from all parts of the country, but we have also been clear on the areas of the country that have the highest category of need, based on the fund's priority themes of economic recovery, improved transport connectivity and regeneration. As my hon. Friend correctly points out, Rother Valley, within the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council area, is in the highest category of need. Councils in category 1, such as Rotherham, will benefit from £125,000 of capacity funding to help them to work up their bids for the fund.

We have also recognised explicitly, through the levelling-up fund prospectus, the crucial role that local Members of Parliament can play in championing the interests of their constituents and communities, and in understanding the local priorities. That is why we expect bidding authorities to fully consult their MPs as part of the process; I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend's council has been doing so and working with him on his priorities alongside other businesses and stakeholders in the area. MPs can officially endorse one of the bids by writing in and can support other bids in the usual way. This is a hugely important part of the bidding process; it is a positive role for MPs in helping to shape the bids and perhaps in acting as a local broker for consensus on what the area really needs. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his work on that alongside his council.

On 30 April we published some updated information to clarify a number of issues for all bidding authorities and respond to some common questions, which will help to address some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised about the type of bids that can be submitted. It provides further guidance on, for instance, how up to three projects can be presented as part of a package of proposals within one bid. He referenced multiple projects that he would like to consider alongside his council and other stakeholders for that bid.

1. [Official Report, 17 May 2021, Vol. 695, c. 4MC.]

Later this year, we will set out more detail about future rounds of the levelling-up fund and how it will work from 2022. While I cannot comment on the specific merits of any of the emerging proposals that he is working on alongside his council or, unfortunately, their chances of success, I certainly encourage him to keep working with his council and to get that bid in by midday on Friday 18 June. We look forward to receiving that.

I also want to mention the UK community renewal fund, which sits alongside the levelling-up fund to pilot new approaches to tackling the skills, employment and local business support challenges faced in different communities. Ultimately, the UK community renewal fund will help us pave the way for the introduction of the new UK shared prosperity fund from 2022, about which we will be saying more in an investment framework later this year. It is important that local areas look to the dual opportunities of the levelling-up fund and the UK community renewal fund, which have the potential to complement each other extremely positively. Given that Rotherham is in the high priority category for the UK community renewal fund, we very much hope it will be submitting for both bids, and we look forward to receiving them. Rotherham should grasp the opportunity that both funds present.

My hon. Friend has passionately articulated the case for his community. I congratulate him on securing this debate and on his determination to deliver for Rother

Valley. We believe that all areas of this country should have the means to positively shape their future. That is important now more than ever as we look to recover from covid-19, and he has made the point that residents of Rother Valley can sometimes feel in need of levelling up. There is the work he is doing on Dinnington and Swallownest high streets, the work he is doing alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase on net zero jobs and the work he is doing on Maltby's grammar school building and the South Yorkshire Joint Railway proposal. It is clear that Rother Valley and wider South Yorkshire is building on its rich industrial past, ushering in a new era of economic renewal and innovation under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley, alongside his colleagues.

One thing is extremely clear: since my hon. Friend's election, he has placed Rother Valley at the centre of a political map. His community now has a loud, strong and powerful voice in Parliament, which cannot be ignored. He has made sure that Ministers and the whole Government are listening, and he has left us in no doubt that we must deliver for Rother Valley.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 May 2021

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals: Radovan Karadžić

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Promoting and enforcing international justice is central to global Britain's role as a force for good in the western Balkans and in the world. The conviction of Radovan Karadžić for genocide and grave crimes at Srebrenica, the siege of Sarajevo and other parts of the conflict was an essential part of addressing the horrors of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Ensuring accountability for such crimes is also pivotal for promoting reconciliation in the region.

On 24 March 2016, the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), in The Hague found Radovan Karadžić guilty of genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war committed during the conflict in and around Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) during the mid-1990s. The Court sentenced him to 40 years of imprisonment, which was increased on appeal to a life sentence.

Following a request to the United Kingdom from the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), the successor body to the ICTY, Radovan Karadžić will now be transferred to a prison in the UK to serve his sentence. Radovan Karadžić will be the fifth prisoner transferred to the UK by the ICTY/IRMCT.

The crimes for which Radovan Karadžić was convicted relate to actions taken in municipalities throughout BiH with a view to permanently removing Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory; spreading terror among the civilian population of Sarajevo through a campaign of sniping and shelling; taking UN personnel hostage; and the genocide at Srebrenica.

The United Kingdom signed a sentence enforcement agreement with the ICTY on 11 March 2004, allowing for sentences to be enforced in the UK, and for Her Majesty's Government to meet the associated costs. The IRMCT remains responsible for further decision making regarding his imprisonment, over and above the prisoner's daily care.

[HCWS20]

TREASURY

Official Development Assistance: Departmental Allocations

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): I would like to update the House on the official development assistance (ODA) allocation by Department, 2020-21.

The Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's provisional statistics on international development confirmed that the UK met the target to spend 0.7% of gross national income on official development assistance

in the 2020 calendar year. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-provisional-uk-aid-spend-2020>.

Following the end of the 2020-21 financial year, we are now publishing the total ODA allocations to Departments and cross-Government funds for 2020-21, as set by HM Treasury at the 2019 spending round and subsequently adjusted through supplementary estimates 2020-21.

The below allocations show the revised financial year budget for 2020-21 compared to SR19 allocations. As set out in the "Official Development Assistance spending for 2020: First Secretary of State's letter" published on 22 July, last summer the Government identified a package of possible reductions in their planned ODA spend for the calendar year 2020, which included arrangements to tailor spending further during the remaining months to enable the Government to manage ODA spend against an uncertain 0.7% position. That package included underspends, delaying activity and stopping some spend. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/official-development-assistance-oda-spending-for-2020-first-secretary-of-states-letter/official-development-assistance-oda-spending-for-2020-first-secretary-of-states-letter>.

The Foreign Secretary led a cross-government review of how ODA is allocated for 2021-22 against the Government's priorities after the 2020 spending review. The final allocations were provided in a written ministerial statement on 26 January 2021 (HCWS735).

Departmental ODA Allocations, 2020-21

ODA allocation by Department (£m)	2020-21 allocations made at the 2019 spending review	Revised 20-21 allocations
FCDO	11,865	11,075
BEIS	1,406	1,281
CSSF	687	644
HO	482	482
DHSC	301	273
Prosperity Fund	295	237
DEFRA	95	95
Other	58	54

1. The FCDO total for SR19 is constructed using the original DFID (accounting for reclassified R&D confirmed at SB20) and FCO SR19 allocations.

2. These figures do not account for budget exchanges or transfers that are agreed and occur between Departments at mains and supplementary estimates.

3. Departmental ODA outturn figures may differ from allocations due to transfers undertaken and agreed between Departments, budget exchanges, and any financial year underspend that may occur.

4. ODA allocations are adjusted as needed at fiscal events in line with OBR projections.

5. ODA in cross-government funds (CSSF and Prosperity Fund) is spent by several Government Departments.

6. "Other" includes DfE, DCMS, DWP, MOD, HMRC, HMT, ONS and Barnett given to the devolved Administrations as a result of UK Government spend on ODA.

[HCWS25]

E-Commerce: VAT Legislative Changes

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government will be introducing changes to simplify the way VAT is administered for some goods sold between Northern Ireland and the EU, and some low-value imports into Northern Ireland from 1 July 2021 (otherwise known as e-commerce VAT changes). This mirrors an

EU-wide reform, which the UK is implementing in Northern Ireland in line with the obligations set out under the Northern Ireland protocol, where EU VAT rules with respect to goods will continue to apply in Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland is, and will remain, part of the UK's VAT system.

The overall aim of the e-commerce VAT changes is to facilitate the declaration and payment of VAT for (a) sales of goods to consumers between Northern Ireland and the EU; and (b) low-value goods, where they are in consignments valued up to £135 (€150), supplied to consumers in Northern Ireland from non-EU countries, including from Great Britain. The changes will affect businesses and online marketplaces that are involved in these transactions. The consumer experience overall will not change.

On 1 January 2021, the UK introduced a set of new VAT rules for the imports of low-value goods into Northern Ireland from outside the UK and the EU. The EU's e-commerce reforms mirror many of those changes. Therefore, the Government consider that there will only be minimal changes for businesses selling imported goods to customers in Northern Ireland.

From a UK perspective, the e-commerce changes mean that:

A new single EU-wide distance selling threshold of £8,818 (€10,000) will be introduced for the sales of goods and services in the EU. The threshold will only apply to supplies of EU-located goods to and from Northern Ireland, which means that, EU suppliers who exceed the threshold will have to register for VAT in the United Kingdom if they wish to sell goods to consumers in Northern Ireland;

Online marketplaces will be liable for collecting and accounting for VAT on goods supplied in Northern Ireland, under certain circumstances; and

Low-value consignment relief, which relieves import VAT on consignments of goods of up to £15, will be removed fully in Northern Ireland and across the EU.

Alongside these changes, two new IT systems will be introduced: one for accounting and collecting VAT on sales of goods between Northern Ireland and the EU—the one-stop shop; and the other for accounting and collecting VAT on imports of non-excise goods from non-EU countries, where they are in consignments that do not exceed £135 (€150) in value—the import one-stop shop. Both systems are designed to reduce burdens on business and facilitate the collection of VAT on sales of goods across Northern Ireland and the EU; and are optional for businesses and online marketplaces to use.

The UK will be taking a phased approach to the introduction of these IT systems. HMRC have today published guidance on gov.uk setting out what this will mean for businesses. However, in many cases, if businesses and online marketplaces opt not to register to use these systems, there will be no change in how they declare and pay for VAT on their sales of goods to consumers in Northern Ireland and EU member states.

The Government will legislate for these changes shortly. [HCWS24]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Sport Broadcasting

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has written to the Premier League and to Sky, BT,

Amazon and the BBC, as the current holders of broadcast rights to the Premier League in the UK, to inform them that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) is “minded to” make an exclusion order under the Competition Act 1998, allowing the Premier League to renew its current broadcast agreements with current UK broadcast partners for an additional three-year period starting 2022-23, without conducting the normal tender process.

In order to remain consistent with past commitments to competition authorities and to avoid a potential breach of competition law, and absent covid-19, the Premier League would normally have re-tendered its domestic broadcast rights in early 2021 at the midpoint of the current three-year cycle and would have concluded sales by now. However, covid-19 has had a significant impact on the value of broadcast rights for football across Europe. Under an auction, it is plausible that the value of the Premier League's domestic rights could drop.

The football pyramid receives the majority of its funding via the Premier League's broadcast revenue. The Premier League and its clubs have already experienced financial losses totalling over £1.5 billion due to the impact of the pandemic, with further losses projected into next season. The wider football pyramid, from the championship through to women's football and the grassroots, has also suffered financial losses due to the pandemic.

The Government have been clear that football has the resources to support itself financially to deal with the consequences of the covid-19 pandemic. To provide financial stability for the football pyramid, the Premier League has therefore requested that the Government make an exclusion order allowing it to renew its current broadcast agreements for an additional three years, on the same commercial and licence terms, with current UK broadcast partners, without conducting a tender process.

Under paragraph 7 of schedule 3 to the Competition Act 1998, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has the power to exclude, via a so-called “exclusion order”, certain agreements from the application of UK competition law where there are “exceptional and compelling reasons of public policy” to do so.

If such an exclusion order is made, the Premier League has committed to:

guaranteeing existing levels of financial support for the football pyramid for four years from 2021-22 to the end of the 2024-25 season. This includes solidarity payments, parachute payments, youth development funding and funding for grassroots football at existing levels, worth over £1.5 billion over the three-year rights cycle.

maintaining at least this level of funding even if its international broadcast rights decrease in value when they are re-tendered individually over the next year into 2022, and to increase the level of funding if its international broadcast rights exceed their current value; and

providing a further minimum £100 million in solidarity and good causes funding to the end of the 2024-25 season, in roughly equal shares, to the National League, women's football, league one and two clubs, grassroots football and cross-game initiatives. This would make a significant financial contribution, including doubling the support for the non-league system, and providing crucial financial support for the women's game.

The Secretary of State for BEIS and DCMS Ministers have considered the impact of covid on the English football pyramid and are minded to agree the Government should act to enable the Premier League to provide financial stability to protect the pyramid following heavily disrupted seasons due to covid, for the following reasons:

Football clubs are a central part of local communities across the country. They provide a focal point, but also huge social and health impacts via outreach and wellbeing programmes and fundamentally provide economic value to local areas through jobs, income and tourism. There is therefore public policy value in preserving football clubs for their fans as consumers and local residents.

There is inherent value in the football league pyramid. As our national game, football holds a unique cultural position, and the preservation of a meritocratic, fair system through the football pyramid has a public policy benefit in its own right.

There is public policy value in having a healthy football system. It is a source of international reputation, attracts fans globally and is a major source of exports for the United Kingdom. The strength of the Premier League is one of the UK's soft power levers for the United Kingdom to attract investment, so having a financially stable system enables that.

As the football pyramid receives a majority of its funding from the Premier League, a reduction in the value of domestic broadcast rights would negatively affect the ability of the Premier League and its clubs to continue to directly and indirectly support the football pyramid in England in the current climate. This would compound the impact of the wider financial losses each level of the pyramid has experienced due to covid, with a real prospect that some clubs and facilities could cease to exist.

An exclusion order allowing the continuation of previously competitively tendered rights for another three years would support all of football following covid. It would help to promote the domestic game after heavily disrupted seasons due to covid by enabling the Premier League to commit to its solidarity payments, parachute payments, and funding for grassroots football at existing levels, worth a minimum of £1.5 billion to the football pyramid over three years.

An exclusion order would also enable the Premier League to release at least £100 million of new funding for particularly vulnerable areas of the sport. This would make a significant financial contribution, including doubling the support for the non-league system, and providing crucial financial support for the women's game.

The Government are in the process of a fan-led review of football governance, and the Premier League is undertaking a strategic review. The proposed exclusion order would not preclude those reviews from acting to change the distribution of broadcast revenue, but it would provide a level of certainty for the wider football pyramid and a minimum level of funding to maintain stability to 2024-25.

On advice from my Department, the Secretary of State for BEIS is satisfied that the Premier League's funding commitments as set out above would provide vital financial stability for the English football pyramid, allowing football to support itself financially, and that renewing the Premier League's domestic broadcasting rights for a limited period of three years only will help to minimise any possible detrimental effects on the broadcasting market and consumers.

On balance, the Secretary of State for BEIS is minded to conclude that there are exceptional and compelling reasons of public policy to make the proposed exclusion order, but would like to consider any representations from interested parties before a final decision is taken. Written representations should be sent to plbroadcastingexclusionorder@dcms.gov.uk by 5 pm on Friday 28 May 2021.

An exclusion order, if made, should be seen as a temporary measure in response to the pandemic. The Government are content that this request by the Premier League was not made as a result of the recently proposed European super league.

Ministers at my Department will keep Parliament updated on progress with this case. A copy of the "minded to" letter will be placed in the Library of both Houses.

[HCWS16]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Independent Reservoir Safety Review Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):

Today I am publishing Professor David Balmforth's review into the application of current legislation for reservoir safety which considers whether the regulation of reservoirs remains effective and robust in securing the ongoing safety of this critical infrastructure. This review follows Professor Balmforth's initial report into the lessons that could be taken from the Toddbrook reservoir incident, where parts of the spillway collapsed following significant heavy rainfall.

I thank Professor Balmforth, and all those who contributed, for a comprehensive assessment of the current reservoir safety framework, and his further recommendations for improvement.

Key findings

The report recognises that there is already a well-established regime to manage the safety of our reservoirs, and that the legislation that supports it is well understood by all those involved, with high levels of compliance. It recognises that many reservoirs have appropriate surveillance, operation and maintenance but the report raises concerns that this is not applied consistently across the industry as a whole.

The report found that both the legislation and industry practice has not always kept pace with the risk-based approach adopted for health and safety in other industries, resulting in a potentially disproportionate approach for measuring risk. Professor Balmforth also found that not all reports received from engineers were clear or well understood by owners and operators, which may be leading to delays in repairs, and/or ongoing regular maintenance at some sites.

The review highlights that the regulator for reservoir safety, the Environment Agency in England, has limited opportunity to quality-assure the overall processes and procedures, which is a key role of other regulators.

The role of panel engineers is central to ensuring all our reservoirs are managed and maintained to minimise risk to public safety. This report finds that while the appointment process ensures competent and capable individuals are in these roles, improvements could be made in respect of the current fragmented approach and leadership for ongoing development and knowledge sharing. There is concern that the supply of appropriately qualified and experienced engineers for the future may not keep pace with need.

Recommendations

Examples of good practice from across the reservoir industry, other regulated industries and international experience have been used to inform a set of comprehensive and interlinked recommendations for both Government and the industry to consider.

The recommendations include:

Seven recommendations (or parts thereof) that relate directly to developing a reservoir safety regime through a risk/hazard based approach

Five recommendations (or parts thereof) relating to panel engineer and owners roles and responsibilities

Three recommendations (or parts thereof) in respect of panel engineer supply and/or ongoing development of the engineers and/or owners

Six recommendations to strengthen the role of the regulator (Environment Agency) including new responsibilities, duties and powers

One recommendation for Government to consider the legislative framework in the round

I welcome these recommendations, and their potential to further strengthen how Government and the reservoir sector itself can embed and secure an effective safety culture. While some of the ideas and recommendations can, and indeed must, be taken forward by the industry itself as good practice now, others will likely require legislative changes.

DEFRA will take forward detailed work, including with the industry, to explore these recommendations further. This will ensure we have a reservoir safety regime that is fit for the future, without disproportionate burden on those responsible.

Alongside this review, Government have taken action to further strengthen reservoir safety, including making it a statutory requirement for registered reservoirs to prepare on-site emergency flood plans. I have issued a direction to this effect to all undertakers of large raised reservoirs in England. This will ensure that those responsible have plans in place and are prepared to mitigate and/or manage an emerging or actual emergency that could result in an uncontrolled release of water. Thankfully such incidents are very rare in this country, but the experience from Toddbrook clearly demonstrates how important this preparation is.

[HCWS17]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Coronavirus Restrictions Regulations

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 SI 2020/750 came into force on 18 July 2020 and have now been

extended until 17 July 2021. These regulations give powers to local authorities to issue a direction to impose prohibitions, restrictions or requirements in respect of:

individual premises (regulation 4(1));

events (regulation 5(1)); and

public outdoor places (regulation 6(1)).

A local authority may give a direction under regulation 4(1), 5(1) or 6(1) only if it considers that the following conditions are met:

a) that giving such a direction responds to a serious and imminent threat to public health,

b) that the direction is necessary for the purpose of preventing, protecting against, controlling or providing a public health response to the incidence or spread of infection by coronavirus in the local authority's area, and

c) that the prohibitions, requirements or restrictions imposed by the direction are a proportionate means of achieving that purpose.

The local authority must have regard to any advice provided by its local director of public health, its interim or acting director of public health, or a consultant appointed by the director, interim director or acting director of public health, in order to issue a direction under the No. 3 regulations.

The No. 3 regulations also allow for the Secretary of State to give a direction to a local authority requiring it to issue a direction under regulation 4(1), 5(1) or 6(1) if the conditions in paragraphs (a)-(c) would be met in relation to the direction. The Secretary of State may also revoke such a direction but must first consult the chief medical officer or deputy CMO of DHSC. To date, I have not given or revoked any directions under regulation 3 of the No. 3 regulations.

Support to local authorities

To help support local authorities in their decisions to issue directions under the No. 3 regulations, optional templates for directions, a decision-making guide and a process map have been provided by the Joint Biosecurity Centre. In addition, a newsletter is regularly published offering additional guidance, local authority case studies and communication of initiatives within local areas to provide assistance. Training has also been offered to all local authorities on the aims and use of the No. 3 regulations, most recently in March 2021.

Use of directions to respond to a serious and imminent threat to public health

Local authorities have used the No. 3 regulations to manage the risk of virus transmission in their local areas. Figures from 18 July 2020 to 29 April 2021 are:

Region	Bar/Club/Pub ¹	Restaurant ¹	Business ¹	Event ²	Outdoor places ³	Total
East midlands	15	12	3	1	1	32
East of England	6	2	0	5	0	13
London	14	2	16	3	0	35
North-east England	34	2	6	1	0	43
North-west England	45	20	25	15	0	105
South-east England	0	0	3	9	3	15

<i>Region</i>	<i>Bar/Club/Pub¹</i>	<i>Restaurant¹</i>	<i>Business¹</i>	<i>Event²</i>	<i>Outdoor places³</i>	<i>Total</i>
South-west England	0	0	1	3	0	4
West midlands	6	5	12	2	0	25
Yorkshire and Humber	12	7	6	8	0	33
Totals	132	50	72	47	4	305

¹ Regulation 4—directions relating to individual premises

² Regulation 5—directions relating to events

³ Regulation 6—directions relating to public outdoor places

Directions can be used to restrict activity in individual premises, events and public outdoor places in a variety of ways, such as restricting customer numbers, requiring seating to be suitably distanced and ensuring customer social distancing. A direction may also be used to close a business or place restrictions on, or prohibit, an event where the risk of transmission, and therefore risk to health, is considered too high. Two thirds of directions issued under regulation 4(1) have closed businesses, while one third have placed restrictions upon the business. Directions issued under regulation 4(1) account for 83% of all directions issued, while directions issued under regulation 5(1) on events, and regulation 6(1) on public outdoor places, account for 15% and 2% of all directions issued, respectively.

As of 29 April 2021, I have considered seven representations from appellants which were made under regulation 4(9)(b) and 5(9)(b) of the No. 3 regulations. On all occasions, after investigation and thorough consideration of the representations and epidemiological data, I decided that it was not appropriate to exercise my power in regulation 3(2) and I upheld the directions on the basis that they were made in response to a serious and imminent threat to public health, were necessary and proportionate, and were based on the epidemiological evidence and other available information.

I will continue to provide updates to the House regarding the use of these powers.

[HCWS28]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Legislation to Counter State Threats: Government Consultation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I am today publishing the consultation on the Government's legislative proposals to counter the evolving and full range of state threats posed to the United Kingdom.

The threat from hostile activity by states is a growing, diversifying and evolving one. States are becoming increasingly assertive in how they advance their own objectives and undermine our own. Unlike terrorists, whose methods rely on grabbing the public's attention, states conducting hostile activity against us will seek to operate in the shadows and remain hidden. While sometimes acts are conducted in broad daylight or through obvious propaganda channels, many of the myriad forms that state threats take will not always be visible: for example, espionage, political interference, sabotage, electoral interference, disinformation, cyber operations and intellectual property theft. Though these acts fall short of open conflict, the consequences for our democracy,

economic security and prosperity are real. We continue to face this very real and serious threat from those who seek to undermine and destabilise our country to pursue their own agendas.

In addition, the global landscape has changed significantly since comprehensive legislation was last passed in this area. New technologies and their widespread commercial availability, have created new opportunities and vectors for attack, lowering the cost and risk to states to conduct espionage. There are also a number of current and future trends that impact on both the threat and our response, including the covid-19 global pandemic, advances in data and technical innovation, and the increasing use of information operations that aim to sow discord, attempt to interfere in democracy, and disrupt the fabric of society.

There is a significant volume of work ongoing within Government to counter state threats and we are making the UK safer by strengthening our ability to deter, withstand and respond to it. This work includes bringing into force a new power under schedule 3 to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 and avowing the Joint State Threats Assessment Team to better understand the threat and inform the Government's response. However, there remains a compelling case for new legislation to help address the threat. Now is the time to comprehensively update existing laws and bring forward new powers.

At their core the legislative proposals in the consultation seek to do three things:

Modernise existing counter espionage laws to reflect the modern threat and modern legislative standards;

Create new offences, tools and powers to detect, deter and disrupt hostile activity in and targeted at the UK;

Improve our ability to protect official data and ensure the associated offences reflect the greater ease at which significant harm can be done.

The legislative proposals in this consultation have been developed through extensive review of current legislative provisions and collaboration with security and intelligence agencies and policy departments at the forefront of tackling state threats in the UK today. These proposals, which are intentionally designed to be country and actor agnostic, include:

Reform of the Official Secrets Acts 1911, 1920 and 1939—these Acts contain the core espionage offences which have failed to keep pace with the threat and modern legal standards;

Reform of the Official Secrets Act 1989—which governs the law around the unauthorised disclosure of official material and its onward disclosure; and

The creation of a foreign influence registration scheme—an important new tool to help combat espionage, interference, and to protect research in sensitive subject areas, as well as to provide a greater awareness of foreign influence currently being exerted in the UK.

The consultation also considers whether there is the case for new tools and powers to criminalise other harmful activity conducted by, and on behalf of states.

I have asked my officials to engage with parliamentarians, Committees and key industry, research and media sectors to ensure as many views as possible can be heard and considered to inform final policy legislative proposals. The Home Office will work in close partnership to consult with the devolved Executives given the clear applicability to the entire United Kingdom.

The input received through this consultation will help shape the tools and powers to ensure they are comprehensive, effective, workable and balance the protection of national security with the important rights and values we all enjoy in the UK.

This country is fortunate to have the best security services in the world. I stand shoulder to shoulder with them, just as I do with our police, and I am committed to ensuring that they have the tools in place to keep this country safe, disrupt hostile activity and punish those who conduct hostile acts against the UK.

Next steps

I will arrange for a copy of the consultation document to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The deadline for responses to the consultation is 22 July 2021, following which I will update the House and publish the Government's response to the consultation.

[HCWS23]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Pensions

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): The Government are committed to public service pensions which are fair to public sector workers. In 2014, reforms were made to the local government pension scheme in England and Wales (the LGPS) to make the scheme more sustainable and affordable for the longer term. These reforms followed the prior recommendations of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission and were part of similar reforms made across the public sector. The Government believe the 2014 changes to the LGPS balanced the interests of local government workers, employers and taxpayers fairly, and it remains the right package of benefits for the sector.

In July 2020, MHCLG consulted on changes to the local government pension scheme in England and Wales (LGPS). That consultation outlined proposals to amend LGPS "transitional protections" following a December 2018 Court of Appeal finding that similar provisions in the judicial and firefighters' pension schemes gave rise to unlawful discrimination. Transitional protections had been introduced by the Government to exempt scheme members nearest to retirement from the impact of the reforms made to public service pensions in 2014 and 2015.

In the LGPS, transitional protection was provided through an "underpin", providing protected members with the higher of their pension under the reformed, career average scheme and the pension they would have

been entitled to under the previous final salary scheme. In our consultation, we proposed extending underpin protection to younger qualifying members.

The Government received responses from a variety of stakeholders. These were detailed and varied, and the Government are grateful for the consideration and thought given to the issues covered in the consultation. Responses were largely supportive of the key elements of the proposals.

After consideration of the responses, we can now confirm the key elements of the changes to scheme regulations which will be made in due course. The overarching aim is that the changes will address the findings of the courts and provide protection to all qualifying members when their benefits are drawn from the scheme. The key points are:

Underpin protection will apply to LGPS members who meet the revised qualifying criteria, principally that they were active in the scheme on 31 March 2012 and subsequently had membership of the career average scheme without a continuous break in service of more than five years.

The period of protection will apply from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2022 but will cease earlier where a member leaves active membership or reaches their final salary scheme normal retirement age (normally 65) before 31 March 2022.

Where a member stays in active membership beyond 31 March 2022, the comparison of their benefits will be based on their final salary when they leave the LGPS, or when they reach their final salary scheme normal retirement age, if earlier.

Underpin protection will apply to qualifying members who leave active membership of the LGPS with an immediate or deferred entitlement to a pension.

A "two stage process" will apply for assessing the underpin so that, where there is a gap between a member's last day of active membership and the date they take their pension, members can be assured they are getting the higher benefit.

Scheme regulations giving effect to the above changes will be retrospective to 1 April 2014.

A full Government response, containing further detail on the matters addressed above, and on other issues which were covered in the consultation, will be published later this year. This will include the Government's decision on whether members will be expected to meet the underpin qualifying criteria in a single period of scheme membership for the underpin to apply.

It is anticipated that regulations giving effect to these changes will be made after new primary legislation in relation to public service pensions has completed its passage through Parliament, and the Government's intention is that regulations will come into force on 1 April 2023.

Ensuring that future pension accrual for all LGPS members is on a career average basis from 1 April 2022 will mean that local government workers continue to receive some of the best pension scheme benefits available in the UK, but that provision is more sustainable for the long term and more affordable for the taxpayer.

[HCWS26]

TRANSPORT

Motor Fuel and Biofuel Regulations 2021

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): I have today published the draft statutory instrument the Motor Fuel (Composition and

Content) and the Biofuel (Labelling) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2021 and accompanying explanatory memorandum. These regulations amend the Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) Regulations 1999 to require the introduction of E10 petrol (petrol with up to 10% ethanol) at filling stations in Great Britain. Current petrol in the UK contains up to 5% ethanol (referred to as E5).

Switching to E10 can reduce the CO₂ emissions from a petrol vehicle by around 2%. This, combined with an increase to overall renewable fuel targets (which has been subject to a separate consultation) could cut overall transport CO₂ emissions by a further 750,000 tonnes a year—the equivalent of taking around 350,000 cars off the road. E10 introduction will also help support UK farmers and particularly the ethanol industry based in the north-east of England. Producing ethanol also creates the valuable by-products of high-protein animal feed and stored CO₂. These reduce reliance on imported products, in line with the Government's bioeconomy strategy.

The regulations also ensure the ongoing availability of E5 petrol (petrol with 5% or less ethanol) for those with vehicles and equipment unsuitable for use with E10. The amendment to the Biofuel (Labelling) Regulations 2004 changes the consumer message that must be displayed when E10 petrol is sold at filling stations. These regulations also make amendments related to the United Kingdom's exit from European Union to rectify deficiencies in the regulations and replace references to European directive 98/70/EC with references to domestic legislation.

The regulations are published in accordance with the procedure required by schedule 8 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and agreed with Parliament. The draft regulations will be available for review for 28 days before they are laid and debates scheduled. They remake the provisions of the Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) and the Biofuel (Labelling) (Amendment) Regulations 2021. Those regulations were treated as if they were subject to the negative procedure, but as they amended provision made under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 using a power conferred before 21 June 2017, paragraph 13(1) of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 applied meaning that the affirmative procedure should have been used.

These regulations were subject to open consultation. The policy detail, Government response and impact assessment are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/introducing-e10-petrol>.

[HCWS27]

Licensing of Railway Undertakings: Draft Legislation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): As part of the Government's EU transition programme, the Department for Transport, working with colleagues in other Government Departments, has been in discussion with France on bilateral arrangements to support the continuation of cross-border services, which provide significant economic and social benefit to the United Kingdom. While other bilateral agreements remain under discussion in relation to the channel tunnel, the critical agreement relates to the recognition of operator licences, which are needed to operate rail services. Agreement in principle has now been reached with France at a technical level, subject to final legal

checks, and the agreement is expected to be concluded in the coming weeks, with ratification through the UK and French Parliaments then to follow.

Through these regulations, which will amend 2005 and 2019 regulations, the Government intend to take the necessary steps to ensure that the above-mentioned bilateral agreement on the rail operator licensing framework for the channel tunnel can be ratified, supporting the continued smooth operation of cross-border rail services. The regulations will enable cross-border operators to continue to operate as they do now and will not introduce any new requirements on them. Without this legislation, there is a real risk that rail freight services, excluding Eurotunnel shuttles, and Eurostar passenger services through the channel tunnel would cease to operate from 30 September, when the current EU contingency legislation applicable to the channel tunnel expires.

The regulations are being published in draft 28 days before they are due to be laid for affirmative debate. This is required under paragraph 14 of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 because the 2005 and 2019 regulations which are being amended were originally made under the European Communities Act 1972. The draft regulations and accompanying explanatory memorandum can be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS24]

High Speed 2 Phase 2a: Consultation Response Report

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I am today publishing a consultation report as required under section 60(1) of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands-Crewe) Act 2021. The report summarises the responses to the HS2 phase 2a local consultation held between 1 February and 26 February 2021 and has been prepared by the independent research company, Ipsos MORI. I am placing copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

I am carefully considering the report and will publish the Government response to their findings in June.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-05-13/HCWS19/>.

[HCWS19]

Maritime and Coastguard Agency: Business Plan 2021-22

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I am proud to announce the publication of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's (MCA) business plan for 2021-22. The MCA does vital work to save lives at sea, regulate ship standards and protect the marine environment. The agency affects not just those working on the coast or at sea, it upholds the legacy of our great maritime nation.

The business plan sets out:

MCA's work towards positioning the United Kingdom as the innovative flag of choice;

Supporting the development and implementation of emerging fuels and technologies, with a key drive towards reducing emissions and with the support and development of autonomous shipping and;

The vision for a future aviation strategy, including the next phase of helicopter contracts.

At the international level, MCA will work alongside the Department and with the input of other Government Departments to represent the UK's interests at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), and at other relevant bodies.

Domestically, MCA will, despite the impact of the pandemic, continue to work collaboratively to grow the maritime sector in the UK so that it continues to contribute positively to the economy. They will also continue to provide a valuable contribution to the delivery and ambitions that were set out in the Maritime 2050 strategy just over two years ago and its accompanying route maps.

This plan allows service users and members of the public the opportunity to see how the agency is developing and using new technologies to improve its services and performance.

The key performance indicators will assess how the agency is performing in operating its key services, managing reforms and the agency finances throughout the year.

The business plan will be available electronically on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-05-13/HCWS18/>.

[HCWS18]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud and Error Statistics

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The statistics for fraud and error in the benefit system for the financial year ending 2021 were published on 13 May 2021, at 9.30 am.

When the pandemic struck last year, the Department faced an unprecedented challenge in meeting the surge in new universal credit claims, which at their peak reached 10 times the levels we would expect during normal times.

DWP's considered judgement was to get money as quickly as possible to those who needed it. To do this, the Department took the decision to streamline our checks to ensure that people could make a claim and still stay at home, save lives and protect the NHS.

This decision meant that the Department could successfully pay an additional 3 million claims during the early months of the pandemic, at the peak of the surge in claims. This ensured that households affected by sudden job losses were able to access benefit payments to help them meet the cost of living during this challenging time.

We were careful to assess what the changes might mean for fraud and error, which is why we logged each change and considered the impact it would have. We also tracked every claim where we were unable to undertake the usual checks.

We began to restore our processes at the earliest opportunity. Limited by capacity constraints due to social distancing and "stay at home" guidance, we accelerated our innovation by building new safeguards,

like our enhanced checking service, a team of trained investigators who review claims and contact claimants by telephone to obtain further information or evidence where there is suspected fraud.

We also increased the role of our integrated risk and intelligence service in co-ordinating the monitoring of, and response to, fraud risks from individuals and organised crime groups. A targeted attack on the benefits system by organised criminals at the height of the pandemic was thwarted by the Department for Work and Pensions, which meant we prevented an estimated £1.7 billion from being paid to people trying to scam the system.

Throughout the pandemic, our serious organised crime teams continued to target organised crime groups working collaboratively with other Government Departments and law enforcement agencies nationally and across borders. We have recently identified another organised attempt to fraudulently claim universal credit at scale and have worked in conjunction with the police to arrest suspects involved, seizing evidence which will enable us to pursue the perpetrators. We will pursue and prosecute those who commit fraud against the benefit system.

The action we took in terms of reinstating—where possible—our normal checks, introducing mitigations and actively intervening in cases has made a significant difference to the level of fraud we might otherwise have incurred.

However, we always knew a minority would abuse the situation the country faced and were clear that the level of fraud and error would inevitably increase, a fact recognised by the National Audit Office. The fraud and error figures published today confirm that overall losses last year were 3.9%, mainly through fraudulent activity from a minority of claimants in the pandemic.

All benefit fraud is wrong. It is a crime and we are bearing down on it as the country emerges from the pandemic. We take any abuse of taxpayers' money seriously, but it is especially disappointing to see people exploit a global pandemic in this way.

We are part way through an exercise which is examining all the cases we tagged and reapplying the verification standards that would have been applied at the time, had it not been for covid-19. We will correct each and every case where we find something is wrong, and where appropriate, we will bring to bear the full force of the law.

In addition, at the Budget the Government announced £44 million of funding for a package of measures designed to prevent fraud and error entering the system, including the expansion of both the enhanced checking service and the integrated risk and intelligence service. This will help build on the work already undertaken to protect universal credit, which has seen us improve the way we collect information, introduce new housing costs verification procedures and develop risk profiling strategies.

The figures announced today show how hard we, as a Department, have worked during these difficult times to offset fraud and error. Despite the huge surge in claims and redeployment of staff, the proportion of fraudulent claims has remained broadly the same as pre-pandemic levels. While the value of overpayments has increased, this is in part a consequence of our decision to suspend

the minimum income floor (MIF) in order to support self-employed universal credit claimants during the pandemic. We will be reinstating MIF in August 2021.

Moreover, official error in universal credit decreased this year, which is testament to the efforts of our staff and the hard work put in to support claimants.

We stand by our decision to honour our obligation to those who found themselves relying on the welfare safety net to support them through these exceptional

times. Given the circumstances, no responsible Government could have considered an alternative course of action.

The Department continues to focus on reducing fraud and error. We are confident the plans we are putting in place will reduce the losses incurred during the last year and will help us develop new approaches to root out the scourge of benefit fraud.

[HCWS21]

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