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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 9 February 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Inflation: Households and Businesses

1. **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent steps the Government have taken to tackle the impact of inflation on households and businesses in Wales. [905481]

2. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent steps the Government have taken to tackle the impact of inflation on households and businesses in Wales. [905482]

8. **Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): What recent steps the Government have taken to tackle the impact of inflation on households and businesses in Wales. [905489]

12. **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What recent steps the Government has taken to tackle the impact of inflation on households and businesses in Wales. [905493]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The Chancellor announced a £9.1 billion energy bills rebate last week. This includes a £200 energy bill discount for households across the UK, including Wales, as well as an additional £175 million to the Welsh Government.

Beth Winter: On Monday, this Conservative Government imposed a real-terms cut to social security benefits and pensions of approximately 4%. This is on top of the hike in national insurance contributions, the rise in the energy price cap and cuts to universal credit and working tax credit, which the Bevan Foundation in Wales has estimated will take approximately £286 million out of the Welsh economy. People in Wales are genuinely fearful of the impact that these cuts are going to have on living standards, so I ask the Secretary of State: how can he justify voting for these measures, which will not only exacerbate existing poverty but drive more and more people into hardship and poverty?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady has constituents, as we all do, who are of course concerned about the cost of living challenges ahead, but I hope I can reassure her by naming, as I have already done, a few of the measures we are putting in place. They include the substantial additional money via the Barnett formula for the Welsh Government, but also the universal credit taper is worth £1,000 per household, the increase in the living wage is also worth £1,000 a year for those in receipt of it and

there are the warm home discounts. Of course, the main thrust of what we are trying to do is create the right circumstances for a jobs-led recovery.

Nick Smith: Tesco's boss says that food inflation will hit 5%. Families across Wales will struggle to cope, so how will the Secretary of State help people in food poverty?

Simon Hart: I can only refer the hon. Member to my earlier comments. We want to be extremely sure, just like him, because Conservative Members have a similar dynamic in our own constituencies, that we are putting in place everything we can, whether that is the universal credit taper, the increase in the living wage, an increase in the tax threshold, or indeed the jobs-led recovery I have mentioned. The fact is that the economic prospects for the UK, including Wales, are actually growing at a reasonable pace, although it can always be faster and greater. I am hoping I can reassure his constituents, just as I am attempting to reassure mine, that we have their best interests at heart when it comes to food poverty.

Nia Griffith: People do understand the need to provide more money for health and social care, but Welsh businesses and workers—they now face rampant inflation, bringing escalating costs and reduced consumer spending power—are angry that the UK Government are hitting them with the national insurance rise while the Chancellor has simply written off billions. What talks has the Secretary of State had with Cabinet colleagues about implementing concerted efforts to recover the £5 billion of taxpayers' money taken fraudulently by criminals in covid support, and about engaging with companies that were vastly overpaid by the UK Government for personal protective equipment contracts on recognising their corporate social responsibility and returning excess profits, rather than hitting workers and businesses across Wales with this national insurance rise?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady raises an important point about fraud. All I can tell her is that the Treasury is a world leader in tracking down, eliminating and reducing the risk of fraud, and I think she should give it some credit for the remarkable work that it has already done in that respect.

Anna McMorris: An 80-year-old constituent of mine has contacted me to say that he and his 78-year-old wife currently pay £68 a month on energy bills and they just about manage, but they have been told that that will go up to nearly £3,000 for the year. Meanwhile, BP has announced its highest profits in years. The Government's answer is to hand out loans, but Labour has a plan to make energy companies pay. My constituent is worried and angry, and he wrote to me asking me to shout and scream at the Secretary of State. I do not think that will work, but what does he expect me to say to my constituent?

Simon Hart: What I hope I could pass on to the hon. Lady's constituent is that deploying the usual Labour response to pretty well every problem in the world, which is to find somebody and tax them, is not the right answer, because that would have a knock-on cost that would then be picked up by the very constituent she mentioned. The idea that tax is anything other than a disincentive in this particular instance is a myth. Much more important are our attempts to make sure that families in the position her constituent points out are looked after to the best of our ability.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has mentioned, the Chancellor has announced that 80% of English households will receive a £150 council tax rebate with effect from April this year. As a consequence, the Welsh Government have received an additional £175 million under the Barnett formula. Is it a matter of regret to him, as it is to me, that the Welsh Government have not yet announced that that money will be passed on to Welsh council tax payers, who are entitled to precisely the same benefits as their English counterparts?

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The Treasury was explicit in what the Barnett consequentialia were for the Welsh Government, and I agree with him. I do not understand why families and businesses in Wales are still unclear about how that money will be used.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): People in rural areas will be at a particular disadvantage during the upcoming energy price crisis. About two thirds of my constituents are not connected to the gas grid and are therefore not covered by the protection of the energy price cap. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as rural areas will experience particular hardship, the Welsh Government have a responsibility to act fast to get the £175 million that they have just received out the door as quickly as possible?

Simon Hart: Absolutely. I refer to my earlier answer. That is critical, because we probably have a higher proportion of people in Wales in that position than almost anywhere else in the UK. So this is urgent, and I urge Labour Members to put as much pressure as they can on their colleagues in Cardiff to make it happen.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the increase in and extension of the warm home discount, which will shield the most vulnerable across the UK from the impact of inflation?

Simon Hart: I certainly will. There is a contrast worth highlighting, as the Government's solutions to these problems are to provide direct and positive interventions for families across Wales rather than defaulting to the lazy position of finding an energy producer and taxing it, as if that would resolve the problem.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is not just record inflation that is hitting Welsh households hard. Rents in Wales have increased by nearly 10% in the last year, the third highest rate in the United Kingdom outside London and Northern Ireland. When it comes to paying bills, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Secretary thinks that a monthly saving on the BBC licence fee of 87p over two years is

“one of the few direct levers we have in our control as a Government.”—[*Official Report*, 17 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 39.]

Is that really the extent of the Government's ambition to help people in Wales cope with a Conservative cost of living crisis?

Simon Hart: I am grateful—I think—for the hon. Lady's question, but she seems to overlook the numerous examples that I have already given, and I have an even

longer list of ways in which the UK Government have stepped in, during covid in particular. We have helped protect 470,000 jobs and 60,000 Welsh businesses, dished out £2.4 billion in business loans, increased the living wage and adapted the universal credit taper—I could go on, if only you would allow me, Mr Speaker. She needs to reflect on the long list of positive things to which Labour has contributed almost nothing by way of assistance.

Jo Stevens: Well, people across Wales are facing the biggest drop in living standards in 30 years under the Secretary of State's watch. Inflation is at a 10-year high and rising, national insurance levels are increasing by more than 10%—another Tory broken manifesto promise—energy bills are up 54% and rents in Wales are up 10%. Wales is bearing the brunt of the incompetence and chaos not just at No. 10 but at No. 11, while the Secretary of State sits at the Cabinet table and lets it all happen, does he not?

Simon Hart: No. The hon. Lady seems to have forgotten that there has been something called a pandemic in the last two years, and that has had a significant effect on the global economy. She also seems to have forgotten that her party is responsible for a number of the standard of living issues in Wales, yet we never hear so much as a squeak of criticism about Welsh Labour's performance in Cardiff. I urge her again to reflect—perhaps through *Hansard* tomorrow—on the comments that I have made and the numerous ways in which the Government have intervened in some of these economic challenges, the result of which is that more people are now on the payroll than before the pandemic began and the UK economy is the fastest growing in the G7. Perhaps she should reflect on those facts before raising the issues that she has.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the lowest paid in Wales will benefit from our increase in the national living wage, protecting them from the impact of rising inflation?

Simon Hart: I certainly can. In answering that question, it is also worth reflecting on the fact that the Labour solution around VAT—an interesting recognition of a Brexit dividend—would not have that effect. The Treasury analysis is that Labour's proposal would unduly hit the families our proposals are designed to help.

Young Audiences Content Fund

3. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of closing the young audiences content fund on Welsh language broadcasting.

[905483]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): There will be a full evaluation of the fund's impact on the provision of public service broadcasting for young people, including Welsh language content. The Government are committed to Welsh language broadcasting. S4C will receive £88.8 million a year for the first two years of the licence fee settlement, rising in line with inflation thereafter.

Ben Lake: Diolch, Mr Speaker. The fund's 5% target for content in the indigenous languages has been invaluable to producers of Welsh language children's programmes such as an upcoming drama series about children's mental health and, of course, the production of new episodes of "Sali Mali". Mike Young, the producer of "Sam Tan" and the creator of "SuperTed", has previously stated that those much-loved favourites would not have been made without state support. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss the impact of the fund's closure and ways we can secure the future of original children's content in the Welsh language?

David T. C. Davies: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that issue. I would approach it with an open mind. I will perhaps remind the hon. Gentleman that it was a Conservative Government who established S4C. It was also a Conservative Government who introduced the Welsh Language Act 1993. He may also know that it was a Conservative Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee who allowed Welsh to be spoken for the first time in Select Committee hearings. Modesty prevents me from saying any more on that, but I can assure him that we will always want to support the Welsh language.

Broadband Coverage and Speeds

4. **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on improving broadband coverage and speeds in Wales. [905484]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Secretary of State recently met the Culture Secretary to discuss the delivery of the UK Government's £5 billion Project Gigabit, which will deliver gigabit connections to the hardest to reach 20% of the UK. Up to 234,000 homes and businesses in Wales should benefit from this investment.

Jonathan Edwards: Diolch, Mr Speaker. According to the House of Commons Library, 17.4% of lines in my constituency receive less than 10 megabits per second, one of the worst records in the British state. It is clear, therefore, that the UK Government and Welsh Government broadband strategies are failing large parts of Carmarthenshire. Will the Wales Office emphasise that mission 4 of the levelling-up White Paper published last week prioritises areas that have been neglected so far?

David T. C. Davies: Those figures are concerning, and I agree that that connectivity needs to become a priority. However, the statistics will also show that the number of homes connected to fast broadband in Wales has risen from just 11% in 2019 to 47% in 2022. That number continues to rise and later this week—in fact, tomorrow—I shall be visiting the Swansea Bay growth deal to look at a project that will further increase connectivity in Wales.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Bore da and diolch, Mr Speaker. Following on from that question about speed and infrastructure in Wales, my hon. Friend may be aware that back in the '80s and '90s I travelled quite quickly with my fellow students on the train from Lampeter to Aberystwyth. Will he provide an update

on the likelihood of bringing back the train line between Carmarthen, Lampeter and Aberystwyth, especially in the 200th anniversary year of the setting up of St David's University College in Lampeter?

David T. C. Davies: That is an exciting and interesting suggestion, and one of a number that will be looked at. What I am doing, with the Secretary of State for Wales and the Secretary of State for Transport, is looking at projects already under way, such as the improvements to the north Wales coast line and to the south Wales relief line.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney) was trying to say that there would be an improvement to broadband if the train line was reopened. That is the only way his question can be connected to the lead question.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto promised gigabit-capable broadband to every home and business across Wales, and across the UK, by 2025. How does the Minister justify the levelling down in his Government's so-called levelling-up White Paper, which now only states targeting 70% to 80% by 2025?

David T. C. Davies: I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree that we have set some very ambitious targets. I certainly hope we are going to meet them, but I just point out once again that the number of homes connected to fast broadband has risen from just 11% to 47% in three years. I think that is an exceptionally good outcome. I can assure him that we want to see that figure continue to rise.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Diolch, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) is absolutely right to raise this issue, because broadband speeds in urban areas—not only in Wales, but in England—are not always up to the mark. At the same time, will the Minister praise, for example, Openreach, which provides fibre to the premises in very rural areas of Wales such as the Dysynni valley in southern Snowdonia?

David T. C. Davies: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend wants to declare a particular interest. Obviously we support Openreach in delivering fibre to the hardest-to-reach areas, but I take him back to the whole purpose of Project Gigabit—to deliver to the hardest-to-reach 20%. The figures already show that we are being very successful in achieving that greater connectivity in rural Wales.

Crown Estate: Devolution

5. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of devolving control of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government. [905485]

6. **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of devolving control of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government. [905487]

9. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of devolving control of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government. [905490]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): There is no public appetite at all in Wales to devolve the Crown Estate, which would serve merely to fragment the market and delay the further development of key projects.

Joanna Cherry: The Scottish Government have awarded 25 GW of offshore wind development rights through Crown Estate Scotland to 17 projects, which has put Scotland at the forefront of global offshore wind development. It is more than double the UK's existing offshore wind capacity and it will create high-quality jobs and significant local investment. Why does the Secretary of State not think that devolving the Crown Estate to Wales would benefit the people of Wales in the way that it is benefitting the people of Scotland?

Simon Hart: I have spoken on this subject recently to port authorities, investors, councils, employees and, most importantly, the public. Not a single person—not one—has suggested to me that the future of floating offshore or, indeed, any other renewables will benefit from the devolution of the Crown Estate. This is an international opportunity for Wales. The supply chain benefits are huge and, actually, the Scottish National party's ambitions are far too modest in this respect.

Allan Dorans: The recent devolution of the Crown Estate seabed is predicted to enable Scotland's offshore wind farms to reliably power around 30 million homes across the United Kingdom. Has the Secretary of State assessed how many millions of homes could be powered by Welsh offshore generation?

Simon Hart: I think I caught the majority of the hon. Gentleman's question. Yes, we have undertaken significant analysis of the potential, but the potential is massively enhanced by this being a UK-wide—an international—approach. It is not enhanced—indeed, it is jeopardised—by constant reference to devolution of the Crown Estate, which seems to be almost off-putting to future investors in this particular sector.

Richard Thomson: Well, it has not put off investment in Scotland, certainly.

The Crown Estate portfolio in Wales, with its marine assets, has risen in value from £49 million in 2020 to its current value of £603 million. The evidence from Scotland is that it is hugely beneficial for the devolved Government to be handling that and maximising the supply chain opportunities. Why is the Minister not open to the idea of devolving it, or is the message to the people of Wales that when it comes to governance in Wales, Westminster still knows best?

Simon Hart: Absolutely not. I made it clear earlier that where I take my advice from and listen the most intently is the views of port authorities, councils, investors, employees and the public. That is what really matters to me. This is about job creation and sustaining jobs and not about looking at every single issue through the prism of independence and what works for the Scottish Government. This is about making this work for the people of Wales, and that is what is important to us.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Devolution of the Crown Estate is a total red herring, and it so cynical of nationalists to turn every issue into an anti-United Kingdom process row. Does my right hon. Friend agree that floating offshore wind represents a hugely important opportunity for Wales, particularly for the port of Milford Haven in my constituency—Milford Haven is shared by his constituency—and will he assure the House that he and his colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are doing everything to ensure that Wales and Pembrokeshire benefit from the opportunities of renewable marine energy?

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend is right; I met the Crown Estate last week and had exactly that conversation. I have to say that it was an exciting, interesting, innovative conversation about all the possibilities that he mentions, which exist across the whole UK but particularly in the Celtic sea. I repeat what I said earlier: the emphasis and impetus come from investors, members of the public and port authorities, not from nationalists who just wish to look at everything through the prism of their own power base.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Secretary of State has just said that there is no public interest or appetite at all, and that not one person is saying that devolving the Crown Estate is a good idea. By this morning, 10,000 people had already signed a petition asserting Wales's right to reap the benefits of our own national resources.

The ScotWind auction raised almost £700 million for Scotland's public finances. To reassure the Secretary of State, this is not a new tax. In the heat of the cost of living crisis, Scottish renewable natural resources generate revenue for the benefit of the Scottish people, providing a better welfare service than in Wales. Is it not clear that devolving the Crown Estate in Scotland has improved the Government's ability to respond to the cost of living crisis, and so it would in Wales?

Simon Hart: Shock, horror—the hon. Gentleman raises that petition. Of course, it represents a tiny, tiny, tiny proportion of the population of Wales, even assuming that everybody who signed it is resident in Wales.

I chose my words carefully earlier. The people I want to listen to most intently are the people who will do the work and benefit from the work: port authorities, councils, employees, the public and investors. Every single person I have spoken to about the issue concludes that devolving the Crown Estate is nothing more than a distraction that would actually damage the prospects of its being the success story it deserves to be.

Hywel Williams: "Parity with Scotland" is possibly not the catchiest of slogans, but here it is just a matter of fairness. Will the Secretary of State now commit, in this Parliament, to the devolution of the Crown Estate to Wales?

Simon Hart: No.

Connectivity and Infrastructure

7. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve connectivity and infrastructure in Wales. [905488]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Government are committed to levelling up across the whole United Kingdom, including Wales. Better connectivity and infrastructure are key to that, which is why we asked Sir Peter Hendy to conduct the Union connectivity review.

Andrew Bowie: Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to the actions that he has announced, the Union connectivity review pledges to do much more, including reducing journey times on the east coast rail line and protecting important domestic routes between London and Aberdeen, for example? It shows levelling up in action and is a demonstration of this Government working for the entire United Kingdom, including Wales.

David T. C. Davies: To draw on the link between Wales and Scotland, I congratulate Loganair, which flies between Cardiff and Edinburgh and will no doubt benefit from the cut in air passenger duty for regional airports. As a result, we can expect to see an increase in demand for flights, which is good news for Cardiff airport, good news for travellers and good news for the Union.

Cross-Border Transport Connectivity

10. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on improving cross-border transport connectivity. [905491]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Cross-border links are vital to achieving levelling up in every part of the United Kingdom, including Wales. Last week, I met the Welsh Government's Transport Minister to discuss how our Governments can work together to improve those vital links, including through the recommendations in the Union connectivity review.

Christian Matheson: If you go by train to north Wales, Mr Speaker, the chances are that you will go through Chester. We have plans ready to go to increase capacity at Chester station, but we are being held up because the Minister's colleagues in the Westminster Department for Transport will not agree on Union connectivity grants for Network Rail and Transport for Wales. Will he please have a word and tell them to get a move on?

David T. C. Davies: I am sure that my colleagues in Westminster will be doing absolutely everything they can to improve connectivity links between Wales and England, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman could have a word with his colleagues in the Welsh Labour Government, who have decided to abandon road building in Wales. Traffic congestion is bad for the environment, and a good road network is good for a flourishing economy.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The Llanymynech-Pant bypass proposal is the most important connection for my constituency, although it is 90% in England. I welcome the Treasury Bench's commitment of £45 million to get it to the next stage, but will the Minister meet with me to ensure that the Welsh Government, with their road blocking and lack of vision on Union connectivity, deliver this road?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend has been an absolute champion of the bypass over many years—*[Interruption.]*—and I am sure that everyone on this side of the House is deeply disappointed—

Mr Speaker: Order. Will you tell me the answer again; I could not hear you.

David T. C. Davies: I am sure that everyone on this side of the House is deeply disappointed that the Welsh Labour Government have decided to abandon road building in Wales.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I want to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905531] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 February.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I can tell the House today that it is my intention to return on the first day after the half-term recess to present our strategy for living with covid. Provided that the current encouraging trends in the data continue, it is my expectation that we will be able to end the last domestic restrictions, including the legal requirement to self-isolate following a positive test, a full month early.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Gareth Bacon: The Northern Ireland protocol frustrates business, undermines the Belfast agreement, and restricts the free movement of goods and people within our United Kingdom. What action will my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Union take to reunite the UK and uphold the interests of all its residents, including those living in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is quite right. The protocol does not require, contrary to how it is being applied by our friends, all foods, all medicines and all plants to be systematically checked in the way that they are. We must fix it, and with good will and common sense I believe we can. However, if our friends do not show the requisite common sense, we will of course trigger article 60.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Was the Business Secretary right to say that fraud is not something that people experience in their day-to-day lives?

The Prime Minister: Of course, this Government and this country despise those who defraud people, and that is why we crack down on fraudsters. We have strengthened our anti-fraud taskforce and we are bringing forward an economic crime Bill. We also attach huge importance to tackling neighbourhood crime and crimes of violence, and I am pleased that those crimes are down 17%.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister's answer has a big hole in it. We have had lockdowns for the past two years; two crimes that people could commit were online fraud and throwing parties. So far as I can see, the numbers for both have gone through the roof.

However, I was asking the Prime Minister about the 14,000 cases of fraud a day. Many older people have been duped out of hard-earned savings, but the Business Secretary casually suggests on TV, "Don't worry; it's not real crime." There is a crime gang in Manchester nicking cars and shipping them around the world, all financed by covid loans from the taxpayer. What is the Chancellor's response? Write off £4 billion in losses, and block an investigation by the National Crime Agency. The Prime Minister's Cabinet is turning a blind eye to scammers. Is it any wonder that his anti-fraud Minister realised that no one in Government seemed to care and threw in the towel?

The Prime Minister: No, because what we are doing is tackling crime across the board. That is why we are investing more in tackling fraud, but we are also tackling the neighbourhood crime that does such massive psychological damage to people in this country. We are tackling knife crime, burglary and crimes of violence in the street with tougher sentences—which Labour voted against, by the way—and putting more police out on the street. And we are able to afford it because we have a strong economy and we are coming back strongly from covid, and that is thanks to the big calls that this Government got right.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister's anti-fraud Minister quit, saying that the failure of Government to tackle fraud was "so egregious" that he had to

"smash some crockery to get people to take notice."

It seems that the Prime Minister has not noticed the broken plates and shattered glass all around him. It is almost as if he has been completely distracted for weeks.

Talking of scams, households are going to have to fork out an extra £19 billion on their energy bills. The Government are insulting people's intelligence by pretending they are giving them a discount. It is not; it is a con. It is a buy now, pay later scheme. A dodgy loan, not a proper plan. *[Interruption.]* He shakes his head, so let me put this in language he might understand. When his donors give him cash to fund his lifestyle and tell him he has to pay it all back later, are they giving him a loan or a discount?

The Prime Minister: Our plan to tackle the cost of living is faster, more efficient and more generous than anything that Labour has set out. We have lifted the living wage by record amounts, we have cut the effective tax for people on universal credit and we are now setting out a fantastic plan to help people with the cost of energy. It is more generous and more effective than anything Labour has set out. It is £9.1 billion—it is huge sums that we are using to help people across the country—and the only reason we can afford it is that we have a strong economy, the fastest growing in the G7—as I think I may have pointed out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman last week—not just last year but this year as well.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister clearly hasn't got the first clue what the Chancellor has signed him up to, so let me help him out. His plan is to hand billions of pounds of taxpayers' cash to energy companies and then force families to pay it off in instalments for years to come. If it sounds like he is forcing people to take out a loan, and it looks like he is forcing people to take out a loan, is it not just forcing people to take out a loan?

The Prime Minister: We are giving people in bands A to D council tax valuations across the country—27 million homes—the equivalent of a £150 rebate off their council tax. Labour's offer is £89. Ours is faster, more generous and more effective. This is a global problem, caused by the spike in gas prices, but what Labour would do is clobber the oil and gas companies right now—*[Interruption.]* Yes they would—with a tax that would deter investment in gas, just when this country needs gas as we transition to green fuel. It would be totally ridiculous, and it would raise prices for consumers.

Keir Starmer: I was always worried that the Prime Minister wasn't one for reading terms and conditions and that he didn't understand what the Chancellor had signed him up to. He has just confirmed my worst fears. There is an alternative—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. If you want to carry on, carry on outside: I am not having this perpetual noise coming from the Front Bench. Secretaries of State should know better. I expect better. I certainly do not need to put up with it any more.

Keir Starmer: There is an alternative. The Prime Minister can stand up to his Chancellor and tell him to support families rather than loading them with debt. He can tell him to look at those bumper profits of the oil and gas giants. Shell's profits are up £14 billion this year. BP's profits are up £9.5 billion this year. Every second of the day, they have made £750 extra profit from rising prices. At the same time, households are facing an extra £700 a year on their bills. Why on earth are this Government forcing loans on British families when they should be asking those with an unexpected windfall to pay a little more to keep household bills down?

The Prime Minister: The Labour plan would clobber suppliers. It is an improvement on what I thought the right hon. Gentleman stood for, which was nationalising the energy companies. Maybe he has dropped that one now. I cannot tell whether he has dropped that one; maybe he has. What he would be doing is hitting the energy companies at precisely the moment when we need to encourage them to go for more gas, because we need to transition now to cleaner fuels, and this Government are providing £9.1 billion of support. It is more generous than anything Labour is offering.

I repeat my point: the only reason we can do it is that we kept our economy moving in those hard times, when Labour took the wrong decisions. We came out of lockdown in July last year when the Leader of the Opposition opposed it, and we kept going over Christmas and new year when they opposed it, and that is why we have the fastest-growing economy in the G7, not just last year but this year as well, as I never tire of saying.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister can bluff and bluster all he likes. The reality is this. On top of the Tory tax rises, on top of the soaring prices, the loan shark Chancellor and his unwitting sidekick have now cooked up a buy-now, pay-later scheme. It leaves taxpayers in debt, while oil and gas companies say that they have more money than they know what to do with. It is the same old story with this Government: get in a mess, protect their mates and ask working people to pick up the bill. But is the Prime Minister not worried that everyone can now see that with this Prime Minister and this Chancellor it is all one big scam, and people across the country are paying the price?

The Prime Minister: What they can see is a Government who are absolutely committed to doing the right thing for the people of this country and taking the tough decisions, when Labour is calling for us to take the easy way out and spend more taxpayers' money. It was this Government who decided to keep going in July, when the Leader of the Opposition wanted to stay in lockdown. We kept going over Christmas and new year.

By the way, it occurs to me that we were also able to use those Brexit freedoms to deliver the fastest booster roll-out and the fastest vaccine roll-out—[*Interruption.*] Yes, when the Leader of the Opposition not only voted 48 times to go back into the EU—yes he did—but he also voted to stay in the European Medicines Agency.

Our plan for jobs is working. We have record low youth unemployment. Our plan for the NHS and care is working. Labour has no plan at all. Our plan for the country is working. We have a great vision to unite and level up across our country. Labour has no plan whatever. I say to him: plan beats no plan. We have a great plan for our country; they play politics.

Q3. [905533] **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): The Government's £9 billion support to help with rising energy bills is most welcome; but will the Prime Minister assure the people of Anglesey and beyond that it is full steam ahead for new nuclear, like Wylfa Newydd, and that this Government are moving at pace on the future nuclear enabling fund, so that the UK has energy security, jobs and investment right here on these shores?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I think it was only last week that I was congratulating my hon. Friend on her fantastic advocacy for nuclear in Ynys Môn. Do not forget, Mr Speaker, that Labour allowed nuclear capacity to decline by 11% on their watch; I do not think my hon. Friend has forgotten that. We want to get back up there, and that is why there will be at least one big nuclear project this Parliament—at least one—and our Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill will support that objective.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I am sure that you and the entire House will want to join me in welcoming the Remembering Srebrenica campaign, that launched our yearly events in Parliament last night. We must all continue to strive for ongoing peace in Bosnia.

The flurry of changes in Downing Street over the last few days is a sight to behold. It is amazing how much energy this Prime Minister can sum up when it comes to saving his own skin. But while he has been busy rearranging the deckchairs, in the real world people continue to be punished by the Tory cost of living crisis. Yesterday,

openDemocracy found that as a direct result of the Chancellor's national insurance hike nurses will, on average, take a £275-a-year pay cut in April. That pay cut will hit at the very same moment that soaring energy bills land—bills that have shot up £1,000 in the space of a year.

It is a bill day and the rest of the public simply cannot afford it. So, rather than the Prime Minister and the Chancellor scrapping over the Tory leadership, will they do something useful and scrap their regressive hike in national insurance?

The Prime Minister: It was interesting that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) did not mention that, because I think everybody can see how vital this is. We have to clear our covid backlogs; we have 6 million people already on the waiting lists; I am afraid that will go up, and we need to be recruiting the staff now. That is why we are recruiting 50,000 more nurses. There are 11,000 more this year than there were last year. To the point made by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), let me say that we have increased the starting salary for nurses by 12.8%, in addition to the bursaries and other help that we give them. We value our nurses, we love our NHS and we are paying for it.

Ian Blackford: Actions speak louder than words and if the Prime Minister wants to reward nurses, he needs to pay them. They are the very backbone of the national health service—the very people he is hitting with a pay cut in April. I should not have to remind the Prime Minister that at the same time as those nurses were going into work every day to fight a pandemic, 16 different parties were happening in his Government. The public know what nurses sacrificed during the pandemic, and they know exactly what this rule-breaking Prime Minister and his Government were up to. So are the Prime Minister and his Chancellor seriously telling those nurses that their reward for seeing us through the pandemic is a £270 wage cut?

The Prime Minister: What we are telling the people of this country now is that we back our fantastic nurses all the way. What they want is more nurses, which is why record numbers are in training and why we had 11,000 more in the NHS this year than there were last year. Those are fantastic investments in our country and in our society, and I must say that it is peculiar that, as I understand it, the Scottish nationalist party's approach to healthcare is now to cut off the bottom of doors in schools in Scotland in order to improve ventilation.

Q5. [905535] **Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): As a proud Wulfrunian, I am thrilled that my city is at the front and centre of the Government's levelling up White Paper. Getting jobseekers of all ages the skills they need to get into work will be vital to levelling up in Wolverhampton, and the City of Wolverhampton College is already doing this at its brand-new facility at Bentley Bridge, in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the college? Will he also meet me and my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), preferably at the college, so that we can discuss how more jobseekers can get access to skills, potentially through the City Learning Quarter and that final bit of funding that we need?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), who is truly a modern-day Lady Wulfruna. She is completely right; Wolverhampton and the Black Country were at the heart of the first industrial revolution and they are at the heart of the current 21st-century green industrial revolution. I am very glad that since April 2020 we have seen 125,000 starts for the sector-based work academy programme, partly at least thanks to her lobbying and support, and wild horses will not keep me away from Wolverhampton.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Seventy-four-year-old Janet had £25,000 stolen by fraudsters. She told the BBC:

“The money was my mum and dad’s and I just felt I let them down.”

For Janet, and for the 4 million people who fell victim to fraudsters and online scammers last year, fraud is a crime. So does the Prime Minister understand the hurt that he and his Ministers cause fraud victims such as Janet when they write them out of the crime figures and dismiss fraud as something that people do not experience in their day-to-day lives? Will the Prime Minister correct the record on crime figures, and apologise?

The Prime Minister: I direct the House to what I have already said to my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer). The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that this Government hate fraud and online fraud. We are tackling the scammers by helping people to come forward when they get an email—when they get duped. We are of course helping them in any way that we can, but we are also cutting the crime that affects people up and down our country—the neighbourhood crime—and dealing with the county lines drugs gangs, and the right hon. Gentleman should support that as well. I am proud that those numbers have come down by 17%.

Q9. [905540] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Wednesday 9 February. It is wonderful news that the first in-person Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting for four years will take place during Her Majesty’s platinum jubilee year. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the global learning crisis is high on the agenda? Will he ask his amazing diplomats to ensure that every leader in the Commonwealth signs up to the Kenyatta declaration on education?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for everything she does to support education for girls. Twelve years of quality education for every girl in the world is probably the single most transformative thing we can do to improve the world. I remember working with my friend Uhuru Kenyatta on that declaration and we will certainly ensure that everybody at the Commonwealth meeting signs up to it.

Q2. [905532] **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): At the height of the lockdown restrictions in 2020, my constituent, who has worked for the NHS for over 30 years, was diagnosed with a tumour on her spine. While she was in hospital undergoing painful surgery, her family obeyed the rules and did not visit her. In the last few minutes, a photo has emerged of the Prime Minister in Downing Street, on 15 December 2020,

surrounded by alcohol, food and people wearing tinsel. It looks a lot like one of the Christmas parties that he told us never happened. For the sake of my constituent and the sacrifices she made, will the Prime Minister be referring that party to the police, as it is not one of those already being investigated?

The Prime Minister: First, I am very sorry about the hon. Gentleman’s constituent and for the difficulties she has been through. I understand very much her feelings, but in what the hon. Gentleman has just said I am afraid he is completely in error.

Q10. [905542] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): On 30 September 2020, the Prime Minister joined me on a building site in Dudley that is now the new Institute of Technology, delivering on skills for future jobs and creating opportunities across the Black Country. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the delivery team—including stakeholders such as Thomas Dudley and Dudley College—that delivered on this amazing project? Will he join me to do so in person at the nearest opportunity?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great champion for Dudley and for the Black Country. I am delighted to hear that the Black Country & Marches Institute of Technology is now open and will certainly keep his kind invitation in mind.

Q4. [905534] **Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): The film “Belfast” contains the immortal words: “If you’re not listening, you probably don’t understand us, and if you don’t understand us, you’re probably not listening.” The fact of the matter is that the protocol has zero support from Unionists. The fact of the matter is—I hope the Prime Minister is listening—that in a divided society a solution that attracts the support of only one section of the community will never stand. Will the Prime Minister therefore take the opportunity to speak to the Irish Government, whose ambassador, Daniel Mulhall, is running around Washington demanding further implementation of the protocol on the basis that it will bring further checks on the people of Northern Ireland? Does the Prime Minister accept that he now has the responsibility to bring forward a solution that unites the people of Northern Ireland and that saves the Union that is being undermined by the protocol?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I agree completely that there must be a solution that commands cross-community support. At the moment, there is no doubt that the balance of the Good Friday agreement is being upset by the way that the protocol is being operated, and we need to fix that. That is what we will do, and, if our friends will not agree, we will, as I said earlier, implement article 16.

11. [905543] **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): Rather than a compulsory windfall tax so favoured by the Opposition, will my right hon. Friend take an alternative view: summon a high-level meeting with the oil and gas companies with the aim of a voluntary agreement to bring more oil and gas on to the wholesale market to reduce oil and gas prices to help hard-pressed people deal with the cost of living problems?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion, which is both interesting and ingenious. The oil and gas companies create hundreds of thousands of jobs in the UK, and they are very important to our economy. I will do what I can to take forward his request for a meeting with them, but I remind him and the House that we have frozen fuel duty for 12 years in a row, saving people £15 in the cost of filling up their tanks, compared with 2010.

6. [905537] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): I understand that the Prime Minister has been heard singing “I will survive” in recent days. I suggest that he would be better off singing “Careless Whisper” instead, because, in 2017, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was condemned to an extended prison sentence in Iran because of the careless words of this Prime Minister. Now, in 2022, this week, my friend, the Leader of the Opposition, was hounded by thugs outside this Parliament because of the careless, disgraceful words of this Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister do the decent thing? Will he reconsider his words, repent and resign?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the hon. Lady should let the thugs and yobs who bullied and harassed the right hon. and learned Gentleman off the hook, because they are culpable, any more than she should let the Iranian Government off the hook, because they are culpable.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Since 2017, referrals for children’s mental health have gone up by 60%. Eating disorders among young girls have gone up by 400% since lockdown, and we know that social media companies play a huge part in that. Given that social media platforms such as TikTok are providing “crack for kids” in terms of adult content, negative imagery and addictive algorithms, will my right hon. Friend consider implementing a 2% levy on social media companies, which would raise £100 million to fund mental health resilience programmes for children?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend has campaigned on this issue assiduously, and he is quite right about the psychological damage that social media can do. I have heard what he has had to say recently about TikTok. We will see what we can do to address all these issues in the forthcoming online harms Bill.

7. [905538] **Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): Bradford is the UK’s youngest city and has the 10th largest city economy, with a GDP of £11.6 billion, and is bidding to be the city of culture. Now, it comes out that no detailed analysis of the long-term economic benefits of investing in Bradford and the north through the integrated rail plan was carried out. This Government’s failure has robbed Bradford of £30 billion-worth of growth over the next 10 years. When will the Prime Minister match action to rhetoric on levelling up and give Bradford the investment that it deserves?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is wrong in what she says, because we are investing massively in Yorkshire—investing in 640 more police in Yorkshire and investing in education in Yorkshire—but she has misunderstood what we said at the time of the £96 billion

integrated rail plan. What we are saying is that we will look at ways in which we can ensure that we protract the eastern leg of High Speed Rail from north of Birmingham to Bradford. What we are not doing is coming up with a scheme before we have decided exactly what to do and how to fund it, but we are not ruling it out.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): I served my country with pride in the Royal Green Jackets. I will always be a rifleman and a veteran. I welcome the veterans’ strategy that the Prime Minister has just brought out, but I ask him whether veterans will always be at the heart of this Government’s strategy and whether everything will be done to see that they always get what they need and are honoured?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is why we have set up an Office for Veterans’ Affairs and have ensured that veterans get preferential treatment on public transport, which was one of the first things I did when I became Prime Minister. It is why we ensure that veterans receive particular support and encouragement in employment, and we encourage employers to take on veterans as well.

Q8. [905539] **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In the panicked Downing Street staffing reshuffle at the weekend, the Prime Minister appointed to a senior role a man who recently lobbied the Government on behalf of Huawei Technologies, a hostile state vendor that this House legislated to exclude entirely from this country’s 5G networks. Given that the No. 10 director of communications has by definition access to some of the most sensitive Government information, will the Prime Minister tell the House whether Mr Harri’s present role requires enhanced developed vetting and STRAP clearance and whether he went through the necessary checks to provide that level of clearance before he took up his post?

The Prime Minister: That is a curious question to come from a Member on the Benches that contain someone who took, I think, £586,000 from the Chinese Government to support his office. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that this Government took the brave and necessary step of making sure that we excluded Huawei from our critical national infrastructure, and that was the right thing to do, whatever he says.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I ask the Prime Minister a question about Sue Gray’s report—*[Interruption.]* Colleagues may groan, but I am only asking it because I asked the Prime Minister this question last week and did not get a straight answer. It is important, because it is about those who make the law obeying the law. The Prime Minister wants to be judged on the facts, and that is right, so may I ask him for a commitment at the Dispatch Box? On conclusion of the Metropolitan police investigation, will he ensure that Sue Gray’s final report is published immediately and in full?

The Prime Minister: With the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend, I believe that I did answer that question last Monday, or whenever it was—possibly last Wednesday as well. I will repeat for the benefit of

the House that as soon as all the inquiries are concluded I will immediately publish in full whatever Sue Gray gives me.

Q12. [905544] **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I understand that the UK Government signed an agreement with the Iranian authorities last summer that would have resulted in the payment of the £400 million that we owe Iran and the release of my constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. That agreement fell through and the debt still has not been paid. The case urgently needs the Prime Minister's attention and personal intervention, so may I ask the Prime Minister to meet personally with me and Richard Ratcliffe? I do not want to meet his colleagues; I want to meet him personally to find out why the agreement fell through and why Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is still not home after six long years.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for that question and for all the hard work she does on behalf of Nazanin. We remain committed to securing the release of Nazanin and all the very difficult consular cases that we have in Iran. As the hon. Lady knows, the International Military Services, or IMS, debt is difficult to settle and square away for all sorts of reasons to do with sanctions, but we will continue to work on it and I will certainly make sure that we have another meeting with Richard Ratcliffe in due course.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Dover is once again beset by miles of traffic jams along the motorways, affecting residents and local businesses alike—not because of Brexit but because of Brussels bureaucracy and red tape. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how we can invest in our local roads, the M2, the M20 and the Dover traffic assessment project to unclog those roads once and for all, and how we can get rid of the unnecessary red tape for a trading global Britain?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what she says. As the economy rebounds, we are seeing all sorts of pressures. We need to ensure that we clear bottlenecks everywhere in our system and that is what we will do.

Q13. [905545] **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I would like to refer to the Prime Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). The photograph referred to is all over social media; everybody can see the photo; the Prime Minister is in the photo. Can I ask him again, will he refer the matter to the police, because it is not one of the parties that are already being investigated by the Metropolitan police?

The Prime Minister: That is precisely the point—it already has been. That event already has been submitted for investigation.

Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis: UK Response

12.35 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary if she will make a statement on the UK response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains deeply concerning. In January, the UN requested nearly \$4.5 billion for 2022—the largest humanitarian appeal on record. The UN has announced that it will be holding an international pledging conference on 31 March, and the UK is strongly supportive of that conference. On 28 January 2022, the Foreign Secretary announced £97 million of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan from the UK. This latest allocation of vital support delivers the Prime Minister's promise to double the aid to Afghanistan, to £286 million. By the end of January 2022, we had disbursed over £176 million in aid, and will disburse the remainder by the end of this financial year—that is, the end of March.

UK aid allocated since October is supporting over 60 hospitals, providing health services for more than 300 million people, ensuring that 4.47 million people get emergency food assistance through the World Food Programme, and will provide 6.1 million people with emergency health, water, protection, shelter and food, through the UN Afghanistan humanitarian fund.

In addition to providing immediate assistance, we are playing a leading role in international efforts to address multiple causes of the crisis. The provision of basic services such as health and education remains critical. We continue to explore solutions for service delivery such as payment of frontline delivery workers. We are working closely and monitoring Afghanistan's economy, specifically its lack of liquidity, and we are working with partners to seek solutions. The UK also played a key role pressing for a resolution establishing a humanitarian exemption under the UN Afghanistan sanctions regime. On 27 January, the UK Government laid legislation to implement UN security Council resolution 2615. That will save lives and reduce the impediments faced by humanitarian agencies.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Minister for her response.

The stark reality is that Britain can and must do more to rise to this horrific challenge. The inescapable facts are that the Taliban won and we lost, but we had previously promised that the military withdrawal would not be followed by economic and political withdrawal. Indeed, in 2010, when we announced the end of the combat role for British troops, we doubled aid and development spending from the UK as we had promised.

Although the £286 million pledged recently is extremely welcome, it is still not clear over what period it is all being spent and whether it is new and additional funding. It is, however, clear that it is not enough. The tremendous response to the Disasters Emergency Committee's appeal for Afghanistan in December shows too that the British people do not think it is enough, as once again ordinary citizens across Britain have responded magnificently.

The appalling reports from brave journalists such as Christina Lamb cannot be read without tears of anguish at the plight of our fellow human beings, who are selling their daughters into early marriage and parting with body organs to provide food for their families. This is not science fiction; these are facts, attested to by British journalists and charities working on the ground while the World Food Programme is trying desperately to feed 20 million starving people.

Some 90% of the people in Afghanistan do not have enough to eat. Five million are living in camps. Four million are just over the border in Iran, and they will not stay there; they will be heading for Europe and for Britain before long. UN professionals have made clear that \$4.4 billion is required, and, typically, fair burden-sharing would mean that the UK would agree to provide about 10% of that. Why is the UK not hosting this important and welcome pledging conference in March?

Before the Prime Minister decided to vaporise the Department for International Development, there were dedicated officials, steeped in the practicalities and respected across the world, who were able to bring together the necessary technical skills, connections and experience to lead the international community to a better and more responsible place. As Britain's International Development Secretary, I spent half my time urging, pleading and cajoling my counterparts in the rich world to step up to the plate. Britain led, and the international community followed. We need the same oomph, the same vigour from Britain today to make this happen. It is not just an appeal to our humanity; it is firmly and completely in our own national interest.

Vicky Ford: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the generosity of the British people in responding to this very serious humanitarian crisis. It is a deeply tragic situation. However, the UK Government have also responded, and have shown leadership across the world. The £286 million that we have promised will be spent by the end of this financial year. It has been spent continually over this period, and will be spent by 31 March. That is the date on which the United Nations will host its new donor conference, and the UK is absolutely supportive of that initiative. It is vital that all countries come together through the UN to step up to the mark.

It is also thanks to UK leadership that the United Nations Security Council backed the resolution that we had suggested to enable the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid, while preserving sanctions against the leading Taliban figures. That means that the aid can continue to flow, and will not be held back because of those sanctions. As I said last month, we are also working to encourage the World Bank, as a matter of urgency, to repurpose the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund, which would unlock a further \$1.5 billion. Indeed, I had discussions with my officials about that just this morning.¹

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Let me start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing a vital urgent question.

1. [Official Report, 21 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 1MC.]

[Mr David Lammy]

This is not the first time that I have risen to my feet to speak about the humanitarian disaster faced by the people of Afghanistan; nor do I believe that it will be the last. The Opposition have warned continually and forcefully of the catastrophe that is unfolding before our very eyes. We warned that the country was heading towards a humanitarian cliff edge. We warned that tens of millions of Afghans faced imminent starvation, including millions of children. We warned that the situation would ultimately deteriorate as the country heads into a freezing winter. The response from the Government has been sorely, sorely lacking.

Quite simply, the international community has turned its back on ordinary Afghan people in their time of greatest need. Rather than a stepping up to the plate on the international stage, we have seen a complete withdrawal. It is a scandal that so far all the Government have offered is finally to send the money that it promised, by March. This was money pledged at the beginning of the disaster; things are now much worse. It is no good the Government saying that they have doubled aid when they halved it the previous year. The UK's financial support for Afghanistan is at the same level as it was in 2019, when there was no impending catastrophe on this scale. Worse still, the Government have so far made no commitment to putting forward any of the additional \$4.4 billion asked for by the UN.

This catastrophe will continue to get worse without a co-ordinated international response. It is a moral imperative that we act swiftly to help Afghanistan at its time of greatest need. We know the money can reach the people in need if directed through the United Nations and other partners, so I ask the Minister the following. What communications has she had with her European counterparts on hosting the global pledging conference suggested by me, our former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill)? What representations has she made to free up the \$1.2 billion sitting in the World Bank that could be used to pay the wages of Afghan healthcare workers and teachers? Will she commit here today to donate the additional funds to the UN appeal for which the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield called? If so, how much?

The appalling scenes in Afghanistan should not divide the opinion of the House. I plead with the Government to do the right and moral thing and urgently step up their response to this unfolding tragedy.

Vicky Ford: It is extremely important, when we talk about such a tragic situation, that we get the facts right about what the UK Government are doing on behalf of the British people. We have announced and already spent more than £176 million of aid, which is supporting more than 60 hospitals, providing health services to more than 300,000 people, ensuring that more than 4 million people are getting emergency food assistance and providing 6.1 million people with emergency health, water and protection. That is what the UK is already doing, and the money is going out week by week, month by month. As promised, by the end of this financial year, at the end of March, our aid will have reached £286 million.

We also announced £97 million in January. As I said last time I was at the Dispatch Box on this subject, it is incredibly important that we work with partners across the world and support the UN, which has announced the largest ever appeal. That is why we are working with it and supporting its donor-led conference.

We are also working to unlock the money at the World Bank. It is a complex issue that involves bringing different people together, but we are leading on that. We have also led on unlocking the money that is getting to the people who need it, because of the exemption we helped to introduce on sanctions.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on dragging the focus of this House away from the playground and back to the real and terrible world.

I am wearing the emblem of the genocide in Srebrenica. What we are witnessing in Afghanistan is virtually genocide by starvation. We cannot, in a civilised world, allow this to continue. Will my hon. Friend please work with the Ministry of Defence to see how we can practically provide not simply hard cash but food, tents, clothes and the things people really need, not in March but now?

Vicky Ford: That is an extremely important point, because we are working, as much as we can, to get aid through to the people who need it. We are working through a lot of different organisations, including the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the World Food Programme, the International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is also funding local partners.

My colleague Lord Ahmad, the Minister with responsibility for south Asia and the UN, has also met senior Afghan women in this country to help shape the policy and the programme by making sure we hear their feedback. Our policies and programmes are also being informed by Afghan leaders, including Shukria Barakzai, Fawzia Koofi and Hasina Safi. That includes supporting local agencies on the ground, especially those focused on women and girls. Lord Ahmad met them very recently, too.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): We hear an awful lot in this place about global Britain—where is global Britain now? The harsh Afghan winter has already set in and the United Nations estimates that only 5% of Afghans have enough good food to eat each day. That was made clear as far back as September and the situation has clearly worsened since. The UK Government have absolutely no excuse if they claim to have been caught by surprise as this famine has developed.

Military operations in Afghanistan cost the UK public purse £28 billion or thereby, and the shambolic handling of the UK and international coalition's withdrawal from the country has accelerated the current humanitarian disaster. As a former military stakeholder, the UK has a moral obligation to support the wellbeing of Afghan people, so why can the FCDO not find a fraction of that £28 billion to support the UN's emergency famine appeal? So far, the UK Government have not given anything to the appeal. Support does not cut it: it is money that works. The UK has committed a mere £286 million and only given £176 million of that to date.

What is the Minister doing to accelerate the delivery of humanitarian aid to those most in need on the ground in Afghanistan?

Vicky Ford: As I have already said, the funding the UK is putting in day by day and week by week already supports 4.47 million people in Afghanistan. We recognise that the UN has launched its largest-ever appeal and we are working to unlock the money at the World Bank. The date of that conference has been announced as 31 March and we will be supporting it; we are extremely supportive as it is. However, we are also doing a huge amount of international work, including encouraging Muslim majority countries to play a full role in seeking to influence the Taliban. For example, the Foreign Secretary visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Indonesia in October and November and met the gulf Foreign Ministers again in December to discuss that and other issues. The Prime Minister's special representative, Nigel Casey, met the Taliban representatives in Oslo last month. We are pushing on all sides, first, to improve the aid that comes in, secondly, to get the aid to the people and, thirdly, to encourage other neighbours and countries to step up to the mark.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Let us cut to the chase: no Minister has met the Taliban. I met them in November and they told me to my face that they could not cope. That is what is leading to extreme poverty, mass malnutrition and a million children close to starvation. It is so simple for us to blame the Taliban, but we chose to hand responsibility to this insurgency, knowing that the economy would then collapse. Now we compound the tragedy by freezing international funds. Does the Minister not agree that if we are to break the impasse and help the Afghan people whom we abandoned, it is now time to recognise the Taliban so that we can get that urgent funding into the country and save lives? That would be an example of leadership and an example of global Britain.

Vicky Ford: Our officials have very pragmatic engagement with the Taliban at official levels, especially pressing on human rights and humanitarian issues. For example, in October the PM's special representative for the Afghan transition, Sir Simon Gass, and the chargé d'affaires for the UK mission to Afghanistan, Dr Martin Longden, travelled to Afghanistan, where they held talks with the Taliban. The Prime Minister's special representative met Taliban representatives late last month and officials have continued to discuss the humanitarian situation. In terms of getting funding to where it is needed to ensure that the humanitarian aid can get there, it was the UK that worked with leadership to get the resolution at the UN giving a humanitarian exemption, meaning that funds can flow for humanitarian need despite the sanctions

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a hallmark of this Government to say, "Everything's all right; we're doing everything we need to do.", but clearly voices from across the House are saying, "Everything is not all right, and you had at least four months when you were warned about this humanitarian crisis affecting millions of people in Afghanistan." Will the Minister commit to come back to this House with a proper and comprehensive statement

on the day we return after recess, to ensure that we are satisfied that there is a comprehensive international and domestic response?

Vicky Ford: As I have said already, the UK funding is providing food aid to 4.47 million people. It is an enormously tragic situation. The UK has stepped up for over 4 million people, and we need others also to step up more. We know that there is going to be a long-term need as well, which is why we are supporting the UN conference that will happen at the end of March. We are working with all the relevant partners—as I have said, the World Food Programme and the many other UN organisations—to make sure that the funding we are putting in is getting to where it is needed. That is supporting 4.4 million people at the moment, and as I have said, this will go up to 6.6 million when we include the support we are also putting in for health, water, protection, shelter and so on.¹

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Last week, the US Treasury Department issued guidance to international banks on sanctions exemptions on humanitarian grounds enabling international banks to transfer money to charities and aid agencies—for example, to pay the wages of teachers or health workers. As a practical step that the Government could take immediately, would the Minister instruct the Treasury, the Financial Conduct Authority, the Bank of England or whichever organisation holds responsibility to issue such guidance to British banks this week?

Vicky Ford: I will certainly take up my right hon. Friend's suggestion with the Minister responsible for south and central Asia.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Let me cut to the chase with the Minister and say that she knows what we must do if we are going to deliver the food to stop this crisis for children. The pictures of children begging, obviously with no food, really gets to all of us, does it not? I have to say to the Minister that she is aware—surely she is aware—that if we are going to get in this food and this help, we have to work with the major international charities. A member of my family is in a very senior role in one of those big agencies. Will she promise me that she will talk to the leaders of those key organisations—she knows who they are—and say, "Are you getting enough resources to deliver on the ground?"? Will she promise to do that today?

Vicky Ford: The funding we are giving is being channelled through many different organisations, including UN organisations such as the World Food Programme, and through the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs into local organisations too. My colleague, the noble Lord responsible for this area, meets them regularly to discuss any blockages in getting the food there. It is a really challenging and heartbreaking situation—everybody understands that—and my colleague is meeting them regularly. That is the way this is currently being funded to make sure that the funding is going not through Government or Taliban organisations, but through those humanitarian aid organisations.²

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Minister will know that true political influence comes from having a physical presence. Could she please confirm what the

1. [Official Report, 21 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 1MC.]

2. [Official Report, 21 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 2MC.]

[James Sunderland]

FCDO physically has on the ground in Kabul, and whether that footprint will increase?

Vicky Ford: I am afraid I am not at liberty to discuss individual situations, especially those of local charities, for example, because I have been told that to do so could put them at risk.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The former Secretary of State for International Development Rory Stewart said yesterday:

“It’s unbelievable that an international coalition which could find 130BN dollars a year for Afghanistan when fighting there, cannot find 5 per cent of that amount to prevent millions of Afghans from starving. The West abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban in August. Now it is abandoning Afghans to starvation. Betrayal follows betrayal.”

Can I ask the Minister what the UK Government have done in real terms, working with the international community, to really help prevent the starvation of the Afghan people?

Vicky Ford: As I have already said from this Dispatch Box, the aid we have allocated since October is supporting 4.47 million people to get emergency food assistance through the World Food Programme, as well as supporting 60 hospitals and 300,000 people with health services. We are working with various UN agencies, including the World Food Programme, to make sure that that is delivered, and we are fully supportive of the UN donor conference, which it has announced will be held on 31 March.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Alongside the humanitarian issues are many concerns about women. Four women—Parwana Khil, Tamana Paryani, Mursal Ayar and Zahra Mohammadi—have just been seized off the street and imprisoned, and everybody is incredibly worried about them. Does the Minister have any information on their whereabouts, because we are concerned about their safety?

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I would be more than happy to follow up with an answer following this urgent question. Since Operation Pitting ended, we have also supported more than 3,000 people to leave Afghanistan or to move from third countries to the UK, so we are continuing to help relocate people.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Minister mentions Operation Pitting. An Afghan gentleman came to my surgery in agony: his family have not left the house or seen daylight for months and he is worried about what is happening to his country. To add insult to injury, the leave to enter for the 15,000 Afghans who are now here expires at the end of this month. When we add all that strife together, their mental health is suffering. Will the Minister guarantee now at the Dispatch Box that by the end of this month all those Afghans who came here will be given leave to remain?

Vicky Ford: As the hon. Lady knows, the Home Office Minister—the Minister for Afghan Resettlement—leads on that subject, so I suggest we raise that with her. Significant cross-Government effort has been under

way to ensure that the thousands of Afghans who have been evacuated to the UK receive the support they need to rebuild their lives.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): What is happening in Afghanistan today is a catastrophe of epic proportions. For those who committed so much to that country, particularly the families of the servicemen and women who lost their lives, the Government’s current trajectory makes their lives harder, not easier, in dealing with that sacrifice. I urge the Government to think again. If we can commit £30 billion to a military project such as Afghanistan, it is obscene that we cannot commit more than 5% in foreign aid to rebuilding that country and saving as many lives as we can, having invested so much over so long.

Vicky Ford: My hon. and gallant Friend is absolutely right. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the 150,000 people who served in Afghanistan and, in particular, to the 457 who so sadly lost their lives and the many others who had life-changing injuries. For 20 years they denied terrorists a safe haven from which to launch attacks against the UK, and enabled development that improved the lives of many millions of people in Afghanistan. I remind him that the UK funding going in at the moment is helping to feed more than 4 million people. It is a very tragic situation but that funding is going through, and we are working with others and pressing to unlock the funds at the World Bank and the support of the donor conference.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Do the Government recognise that this catastrophe will continue to unfold before our eyes unless the Afghan banking system starts working again? In particular, do the Government support the release of frozen Afghan central bank reserves to restore inter-bank lending? On donor funds, whether they are held by the World Bank or being asked for from donors around the world, do the Minister and all those involved understand that we need speed? It may be complex, but people starving or having to sell their children are not interested in complexity; they want help now. A meeting later this month or next month is, frankly, too late.

Vicky Ford: As I have said, we are closely monitoring the economic situation, especially the lack of liquidity, and we are working urgently with partners to seek solutions, including calling for that money to be released from the World Bank.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Afghanistan has been dependent on foreign aid and FDI since time immemorial. Indeed, my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who is no longer in her place, referred to the former Member for Penrith and The Border and the need for at least 5% funding immediately. Western Governments got Afghanistan wrong last August, 10 years ago and 20 years ago. As we look to the future, what will UK-Afghanistan relations and strategy look like?

Vicky Ford: It is an enormously complicated situation. We are engaging with the Taliban at official level, especially on the humanitarian situation and human rights. We are currently focused on ensuring that our committed

funds are getting to the 4 million-plus people we are supporting with food aid and other aid, encouraging the return of girls to education when schools go back in March, and doing everything we can to encourage the international community to step forward and address the current situation, which is indeed very serious.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Further to the point made by my friend the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), I suspect that the Minister saw the comments from General Lord Richards, who called on the west to come to terms with the Taliban being the Government in Afghanistan. None of us wanted that outcome, but innocent people are starving and freezing to death and it feels like we are sleepwalking into a catastrophe. Will she look again at what more can be done to unfreeze state assets, lift sanctions and restart the Afghan economy, in order to give people in Afghanistan some sense of hope for the future?

Vicky Ford: On sanctions, as I said, we have already made progress as the humanitarian exemption that came into UK law on 27 January has helped to unlock funding. On whether we should recognise the Taliban, we have a long-standing policy of recognising states, not Governments, and the Prime Minister has been clear that if the Taliban want international acceptance, they must abide by international norms. However, that does not stop us from engaging at official level, especially on humanitarian issues.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is one of the most generous such schemes in this country's history. However, while some local authorities are providing homes—they are ready and available—there appear to be delays from the Home Office in processing and matching them to Afghans resettled through the scheme. Will the Minister please ask the Minister for Afghan Resettlement to write to me with an update specifically on the properties offered by Blaby District Council?

Vicky Ford: Yes.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Not only does famine kill, but starvation and malnutrition will scar the bodies and brains of a generation and beyond. Every day that we delay means that recovery will be more expensive than acting now. We need cash in the system and the Afghan economy. If the World Bank could release reconstruction funds today, how quickly could that cash be flowing through the Afghan economy?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree that it is important to keep money flowing through the Afghan economy and, as I said, we are working with the World Bank on that. On 25 January—a couple of weeks ago—the UK also supported the Asian Development Bank with a £405 million support package for the Afghan people, funded from the Asian Development Fund.¹

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Obviously, when the evacuation took place, and immediately afterwards, Afghanistan was the centre of attention. Naturally, people have forgotten about it, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield

(Mr Mitchell) on bringing it to the attention of the House once again. At the start of the evacuation, 656 families in my constituency had relatives in Afghanistan who were trying to get out. This weekend, I discovered some more, most of whom are still trapped there and are UK citizens. May I suggest to the Minister that we should have a facility, via the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, whereby MPs can confidentially feed in details about the people who are still trapped there, so that assistance can be provided? Clearly they are under threat from the Taliban and in peril. We need to retain confidentiality but assist them to leave if that is what they want to do.

Vicky Ford: As I said, this is a hugely concerning situation. On helping people to leave the country, the UK has been working to allow Afghan nationals to cross borders into neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. We have supported more than 3,400 people to leave Afghanistan since the end of Operation Pitting. The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is managed by the Home Office, so my hon. Friend should raise that issue with the Home Office. On the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme, which is for people who helped the Government, people can still apply to that. I understand that the Minister for the Armed Forces is due to be holding a resettlement surgery shortly, so perhaps my hon. Friend could raise those issues with him directly. If not, he should certainly write to me and I will pass the details on.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will recognise that from all parts of the House there is a desire for more action, not simply from the world community, but from this Government of ours. It is good to know that 4 million people are being helped, but there are probably 37 million people facing starvation at this very moment, and they will continue to face starvation unless we see the reconstruction of the Afghan economy. Where is the World Bank up to on that? What are the Government doing to bring pressure to bear to say, “We need action now, not in months’ time”?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree. This is a complex situation, but we are pressing the World Bank. We are also working with it and the UN to find solutions to allow international non-governmental organisations to access currency in Afghanistan, which is another issue.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Successive Governments have committed United Kingdom forces to Afghanistan and we have spent billions of pounds. We now have a situation where millions of people are starving, and we must cut through the bureaucracy and get food to people, because otherwise they will starve to death. We sit here in a country where we can feed ourselves and we do our very best to feed our whole population. For goodness’ sake, Minister, please, we have to get more food into Afghanistan and get it there now.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this is an incredibly concerning humanitarian situation. We have pledged our funding, and it is going through and getting through to those we are supporting, but it is important that the rest of the world also steps up. I understand that some countries—the European Union and United States—have also made announcements

1. [Official Report, 21 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 2MC.]

[Vicky Ford]

such as we have since the UN launched its appeal. We are absolutely supporting that UN appeal, because the momentum needs to continue. This is a very urgent situation.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents have close family members in Afghanistan who worked bravely to further our shared aims in the country, including by working alongside NATO forces, in the media and on supporting women's rights. So many who could not get out are at ongoing serious risk from the Taliban and are still in hiding. Constituents have told me recently about how family members are being hunted by the Taliban, who are going door to door. The humanitarian crisis is making things so much worse, with food prices rising and the impossibility of access to the help that is needed. With 31 March two months away, will the Minister work with colleagues across Government and across this House, and use our soft power to bring the international community together more quickly and with greater urgency, not only to tackle the humanitarian crisis but to accelerate the evacuation and resettlement of Afghans still at risk?

Vicky Ford: The Ministry of Defence's ARAP scheme is still open and people can still apply, and the hon. Lady should raise individual cases with the Armed Forces Minister. We have supported some 3,400 people to leave Afghanistan since the end of Operation Pitting, including over 700 British nationals and eligible dependants. We will continue to work to ensure that those who are eligible can try to depart the country safely, and that includes holding the Taliban to account for their commitment on safe passage.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Ex-pats and diaspora community groups, such as Glasgow Afghan United in Glasgow North, play a hugely important role in sending remittances back and keeping channels of communication going with the humanitarian situation on the ground, and indeed trying to support friends and family members who want to leave Afghanistan. What support are the Government providing to those kinds of groups to ensure that support continues to be provided, that channels of communication are kept open and that voices on the ground are heard?

Vicky Ford: As I mentioned earlier, this is an extremely serious situation. My colleague Lord Ahmad regularly meets the various aid organisations that we work with, and he has been meeting Afghan leaders, including many women Afghan leaders, to ensure that they are feeding into our projects. Just last week, he met a group of very senior Afghan women who have come to this country, including businesswomen and judges, to feed in their views and what they are hearing from the communities they have left behind, to ensure that that is helping to shape our policies.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): As we have heard and seen in the utterly heartbreaking scenes on our TV screens every night, urgent humanitarian aid is absolutely essential, but people in Afghanistan also desperately need access to basic public services. Can the

Minister set out what the Government are doing to co-ordinate a global plan to get the money needed to keep local schools, clinics and hospitals running?

Vicky Ford: The money that we have already announced is providing over 6 million people not only with food but with health, water, protection, shelter and so on. I agree on the importance of ensuring that children and young people, especially girls, can return to school. The Taliban have said that they can, but we want to see that delivered when schools reopen at the end of the holidays at the beginning of March. We will continue to work with other organisations, especially going into the UN pledging conference, to call people together to ensure that those donations come through.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): It is estimated that the war in Afghanistan cost the US \$2 trillion. The same BBC report indicates that the UK cost was \$1.5 billion per annum. The Minister says that the UK Government are committed to spending £286 million this year. Can she explain why the spending on war dwarfs the spending on aid, despite the clear humanitarian crisis and the UK's moral obligation to the country?

Vicky Ford: None of us wishes to be in this situation. There is a deeply concerning humanitarian situation, and what we all saw happening over the summer when the Taliban moved in so quickly left a really difficult situation, but Operation Pitting and the work of our soldiers to evacuate those 15,000 people was really incredible. It is important now that funding comes from across the world, not just from the UK. We continue to be a leading donor with the money we have contributed so far, which is helping the 4 million. I cannot comment any further ahead of the conference, but I am sure that the House will be informed as and when we make further announcements through written ministerial statements.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry, but the answers we have heard today are just completely inadequate. I do not think the Minister understands that tens of millions of people will starve to death in Afghanistan unless she steps up and meets the need, economically and politically, to put in the resolution that we need. I have been trying to meet Ministers with the only Afghan MP in our country. Two months have gone by and we still do not have a meeting. MPs know their communities and how to get the money to the frontline, but they need help from this Government. Where is it?

Vicky Ford: My colleague Lord Ahmad met a group of leading Afghan women in this country only last week. If the hon. Lady would like to contact me about her particular contact, I will make sure he reaches out so that such roundtables can include other people recommended by this House. It is a deeply tragic situation. It is many millions of people. There are other very, very difficult humanitarian situations across the world. Just last week, I announced further funding for humanitarian aid in Somalia, in Kenya and in Ethiopia—a very serious situation. The UK's aid is currently providing food for over 4.4 million people. We will support the conference and the House will continue to be updated when we have more news to share.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that I am bothered about this: if Members ask to meet Ministers, Ministers should try to make sure they are available, otherwise they are beginning to ignore the Back Benchers to whom Ministers are meant to be answerable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is clear to me that we have a moral obligation to support the people of Afghanistan, who feel abandoned. The Minister stated that UK funding is getting to where it is needed. With that in mind, it is vital to ensure that support is delivered on the ground for Christians who are at the bottom of the pecking order for Taliban assistance. What can be done to ensure that food is received by Christians and other ethnic minorities? What will be done to improve a dire and precarious position, and ensure that UK funding gets, as the Minister stated, to where it is needed?

Vicky Ford: We work with a lot of different local organisations through the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. If there are specific organisations that the hon. Member would like to engage with, then he can contact me.

Mr Speaker, regarding meetings with Ministers, I am more than happy, of course, to meet Members, but in this case, I think that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) needs to meet the Minister responsible, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad. However, I will follow up on that point, because it is the first time I have heard an inquiry of that nature.

North Sea Oil and Gas

1.21 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on reports that six North sea oil and gas fields are due to be given the green light this year.

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): There will continue to be ongoing demand for oil and gas over the coming years. It is a clear choice between a transition that secures our energy, protects jobs and leads to innovation in new technologies like carbon capture and hydrogen, and an extinction for our energy sector, as I think the hon. Lady proposes. Flicking a switch and turning off our domestic source of gas overnight would put energy security, British jobs and industries at risk, and we would be even more dependent on foreign imports. The way we produce oil and gas is cleaner than in many jurisdictions, so it would be illogical to import them at further expense to Britain and our planet.

The fields referred to in these reports are already licensed, some dating back to as early as 1970, and are now going through the usual regulatory processes. All proposals are subject to a rigorous scrutiny process prior to consent, as opposed to licensing, by our expert regulators, including an environmental impact assessment and a public consultation. No decisions have been taken by the regulators, so it would be inappropriate to comment further on that process. However, to be clear, continued support for Britain's oil and gas sector is not just compatible with our net zero goals; it is essential if we are to meet the ambitious targets we set for ourselves while protecting jobs and livelihoods.

As announced last year, and forming part of the North sea transition deal, we will introduce a climate compatibility checkpoint for any new licences to ensure that any future licensing rounds remain consistent with our goals. Meanwhile, we continue to make progress on developing new nuclear, which I think the hon. Lady also opposes, and renewables that will power our future. Today, we have announced that we are ramping up our options for our flagship renewable scheme, contracts for difference, establishing new industries, boosting investment and creating jobs in our former industrial heartlands.

Caroline Lucas: That was a frankly extraordinary statement by the Minister. The idea that the solution to an energy crisis caused by high gas prices is to increase our reliance on gas seems pretty risible. The UK still holds the COP presidency and is, of course, bound by the Glasgow climate pact, so why is he ignoring the international agreement that

“limiting global warming to 1.5 °C requires rapid, deep and sustained reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions”

and giving the green light to the extraction of more oil and gas?

Will the Minister confirm whether he and his Government are actually still committed to net zero by 2050 and the interim targets? Frankly, judging by their actions, that seems to be in question.

Why is the Minister not listening to experts such as the International Energy Agency, which could not have been more explicit? Perhaps he has not read its “Net Zero by 2050” report, but if he had, he would know that

[Caroline Lucas]

2021 is the cut-off point for the development of any new oil and gas fields if we want to hit internationally agreed climate goals. Does the Minister acknowledge that the proposals go against the spirit, if not the letter, of that warning?

Is the Minister aware that renewables are already cost competitive, with wind and solar beating new gas generation hands down? Let us not have any more of this guff about more transition fuels being needed.

Will the Minister explain to the House and to our constituents why the Government are not investing in real energy security for people? Why not roll out an ambitious street-by-street energy efficiency and insulation programme, instead of pretending that we need more oil and gas to keep our homes warm and to bring people's bills down?

Why are Government decisions about new licences being taken behind closed doors? MPs only hear about them through media reports.

When does the Minister plan to update the Oil and Gas Authority's usual processes and the environmental impact assessment framework to minimise the economic recovery of North sea reserves? When will he get rid of the outdated MER duty that calls on the Government to maximise economic recovery? He needs to be guided by the climate science and, quite frankly, he is not.

Finally, will the Minister agree that any Government recommendation to the OGA that undermines the House of Commons' formal declaration of a climate emergency, as well as our international climate obligations, should at the very least be subject to a parliamentary vote?

Greg Hands: Let me first say that it is a pleasure to take a question from the hon. Lady. I have been in this role for four months, and I think I am right in saying that this is the first time that she has actually asked me a question about energy and climate change, so I am delighted to see her here today.

We are not increasing our dependence on gas. We are clear that we are increasing the production of renewables, which is actually part of the solution for the medium to long term—and even the short term. We are not resting on our laurels about having the world's largest offshore wind sector; we are quadrupling that capacity over the decade. What we are not increasing is our dependence on imported foreign gas. The point of this is that our domestic production emits far less carbon and is obviously better for our energy security.

The hon. Lady says we are ignoring COP, but it is quite the opposite. The COP President continues to be hard at work for the rest of the year. Of course, we remain adherent to our net zero strategy, which I launched at this Dispatch Box back in October.

Renewables are cost-effective—the hon. Lady is quite right. They have become a lot more cost-effective thanks to the actions taken by this Government on contracts for difference and our hard work over 12 years to increase the percentage of our electricity generation coming from renewables from 7% to 43%.

The hon. Lady talks about decisions behind closed doors, but these are not decisions. These licences have already been licensed, and further regulatory processes will continue throughout the year.

The hon. Lady asked whether we are guided by the climate science. Of course we are. We are leading in climate science.

Finally, it is now 33 years since the Green party's best ever electoral performance in the UK. I think it scored 12% in the 1989 election, but it has not come close since. Why is that? At that time, it was saying that it was impossible to take action on emissions while still growing the economy. This country and the Conservative party has proven the Green party comprehensively wrong. We have grown the economy by 78% while cutting emissions by 44%, delivering for the people of this country both on the economy and on the environment.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentions nuclear power. Does he welcome the successful nuclear fusion experiment that has taken place today? Does he agree that it is far better for us to produce our own gas and oil than to depend on expensive foreign imports?

Greg Hands: I entirely agree. A very important announcement on fusion is being made today by the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is quite right about the progress we are making in this place, which is opposed by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), her party and various other Opposition parties. We are moving forward on nuclear. Money is going into the Rolls-Royce small modular reactors programme; Hinkley Point C is being built; we are moving towards a final investment case for a further nuclear power plant in this Parliament; and we have a future nuclear enabling fund. We are moving forward on nuclear, which is an essential part of this country's future energy needs and energy security.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The truth is that the Government are thrashing around after what we now know has been a decade of failure on energy, particularly on the transition to a low-carbon energy economy. They have no answer to the energy crisis that millions of families in our country face.

This is not a long-term answer either. The energy price crisis is a fossil fuel crisis, so the long-term answer must be to go further and faster on zero-carbon energy, energy efficiency and clean energy storage. On energy security, the Opposition believe that the long-term answer lies in zero-carbon energy. We need a phased and just transition in the North sea, but that cannot be an excuse for business as usual and pretending that the climate crisis does not exist.

There is one crucial climate test that should be applied to the current proposals and other proposals: whether they are compatible with keeping global warming to 1.5°. In the energy White Paper, the Government said that they would

“develop the existing checkpoints in our processes before proceeding with future licensing rounds.”

Is the Minister saying that the proposals he describes are exempt from that statement in the energy White Paper? Can he explain how what he has said today is consistent with its approach? Can he tell the House whether he believes that any future licensing decisions must be compatible with keeping global warming to 1.5°? Can he tell us how that assessment will be made?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Of course, he could have made his own UQ application today on this very topic, but let me answer him.

Yes, we are absolutely committed to a zero-carbon energy system. We are committed to a decarbonised power sector by the year 2035, so long as it is consistent with security of supply, as well as being consistent with the net zero strategy to get the UK to net zero by 2050. I have not heard recently whether the Labour party is still committed to getting to net zero by 2030, which I think was in its manifesto at the last election. Perhaps it would be helpful if one day the hon. Gentleman updated us on that really very ambitious target.

On compatibility with action on global emissions, the answer is “Absolutely.” That is why a key part of the North sea transition deal was the climate compatibility checkpoint that we announced just a year ago. The consultation, which closes on 28 February, refers to future licences; the current licences would still need consent from the regulators. Nothing has changed in the Government’s position or in the process. We look forward to responding to the climate compatibility checkpoint consultation in due course.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Our commitment to net zero is not in any sense incompatible with making use of our domestic reserves. Otherwise, we will simply be reliant on imported gas from Putin and the Gulf, creating insecurity and greater emissions in the process. If we want our oil and gas companies to invest, we need to provide them with certainty. Will my right hon. Friend reaffirm the principles that I committed to as Exchequer Secretary, as other Treasury Ministers did: fiscal stability and maximising economic recovery in the North sea basin? It is through that combination that we can encourage our world-leading oil and gas companies to invest for the future.

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend was a brilliant Exchequer Secretary.

As a former Treasury Minister, I can say how well he was regarded in Government and in this House for the important work that he did at HM Treasury. He is right: this is not in itself a debate between gas and renewables. The current debate is whether we get the gas that we currently need from the UK continental shelf or import it from abroad. Foreign imports come at a higher price in regard to emissions and our energy insecurity.

It is worth reminding ourselves that 50% of UK gas comes from the UK continental shelf; that is a good position to be in. An additional 30% comes from Norway, which I regard as a very good, stable and secure source. On the investment picture, he is also right—and the Chancellor was absolutely clear on this in his statement on Thursday—on the importance of more investment coming into the North sea, not just for the short term but for the transition going forward.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I welcome this urgent question because it gives us all an opportunity in this Chamber to reflect upon the fact that when the UK Government need to meet their energy demands and their financial demands, the first thing they seek to do is to turn the tap on in Scotland and exploit our natural resources. Whilst they are willing to do that, they are simultaneously unwilling to deliver carbon

capture and underground storage in the north-east of Scotland, unwilling to match the Scottish Government’s £500 million just transition fund, and of course unwilling to finally end the renewables robbery that is the TNUoS—transmission network use of system—account charging scandal. May I ask the Secretary of State a very simple question: when is he going to show similar haste on those important issues?

Greg Hands: I listen to the hon. Gentleman week in, week out, claiming that the UK Government, when it comes to energy, are doing down Scotland. The exact opposite is the truth. We are very supportive of Scottish nuclear, which he is opposed to. The Hunterston nuclear plant closed just a few weeks ago, which had provided, at low cost, zero-carbon energy to all of Scotland’s homes on an equivalent basis for 31 years. We heard not a peep out of him. We hear the Scottish First Minister recommending that particular fields not be given approval. How does that land among the 200,000 people in this country who are dependent on the oil and gas sector, of which about 40%—80,000 or so—are in Scotland, particularly north-east Scotland?

On CCUS, the hon. Gentleman knows that the Acorn cluster is the reserve cluster, and has significant UK Government support. I have met with Storegga and many other participants in recent weeks. The transition review is led by Ofgem and of course we will look at cost and affordability in relation to transition.

I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman’s ideological opposition to nuclear, and now the increased opposition to oil and gas and the North sea transition, shows that the SNP is not fit to run an energy policy for Scotland, and the people of Scotland will be thankful that the matter is reserved.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Nothing could be more dangerous to our position as a secure destination for investment than the imposition of windfall taxes, could it?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend makes a strong point. Of course the line from the Treasury—speaking as a former Treasury Minister—is that all taxes are always under review, but I repeat the words of the Chancellor from Thursday, that a windfall tax is “superficially appealing” but probably counterproductive. He reminded us that oil and gas companies pay corporation at twice the rate of non-oil and gas companies, and that the sector has already paid some £33.7 billion in taxes since the year 2010.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In November, the COP President was reduced to tears after ambitions to phase out fossil fuels were voted down at the last minute. Three months later, the UK Government are tanking efforts to keep us to 1.5° by approving these six new oilfields. It is not just about looking at the energy supply and demand in this country; it is about setting an example. If we are to approve this fossil fuel exploration, what is to stop other countries from following suit?

Greg Hands: I very much welcome the hon. Lady’s question and the chance to put on the record the brilliant job done by the COP President. At the start of the year running up to the conference, only 30% of global GDP was covered by a net zero commitment. That rose to 90% after the conference, which sets an

[Greg Hands]

example. I am the co-chair of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, an international group calling for the phasing out of coal—something I am proud of.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): There is one thing that none of us in this House must ever apologise for: defending the interests of our constituents. I look across my constituency and across the country, and it is quite clear that energy bills are going to soar. That is partially due to a lack of energy security. But let us be clear: coal is a very dirty fossil fuel; gas is less so; nuclear is fairly clean; and renewable is right at the top of the tree. I commend the Government for recognising that we must never let the perfect be the enemy of the good, by ensuring that we get cheaper fuel supply to our people.

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend puts it very well and succinctly. The key word to use is “transition”: the transition from our existing energy mix to the energy of the future.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Granting new oil and gas exploration in the North sea flies in the face of the Government’s net zero commitment. Closer to home, the Tory-controlled Surrey County Council is defending in court a decision to approve four oil wells in Horse Hill, Surrey. Why are the Government getting behind Surrey County Council’s defending in court the destruction of green land and the introduction of massive new CO₂ pollution, in direct conflict with their own net zero ambition?

Greg Hands: On the second matter, it would not be right for me to opine on planning decisions. On the first, the licences are not new—I do not think the hon. Lady heard my statement—regardless of what she may read in *The Daily Telegraph*. In some cases, they were granted as early as 1970. The issue is how those licences are taken forward once they have regulatory approval.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s confirmation that these are not new fields and, in some cases, have been licensed for many decades. Can he confirm that these fields and their production profiles are already factored into this Government’s energy transition plans for net zero by 2050—not only the Government’s plans but the recommendations of the Climate Change Committee? As part of an already declining domestic production profile, even those and further oil and gas fields that are still to come do not close the gap between current oil and gas provision and renewables, although that gap will steadily close as time goes on.

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend makes some strong points. He is absolutely right that these are not new fields; they are fields that have already been licensed and that therefore have been taken into account in our net zero strategy and in our upcoming carbon budgets. What that would mean if they were to get regulatory approval—I stress that that is an independent process—is that probably, in the future, we would be importing more gas, which would come with higher emissions and at a higher price.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We do have another urgent question and a statement before we even come to the main business, so I urge colleagues to keep their questions brief.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): We have a Prime Minister whose approach is “Do as I say, not as I do”. In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 22 September last year, he stated:

“We are approaching that critical turning point—in less than two months—when we must show that we are...learning, and maturing, and finally taking responsibility for the destruction we are inflicting...It is time for humanity to grow up.”

I do not care much for the Prime Minister, but I care about this country’s reputation. Has he misled the United Nations?

Greg Hands: We are proud of the record and our delivery at COP, and the COP President continues to deliver. It is a fantastic achievement to get coal written into a COP document for the first time. We should be proud of the fact that we are the co-chair of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, and the fact that so much more of the world’s GDP has been under net zero obligations at the end of the UK’s year than at the beginning.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The UK’s journey to net zero will still require some fossil fuels during the transition period. While my right hon. Friend focuses on our sustainable future, will he ensure that domestic production meets our transition needs? If we do not see that, all we will see is increased emissions.

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right: this is an industry in transition, which is why we did the North sea transition deal with the sector last March. There are obligations in both directions. For instance, the industry has an obligation to electrify offshore, while we need to work with the industry to transform jobs, skillsets and the energy mix. As my hon. Friend says, this is a transition, not an attempt to close down the sector, which I think is what the Green party is calling for.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome this decision, especially because it will secure important investment, create jobs, help to reduce fuel imports, give us greater fuel security, and indeed, in the longer term, help to reduce the energy crisis that the country faces. Does the Minister agree that the objective of any energy policy should be to safeguard those who are vulnerable, and that that should take precedence over the possibility that any such policy will influence global temperatures in the future?

Greg Hands: The right hon. Gentleman has asked a probing question. I would say that we have both those obligations. We are obligated to take action on climate change and reducing emissions, and the UK is a world leader in that regard. We are also obligated to deliver energy, at an affordable price, to the people of this country. The £9.1 billion package of support that the Chancellor announced last week, with the £350 rebate on bills, was intended to do precisely that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The problem is that the Minister is still talking about 2050 when we have a crisis right now. It is clear that the Government refused to support a windfall tax on the

energy companies so that they could invest in their oil and gas production, rather than the money going to our constituents who are struggling with their energy bills. That is not going to be settled, so may I ask the Minister why he will not impose a windfall tax on these companies so that they can contribute to the just transition and invest in green energy for the future?

Greg Hands: The Chancellor outlined the disadvantages of a windfall tax at the Dispatch Box last Thursday, when he said that it was “superficially appealing” but probably counterproductive. He also said that oil and gas companies were paying corporation tax at twice the rate paid by other companies, and that taxing UK activity on something that is traded globally would probably cost UK jobs and drive up the price of retail fuel, and would certainly make the UK less energy-secure.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I cautiously welcome this news. It will help to secure 100,000 jobs in the industry and in the north-east of Scotland, and I think that in the current political times it will help to deliver resilience to energy supplies not just here but across Europe.

Will the Government commit themselves to taking three actions in parallel to help to save the planet as well as saving jobs? First, will they attach a zero-carbon obligation to each new licence underpinned with fiscal and fine regimes? Secondly, will they accelerate just transition approval for the Acorn carbon capture and storage cluster? Thirdly, will the Minister meet me to discuss how to support the development of carbon capture technologies at sites such as the Mossmorran Natural Gas Liquids and Ethylene plants in my constituency?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking a slightly more constructive approach than his Scottish National party colleague, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn). He is right: we can save the planet and save jobs at the same time. He called for a zero-carbon obligation, but I suggest that he should wait to see the results of the consultation on the climate compatibility checkpoint; he will have heard what I said

earlier about how the UK Government are supporting carbon capture, utilisation and storage; and as for meeting him, of course I will do so.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): According to UK statistics, the amount of oil and gas sourced from the North and Celtic seas has ballooned. It has doubled year on year. One oil company chief executive is reported to have described his company as “literally like a cash machine”

as he handed billions of pounds to shareholders as a result of those increased exports. Is the reality not that that exploitation has more to do with maximising profits and tax revenues than dealing with the domestic energy crisis?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. I will need to have a look at the timeframe for his statistic on doubling production, because clearly during the first year of the pandemic, in particular, production was very low. I would have to look at that. I think his call is for higher taxation, and again it is worth looking at the tax being paid by the sector. Since 2010, the sector has paid £33.7 billion in taxes, and £375 billion over the past 50 years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Although I, like many, welcome the fact that new gas and oil supply can be found in the North sea, the timescale will not help fuel poverty in the interim. What is the Department doing to secure fuel at appropriate prices for working families in my constituency of Strangford and, indeed, across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman is right that matters being discussed today are for gas production in the future, but I refer him to the Chancellor’s statement to the House on Thursday for the package of support being provided by the Government. That will include £350 on bills, made up of a £200 discount on the bill and a £150 rebate on council tax. We are also raising the national minimum wage from £8.91 an hour to £9.50, we have frozen fuel duty for 12 years, and, of course, we are providing additional discretionary funds to local authorities to make sure that those who are not covered by those schemes are.

TOEIC English Language Tests

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before we come to the next urgent question, I want to inform the House that I am aware that there are certain live court cases that are relevant. Given the importance of the subject matter, Mr Speaker has granted a limited waiver to allow general reference to the issues, but Members should not refer to the detail of live cases.

1.52 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*):

To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement about reports of failings in the test of English for international communication, or TOEIC, language tests in 2012.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster):

I am aware that BBC “Newsnight” is tonight examining the Home Office’s response to systemic fraud that took place in the teaching of English international communication exams prior to 2014. In 2014, the BBC’s “Panorama” programme uncovered examples of organised fraud on a significant scale taking place during TOEIC exams, as they are known, which were at the time required under immigration rules for student and other visas. The Home Office’s subsequent investigation into the abuse of English language testing revealed systemic cheating that was indicative of significant organised fraud. Ministers and Parliament were clear at the time that they expected a robust and speedy response. As such, the Government took a number of steps to fix the broken student visa system that operated before 2014 and to prevent such abuse from happening again.

The actions taken included stopping more than 1,000 colleges bringing bogus or low-quality students into the country who intended to work, not study. Given the scale of the fraud, it is impossible to say that nobody was wrongly affected and a number of appeals have succeeded. However, we continue to believe that there was a large-scale problem with cheating, as the BBC uncovered. Individuals affected have always had the right to challenge Home Office decisions through appeal or judicial review. Many have done that and it is important to note that the courts, up to the Court of Appeal, have consistently found that the evidence of invalid cases was enough for the Home Office to take the action it did.

However, as the Home Secretary set out to the Home Affairs Committee on 2 February and as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) will be aware, the upper tribunal presidential panel is currently considering the case known RK/DK, which involves many of the issues raised by the BBC in relation to ETS TOIEC. The determination in that case will have a critical bearing on the Home Office’s future approach to ETS TOIEC-related cases, so it would be inappropriate to comment directly on the BBC’s findings ahead of that determination. I can confirm, though, that we will announce the next steps once we have received and considered the judgment.

Stephen Timms: In 2011, the Home Office gave a licence to the US firm ETS to operate its TOIEC English language test to establish whether overseas students could speak English well enough to study in

the UK. Nearly 60,000 students took the test over three years but, as the Minister said, in 2014 “Panorama” exposed cheating at a number of TOIEC test centres and the ETS licence was withdrawn.

In response, ETS promised to analyse its recordings of all the students who had taken the test. Having done that, ETS told the Home Office later in 2014 that 96.5% of the students had either definitely or probably cheated. The Home Office seems to have failed to ask even the most basic questions about that absurd claim, now discredited, and it went ahead and cancelled the visas of more than 30,000 students. Contrary to what the Minister said, no appeal was available other than for students to go back to their home countries and then appeal, but in reality there was no provision there to make an appeal. Thousands of innocent students had their futures destroyed.

This morning, the original “Panorama” team has reported that ETS knew about the cheating well before the “Panorama” programme but did nothing because it wanted to keep the revenue. The BBC has also reported that the Home Office was told in 2012 by ETS whistleblowers but, instead of cancelling the licence then, allowed ETS to carry on for another two years. Thousands of innocent students were dragged into disaster as a result. Home Office failings have wrecked the lives of thousands of innocent people.

The Home Secretary told the Home Affairs Committee a year ago that too many people had been hurt and that a resolution was needed, but there has been no progress since. Will the Minister now come forward with a straightforward mechanism, as promised by the previous Home Secretary two and half years ago, to enable innocent students to clear their names and rebuild their lives?

Kevin Foster: As I have already touched on, I will not be commenting more widely on some of the matters that are currently sub judice, but I point out again that the scale of cheating exposed at the time was endemic. It is a rather bizarre argument that we should have gone earlier and harder on this issue. I made it clear in my statement that the courts up to the Court of Appeal have consistently found that there was enough evidence of invalid cases for the Home Office to take the action it took.

As I pointed out, there are opportunities for appeals. Those who have been here for some time may well be able to make claims based on their private life or human rights claims that would allow them to secure status in this country.

At the core of all this is the need to reflect on what has happened over the past 10 years in respect of what was previously the tier 4 route and is now the student route. We have reformed a system that was wide open to abuse and that brought the name of our education sector into disrepute. We have created a new system, particularly in respect of the new student visa, that works for students and education providers and, crucially, in respect of the Home Office balancing the need for compliance with the wish to facilitate the ambitions of hundreds of thousands of people who wish to study at our world-leading institutions. The student visa system is a world away from where it was in the past.

Finally, I should point out that 20 people have been convicted for their role in the systemic and organised cheating in English tests. That speaks strongly to the

actions we took. As I said, there continues to be a process through the courts for those who wish to challenge the decision in their own cases. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we encourage the courts to make a determination if there is an allegation of dishonesty in relation to TOIEC. As I said, when the final judgment comes from the panel, we will respond more fully.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this urgent question. I must also say that I look forward to working constructively with the Minister, but I can assure him that we will robustly hold him to account as well.

We know there is a moral vacuum at the heart of this Conservative Government. We know that No. 10 is a shambles and that the Home Office under this Home Secretary is not fit for purpose. This case brings all those fundamental flaws into a toxic combination of indifference and incompetence. The harrowing accounts that have emerged include a man who was held in a cell for months on end, wrongly accused of failing his test, without any right to release or even to appeal. Students who could have contributed so much to our country have been wrongly deported based on unreliable evidence and as a result have suffered deep and intolerable injustice and personal hardship. As one student put it:

“I want my future back.”

It goes without saying that the Labour party supports the use of English language tests, and of course we support efforts to target cheating, but we must utterly condemn the blind eye that the Home Office turned to ETS's failings. Can the Minister therefore tell us why on earth the Home Office thought it appropriate to allow a discredited ETS to manage the initial investigation in 2014, and to rely on its deeply questionable data? Do the Government intend to continue to rely on ETS's claims? If so, how can the Home Office be sure the data is reliable? What action do the Government plan to take to right those wrongs? Will they continue to force migrants through the demeaning process of lengthy legal battles rather than resolving the matter internally? Will the Minister commit now, from the Dispatch Box, to a mechanism that will allow innocent students to clear their names?

This is, of course, just one of a litany of Home Office failures under this Conservative Government since 2010, from the Windrush scandal to data leaks and the ongoing small boats crisis. The Home Secretary must now take full responsibility for this shocking miscarriage of justice.

Kevin Foster: Let us start on a constructive note: I welcome the hon. Gentleman, my new shadow, to his place. The circumstances that led to his appointment are obviously unfortunate, but I genuinely welcome it and look forward to having a constructive relationship with him, as I have with other shadow Ministers, on matters where there is agreement and where it is in everyone's interest that we engage constructively.

Turning to the comments the hon. Gentleman has just made, I find it quite interesting to get a lecture on how to set up an immigration system from the party that initially set up the tier 4 system, with its many flaws that we discovered on coming into government 12 years ago. It is a bit rich to be getting a lecture now on the fact

that there was a need to reform massively our student visa system to ensure any form of effective compliance within it.

However, as I have touched on, I will not get drawn on the wider facts within the court case. We have already seen judgments and determinations up to and including the Court of Appeal saying that the evidence was sufficient to justify taking the actions we took at the time. I respect the fact that people have the ability to go to the courts, particularly now that people are getting leave under our private or family life rule; that is not a huge surprise, given that we are talking about people who entered the UK, in many cases, at least eight years ago.

Our position is that there are mechanisms, but we are awaiting the determination. We will be able to set matters out more fully then; I hope we all understand why it makes sense to get that particular tribunal determination and then announce and confirm our next steps, rather than speculating on what it might say.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I too pay tribute to the very tenacious right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), as well as to Migrant Voice, the immigration lawyers and most of all the students who have all refused to accept the outrageous injustices perpetrated on them by the Home Office. Yes, there was significant fraud, but the Home Office must wake up to the fact that there was systemic injustice for innocent students. It came about because, despite its having been put under criminal investigation, that very same company, ETS, was asked by the Home Office to be judge and jury on tens of thousands of students and to mark its own tainted, dodgy homework.

That company's verdicts were accepted without question; no opportunity was given to students to provide their own evidence, or even to see or hear the evidence against them. It was not so much Home Office negligence as maliciousness, and one of the worst excesses of the hostile environment policy. The questions today are: what will be done to fix it and what lessons can be learned?

On fixing it, it is not good enough to hide behind out-of-country appeals or judicial reviews. Those are hopeless processes. The Minister needs to consult on a process that is independent and fast and that can allow students to right the wrongs that have been meted out to them, and there will also have to be a compensation scheme. Finally, what has the Home Office learned from all of this, and is it not about time that this whole episode was also handed to Wendy Williams?

Kevin Foster: The biggest lesson that was learned was the need to transform our student visa system from one that was all too often a flag of convenience for those looking to come to work in the UK rather than for those genuinely looking to study. As we have said, the system has been absolutely transformed. It is one of our most compliant routes. It has allowed us to bring in additional benefits such as the graduate route that we created last year, plus more simplified processes for those applying for a student visa in the UK, both of which are very much rooted in the excellent relationship that we now have with the sector. Let us be very clear, we got rid of more than 1,000 sponsors, who, it is safe to say, were not meeting the high standards that the sector more widely provides.

[Kevin Foster]

On the specifics, again, we are waiting the determination from the tribunal. I have touched on the judgments that we have already had on the evidence that we used for the basis of our action, up to and including the Court of Appeal. Once we have the determination of the tribunal, we will be happy to confirm our next steps.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): One of my constituents was woken at 6 in the morning, dragged from the home that he shares with his British wife and child and detained for days. He lost the right to work and was catapulted towards bankruptcy, unable to pay more legal costs. For year, after year, after year, he was terrified of another knock on the door. Although this is the story of one constituent, it is the story of many of my constituents. All they want is a fair chance to clear their names, and, frankly, they deserve compensation as well. I would be really grateful to hear something from the Minister, as this has dragged on for too long. The Government must create a process to end this scandal. When will they do so?

Kevin Foster: Again, once we have the tribunal determination, we will set out more fully what our response is, rather than speculating today on what that response may be. As I have said, other people are making applications under the status of their private and family life. We have changed our guidance to make it clear that that status is not a block to the application being granted. Obviously, decision makers in the Home Office will now appropriately balance matters of eight years ago with what someone's private or family life may be today, and look at the proportionate outcome in a case.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is pretty clear that today's urgent question—I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on obtaining it—will not be the last word on this matter. I wonder whether, when we return to this in the fullness of time, the Minister's answers will look quite as robust as the delivery with which he offers them to the House today. Instead of doubling down on the history of the Home Office's dealings with ETS, would it not have been better to bring in somebody independent of the Home Office to restore a bit of trust in the system, which is so manifestly lacking?

Kevin Foster: We are talking about actions taken during the time of the coalition Government. Obviously, we were grateful for the support of the right hon. Gentleman's party at that time.

On bringing in independent systems, we have touched on that. There is an ability to appeal decisions to the courts, and we encourage the courts, where there is a case before them, to make a determination, and we have been doing that for some time. Again, we await the tribunal. The right hon. Gentleman is speculating on the outcome. We will see what the outcome actually is and then bring forward what we believe should be the next steps.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I have as constituents a married couple: the wife is originally from the Philippines; they have been married for several years. She was sucked into this scandal by having, by

chance, to use one of these centres and was deemed to have cheated the system. If she makes a subsequent application, it will be assumed that she has been dishonest previously and she will not be allowed to apply. I urge the Minister, now that there is enough doubt and murkiness about these systems, to draw a line and to say to everybody who applied previously, "We will not tarnish your reputation. It is a fresh application and do your best."

Kevin Foster: As I said, we have already amended our guidance where a person's right to a private and family life in the UK is relevant. An allegation in relation to TOEIC is not a block and does not mean that an application would not be granted. It is not an overriding consideration, as other evidence of criminality or dishonesty in the immigration system may well be. The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with that.

Again, the tribunal has not given us a timescale, but we believe we are not far away from getting a final determination which will allow us to bring forward our next steps based on that determination, rather than speculating about what the determination might be. At the moment, there is not a block on a person making another application, and our guidance will, of course, take into account the balance of the individual's rights and interests versus conduct of at least eight years ago.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have constituents who are affected by the TOEIC scandal, and I also have constituents who are affected by the paragraph 322(5) highly-skilled migrants scandal. What they have in common is the devastating impact of accusations of being of poor character or of cheating. Will the Minister look again at the cases of my constituents, all of whom claim to have had no bad character and no cheating? Will he apologise to them for the hell he has put them through?

Kevin Foster: As always, I am happy to look at individual cases referred to me, but it would not be appropriate for me to discuss individuals on the Floor of the House. On the overall position, we have to look back at the scale of what was happening eight years ago. It is not happening in our immigration system today, as we have transformed the student visa system.

On another route that has been cited, we are making sure that things such as HMRC data are rightly used in immigration applications. As it stands, the tribunal determination is imminent and we will announce further steps once we have it.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I also have many constituents who are affected by this appalling TOEIC scandal, both the tier 4 migrants who were bringing the skills that we so badly needed in this country and the students who were coming here to learn extra skills to take back to their home country. When this scandal hit them, they were forced either to live under the radar on no income while they fought to get justice for themselves through the courts, or to give up and go home, as many did.

It caused huge shame to those who had to go home, particularly the students who had paid a fortune to take the courses. Some of them had given up in the third year, and the universities did not allow them to catch up and they had to start all over again. All the people I met

were willing and able to take further English exams. In fact, several had already passed a higher-level test, the International English Language Testing System test. Will the Government at least consider giving those who remain in the system some justice by letting them take a further English test?

Kevin Foster: It might be tempting to say, “Why not take a further English test?” Of course, if somebody has been living in the UK for eight years, it is likely that their English will have improved considerably since their test. As I have outlined, there is a reason why we shut down more than 1,000 bogus colleges a decade ago: we had a route that was completely open to abuse. It was a flag of convenience for the many people who were coming to the UK to work, not to study. That is why the biggest lesson learned was to have an effective student route, which is what we have today.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): We all know that people cheated on the TOEIC tests. We also know that unreliable evidence condemned many innocent victims, perhaps thousands of them, to a life of abject hardship and poverty. They are unable to work or study, their life has been put on hold and their reputation has been absolutely trashed. They need justice. What mechanism can the Minister offer to get them out of this situation that will not cost them further money that they simply do not have?

Kevin Foster: As touched on, people can appeal to the courts, and many are getting determinations based on their private and family lives. As I have mentioned

already, courts up to and including the Court of Appeal have held that our approach, given the evidence we had of systemic cheating in the system, was appropriate and proportionate. However, we await the latest determination, which will then allow us to announce what further steps we may wish to take.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I have English language schools in my constituency that are of very high quality and are very robust, and they have dozens of former students whose lives are in limbo because of this scandal and who continue to suffer from the effects of it. The Minister said that they have the option of applying through the family life system or they can go to court. Would it not be better to consider reviewing all those cases and giving those people some justice?

Kevin Foster: As the hon. Member says, we now have a very strong system of English language tuition and of both universities and other higher education institutions sponsoring under our student route. That works very well, is highly compliant and is an absolute world away from the system that existed 12 years ago. On what he suggests about other areas, there is the ability, as I have said, for people to make private life applications if they are here in the UK. However, on the wider position, I think it makes eminent sense, given that we are awaiting a determination from the highest tribunal in effect—the upper tribunal presidential panel—to actually have that determination and then consider what the next steps will be, rather than to announce something speculative.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Integration White Paper

2.16 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the integration White Paper.

The covid-19 pandemic has been a living example of the importance of working together as one. Whether it is the extraordinary success of the vaccination programme or the work to identify and protect the most vulnerable, we were at our best when we were working across traditional boundaries towards a common goal. We must learn the lessons of the pandemic and channel this spirit of collaboration.

Although huge progress has been made in bringing together our health and care services and local government, our system often remains fragmented and too often fails to deliver joined-up services that meet people's needs. Thanks to incredible advances in health and care, people are enjoying longer life expectancies, but may be living with more complex needs for longer. Navigating a complex health and care system to meet those needs can be hard, especially when services are often funded, managed and delivered separately. People too often find that they are having to force services to work together, rather than experiencing a seamless, joined-up health and care journey.

If we are to succeed in our goals of levelling up our nation, we must keep working to make integrated health and care a reality across England. Today, we are publishing the integration White Paper, which shows how we will get there. It is the next step in our ambitious programme of reform, building on the Health and Care Bill and the social care reform White Paper, which this Government introduced to the House in December.

This White Paper has been shaped by the real-world experience of people, as well as that of nurses, care workers and doctors on the frontline, drawing on some of the great examples of collaborative working we have seen, particularly during the pandemic. It will make health and care systems fit for the future, boost the health of local communities and make it easier to access health and care services. It is a plan with people and outcomes at its heart—no more endless form filling, no impenetrable processes and no more bureaucracy that sees too many people getting lost in the system and not receiving the care they need.

First, we will ensure strong leadership and accountability, which is critical to delivering integration. Local leaders have a unique relationship with the people they serve. Our plans will bring together local leaders to deliver on shared outcomes, all in the best interests of their local communities, and encourage local arrangements that provide clarity over health and care services in each area, including aligning and pooling budgets. This arrangement has already been successfully adopted in several local areas. We have suggested a model that meets these criteria, and we expect areas to develop appropriate arrangements by spring of next year. Local NHS and local authority leaders will be empowered to deliver against these outcomes, and will be accountable for delivery and performance against them. They will be supported by a new national leadership programme addressing the skills required to deliver effective system transformation and strong local collaboration.

Integration supports transparency, and joining up NHS and local authority data means that we can provide local people with better insights about how their area's health and care services are performing. With access to more information, they will be more empowered to make decisions about where and how they access care. There will be a new single accountable person for delivery of a shared health and care plan at local level. In practice, that could mean an individual with a dual role across health and care or a single lead for a place-based arrangement.

Secondly, we will do more to join up care. At the moment, too many people are bounced around the system or have to tell their story multiple times to different professionals to get the care that they need, which is frustrating for people and frontline workers alike. There are so many opportunities here. Closer working between primary and secondary care can allow care that is closer to home, keeping people healthy and independent for longer, and closer working between mental health and social care services can reduce crisis admissions and improve the quality of life for those living with mental illness. The White Paper sets out how we will get there, using the power of data to give local leaders the information that they need to establish new, joined-up services to tackle the issues facing their communities.

Thirdly, we will make the best use of the huge advances in digital and data. We have seen throughout the pandemic how digital tools can empower people to look after their health and take greater control of their care—for instance, through the NHS app or remote monitoring technologies. Where several organisations are involved in one person's care, there is a real opportunity to bring together data safely to create a seamless and joined-up experience. The White Paper reiterates our commitment to having shared records in place for all people by 2024, providing local people with a single, functional health and care record that everyone involved in care can access in a secure way. That will mean every professional having access to the key facts relating to a person's condition, such as their diagnoses and medications. That will improve care, too, with professionals able to make care plans in full knowledge of the facts.

We have seen a rapid expansion of digital channels in primary and secondary care services in recent years, but there is plenty more that we can do. This year, one million people will be supported by digitally enabled care pathways in the comfort of their home. The White Paper sets out how we will open up even more ways for people to access health and adult social care services remotely. We will also support digital transformation by formally recognising the digital data and technology profession within the NHS "Agenda for Change", and including basic digital, data and technology skills in the training of all health and care staff. Integrated care systems will be tasked with developing digital investment plans so that we can ensure that digital capability is strong right across the board. That means data flowing seamlessly across all care settings, with technology transforming care so that it is personalised to the patient.

Finally, the White Paper shows the part that the workforce can play. The health and care workforce is one of the biggest assets that we have, and we want to make it easier for people working in health and care to feel confident in how the system works together in the best interests of those they care for and to feel empowered to progress their careers across the health and care

family. To drive that, integrated care systems will support joint health and care workforce planning. We will improve training and ongoing learning and development opportunities for staff. That means creating more opportunities for joint continuous development and joint roles across health and social care, increasing the number of clinical practice placements in adult social care for health undergraduates and exploring the introduction of an integrated skills passport to allow health and care staff to transfer their skills and knowledge between the NHS, public health and social care.

The White Paper represents a further step in our journey of reform, building on the foundation laid in the Health and Care Bill, looking ahead to a future of health and care in this country with people at its very heart. It paints a vivid picture of a health and care system with more personalised care and greater transparency and choice, where early intervention prevents the most serious diseases, using the power of integration to give people the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

2.24 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, which I got about 30 minutes ago, but I confess that I read most of it some 30 years ago when I was developing joint services. After waiting an eternity for the Department of Health and Social Care White Paper, the Government are spoiling us with their third paper of the year. All these papers are necessary to try to remedy the disastrous Lansley Act—the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

We acknowledge that reversing that Act and the integration of health and social care, however it is defined, is extremely difficult, but this integration will not be delivered by the White Paper and it is certainly not well defined. It is not clear how this fits with the Health and Care Bill, which is currently in the Lords. Even the experts involved in the Committee and elsewhere are repeatedly tripping over crucial issues such as the relationship between integrated care boards, integrated care partnerships and integrated care systems. How do they work with health and wellbeing boards? Where is the clinical leadership? Where is the accountability to local people? I banged on a lot about accountability in the Bill Committee so I am glad that somebody was at least listening and that we seem to have a bit of progress, but where are the voices of local people who are increasingly being asked to pay more for less?

Like a house made of crepe paper, this gossamer-thin White Paper collapses with the faintest breeze of scrutiny. Let us be clear: it is not a plan, nor is it even a starting strategy. It is just a series of woolly claims about how things could be better, unsupported by any evidence or analysis of the resources and organisational and funding flow changes that will obviously be necessary. It could have been written at any time over the past 30 years. It contains little that is new and nothing to illustrate new thinking or new attitudes. It relies on the bogus assumption that because something may work for a while on a small scale, it will obviously work everywhere. It is not any kind of plan for integrated care that people will recognise; these are just aspirations about integrated systems.

There is little to explain how a joined-up system would be managed, how it would be accountable to the public, patients and service-users, how the funding will

be allocated and shared or how performance would be assessed and weaknesses addressed. Nothing in the White Paper addresses the key issue of balancing what is locally determined against national standards and national entitlements.

Crucially, there is nothing to address the key barrier to integration—that social care and the NHS are in different empires with no level playing field. One is means-tested and one is not. One has national criteria for entitlement and one does not. The way in which they are governed and funded is totally different and they are kept going by two separate workforces with no aligned terms and conditions.

I welcome the announcement of a skills passport and we will certainly look at the detail of that. However, unless there is pooled funding on a major scale—out-of-hospital funding—there will be no system drivers to really improve integration. This White Paper is again about simply encouraging, but we have had 30 years of that.

The reality is that the White Paper is remarkable for what it does not do. It does not seem to help children and young people. It does not address the challenge of how to care for and support working-age adults with a disability. It does not really value or assist the informal workforce or carers.

Our NHS and care system is under enormous pressure after years of austerity funding made incalculably worse by the impact of the covid pandemic, but the challenges that it faces are manifest, from a legacy of a “hospital first” approach to a decades-long failure to share care records. That runs alongside chronic underfunding and devaluing of public health, huge gaps in the workforce and wholly inadequate social care provision, with more than 500,000 people waiting for assessment and hundreds of thousands more denied access to care of any kind because the barrier for access is far too high.

This is a will-o'-the-wisp White Paper: one minute it is there before us only to vanish at a glance. The truth is that there does not seem to be anything of note that cannot already be done. Fundamentally, what is the point of it? As things stand, the number of patients waiting for care will continue to rise for the next two years, and there is no plan—not even the ambition—to get waiting times and waiting lists down to the record lows seen under the last Labour Government.

Worse still, these proposals will see patients paying more in tax but waiting longer for care. The Government are blaming covid, but will the Minister tell us when the target for NHS patients in England to be treated within 18 weeks was last met? If he cannot remember, it was in fact in 2016, four years before the pandemic. It is clear from the announcement yesterday and here today—just as it is from the decade of Tory mismanagement that left the NHS ill-equipped to cope with covid—that the longer we give the Conservatives in office, the longer patients will wait. Their time really is up.

Today is not a serious endeavour; it is a greatest hits of soundbites and buzzwords, randomly assembled to make a decent press release and get an outing on the evening bulletins. It is a desperate desire to own the news cycle and calm Tory Back Benchers' nerves. It really is disappointing and it is simply not good enough.

Edward Argar: It is a pleasure to see the shadow Minister in her place—she will know that I genuinely mean that, because she and I spent many happy days

[Edward Argar]

upstairs in Committee debating exactly these issues. This White Paper sets out clearly the next steps and builds on the strong foundations of integration that that legislation put forward, with the integrated care boards, integrated care providers and integrated care systems, which our deliberations in Committee and in this House demonstrated were clear, understandable and effective in providing locally based governance; bringing together at an ICB level NHS services within a locality, and within an ICP broader ranges of services, including housing providers and others. This has been bringing together the national health service we have with the localised delivery we all seek.

That is one of the key points of the White Paper: the next steps in how to deliver place-based solutions and allow the system to continue to evolve organically through that permissive approach that characterises the legislation we are putting through Parliament, rather than the prescriptive approach that the Labour party at times appears to prefer. The White Paper contains new thinking on new ways forward, drawing on not just the lessons of the pandemic but much longer-standing arrangements within localities, recognising best practice for integration between health and social care, and reflecting that organic development that occurs within a place as local leaders, local communities and those using the services work together to deliver services that work best for them.

The hon. Lady touched on how some of this might work in practice and talked about funding and budgets. We have made it clear—I used to use this when I was a local councillor—that section 75 of the National Health Service Act 2006, on the ability to pool budgets, has been effective, but it is time to go further and explore whether that remains the most effective vehicle by which that sharing of budgets can be undertaken, so it is right that we look at this.

The hon. Lady touched more broadly on social care and the NHS. I have to say to her that we announced our White Paper for social care last September. She mentioned the plethora of White Papers. We rightly recognise the different parts of the health and social care system and have clear plans for each of them. Those different White Papers together form a coherent whole, putting forward reform proposals that will make a difference for patients and others alike. I have to say to the Opposition that, much as they may gently chide us on this, in 13 years in government they had two Green Papers, one royal commission and one spending review priority, but still no reforms to improve social care provision in this country. This Government have seized the nettle and brought forward proposals that will genuinely move us forward.

Finally, on the hon. Lady's points about yesterday's announcement on NHS waiting lists, this Government have been transparent with the British people about the challenge ahead of us and about our plan to meet that challenge. Our approach, which combines ambition with realism, has been welcomed by stakeholders across the health and social care space. Ours is the party of the NHS. We are the party that has put the resources into that NHS, with £33.9 billion put into law at the start of 2020, and then record funding through the health and care levy, which the Labour party voted against.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): As one in the long line of former Health Secretaries with scars on their back—to quote Sir Tony, if we are allowed to—from when they tried to integrate the health and care systems, I warmly welcome this White Paper. I think it is more than aspirations. But there are three central elements of the plumbing that we have to get right, and I want to ask the Minister, who I know is very committed to this, for his response.

First, previous attempts to have pooled budgets for vulnerable people have been bedevilled by the fact that the NHS has not wanted to pool its budgets with an underfunded social care system. The grant to local government is still not generous, to say the least. The Select Committee on Health and Social Care recommended an increase of £7 billion a year by the end of the Parliament, but it is actually going up by £2 billion a year. What will we do to overcome the resistance in the NHS to merging budgets with a social care system that is feeling very stretched?

Secondly, it is a very big step forward that everyone will have a single electronic health and care record by 2024, but my simple question is whether the public will be able to access the data. Patients are the best guarantors and defenders of their own health, so they should be able to access everything that professionals can see about them.

My third question is about having a single professional responsible for someone's care. What is the role of GPs in that? For most members of the public, the central person responsible for their care is their GP. Is it not time to go back to the days when everyone had their own family doctor, instead of a different doctor every time they call the surgery? They might not see the same person every time, but there should be someone at the GP surgery who is responsible for their overall care, whether that is in the health system or the social care system.

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend speaks with typical wisdom and common sense on these issues. I will briefly address each of his three points in turn.

On pooled and shared budgets, I have to say that I think section 75 of the National Health Service Act 2006 has worked well. When I was cabinet member for health and adult social care at my council—I had more hair then, and it was not grey—I also sat on a primary care trust board as a non-executive member. I had a senior director of that PCT on my management team; we forged a common purpose, recognising that there would be some areas in which NHS moneys were greater than those put in by the local authority and vice versa, but the shared goal was achievable only when we worked together. I think that there is genuinely something to build on, and the ICSs, ICBs and ICPs at the upper level will be the vehicle to move the process forward. When I was doing it, there was a degree of personal relationship moving it forward, rather than necessarily a systematised approach, but I genuinely think that there is a willingness and a recognition of the need for this.

On public access to electronic records, my right hon. Friend's central point is absolutely right: it is important to recognise that such data is our data and individuals' data. We must always be wary about doing something to someone, as opposed to in partnership with them. That principle will underpin our approach in this space.

Finally, my right hon. Friend referred to a single responsible professional—not a single point of contact, but someone who brings together an individual's care. He is right to highlight the importance of general practitioners. May I put on record my gratitude to GPs not only for all their work over the past two years, and for all they do day in, day out, but for the wisdom and care that they bring to addressing their patients' needs?

Since my right hon. Friend's time as Secretary of State, there has been a continual drive to increase the number of doctors in our health service. Not all will become general practitioners, but we need to continue to make general practice accessible and to encourage people to choose it as an incredibly exciting and rewarding career. One of the key elements of making what he describes work is building up a body of general practitioners who are able to perform such tasks. I pay tribute to his work; we are continuing that work and building on his foundations. I am grateful for his questions and for his contributions.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I think it fair to say that England is late to the integration game; Scotland and Wales have been legislating and moving in that direction for 20 years. The Scottish Government are pushing forward plans for a national care service to ensure that social care is fit for the 21st century, and have developed the NHS Pharmacy First Scotland scheme to spread the burden of frontline care and make pharmacies the first port of call for patients when GP and hospital visits are not necessary.

What lessons have been learned from the devolved nations? Any new plan for the NHS will not change the reality of the challenges facing the NHS organisation across all four of our nations, including that of vacancies. While Scotland's workforce has grown by 20% under the SNP, Brexit is still hampering our ability to recruit from EU nations. Will the Minister discuss loosening Brexit and immigration controls with his fellow Ministers to help alleviate that situation?

Edward Argar: I saw the hon. Gentleman's final point coming. To his original point, we are always happy to speak to the devolved Administrations and learn from their ideas, just as I am sure they occasionally look to England to see what they can learn—that is part of being a member of this Union. I speak regularly to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), including about such matters. To his final point, all I would say is that since 2010 we have seen around 30,000 more doctors and 38,000 more nurses in the English NHS—I have highlighted the role that my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) played in that—so I think we are doing a pretty good job of continuing to grow the workforce. There is much more to do, but we have a plan and we are delivering on it.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I welcome this ambitious and much-needed programme of reform. One of the greatest challenges is ensuring the accountability of NHS bodies to local people, and I wonder whether the Minister could say a bit more about how these plans will ensure that local NHS bodies are accountable to the local people they serve.

Edward Argar: These plans build on what we are proposing in our legislation. At the heart of the Bill are integrated care systems, which bring together at ICB level and ICP level the local authorities that are elected to represent their areas, local people—Healthwatch will have a key voice in this space—and of course the local NHS.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The clinical commissioning group in Barnsley says that it is struggling with unprecedented capacity issues. With a record 6 million patients waiting for planned NHS treatment across the UK, can the Minister explain how we will tackle the crisis in waiting times through this White Paper?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will have seen yesterday the announcement and publication of our plan to tackle waiting lists caused by the covid pandemic, the investment that underpins that, the approach to the workforce and how we will bring those waiting lists down. This White Paper builds on that; they are complementary and work together. This is about looking to the future to improve how our systems work together, but we set out a clear and comprehensive plan yesterday to do exactly what she speaks of.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I declare my interest as a doctor. I wonder what the practical consequences of this will be. Can I suggest to my hon. Friend, whom I admire greatly, that one of those practical consequences might be to end the awful business of people waiting for weeks and weeks in acute hospital beds for discharge to more appropriate settings in the community? It does them no good, it is massively expensive to the system, and it prevents them moving on to places that can better care for them and give them what they need while allowing the acute sector to do what it can do, which is to manage people who are acutely unwell. At the moment we have 10,000 people in the system waiting for discharge. That will not do, and I would be interested to know from my hon. Friend how these proposals will help.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend in this respect. Discharge of people from hospital safely, either into a care home setting or back to their own home with support, is vital not only for their own health outcomes but for the flow of patients through our acute hospitals to enable A&Es and other parts of the system to function effectively. Through the national discharge taskforce and through the work we have done throughout the pandemic, we are bringing together acute hospitals and local authorities, and we have made huge strides together within localities in improving this and learning lessons. This White Paper sets out a way in which they can be embedded to ensure that they continue to deliver long-lasting benefits.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): My constituent Lynn is a powerful and loving advocate for her husband Andy, but she is at her wits' end because she has to repeat the same information time and time again to nurses, consultants, dementia specialists, carers and the Department for Work and Pensions. When will the White Paper make her life a little bit easier? Despite her frustrations, she knows that all those professionals are working incredibly hard, but there just are not enough of them. How can it be that the Minister has said in this

[Daisy Cooper]

statement that he wants integrated care systems to have a joint health and care workforce plan, but he is still refusing to put that commitment to a workforce strategy into the Health and Care Bill?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments and for highlighting the situation Lynn and Andy find themselves in. What we seek to do, through what I said about care records, is exactly what she and I think they would wish to see, which is to reduce the number of unnecessary or duplicative interactions with the system.

She touches on workforce. I set out in my remarks earlier that since 2010, under this Government, there have been over 30,000 more doctors and 38,000 more nurses. In just the past year, we have seen a huge increase in the number of nurses—I think 11,000—and an increase of about 5,000 doctors. We continue to grow the workforce and we are already working to do so. My right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who is no longer in his place, set a lot of that in motion. We have also commissioned from Health Education England and NHS England, now that we have announced their merger, the long-term 10-year workforce strategy, which I look forward to with interest.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering General Hospital and Northampton General Hospital have between them 1,100 beds, 300 of which are occupied mainly by elderly patients who have completed their medical treatment and await discharge either into a care home or a domiciliary care setting. Meanwhile, adult social care is provided by the two unitary authorities, which contract with over 80 different domiciliary care providers. Would the Minister welcome ambitious proposals from Northamptonshire along the lines of those already being pursued by Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, whereby the NHS itself provides domiciliary care? Unless we get those 300 patients into an appropriate setting out of hospital, our hospitals will for ever be clogged up.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who quite rightly never misses an opportunity to pay tribute to his local hospital trust. As he knows, I am always happy—as is my hon. Friend the Minister for Care and Mental Health—to hear any ideas for innovation that may improve outcomes for patients and communities.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As we have heard, councils and health service bodies have been taking the opportunity to work together in the absence of Government action. In Gateshead, we have a joint commissioning director for health and care, which has worked out very well. So things have been happening without the White Paper. The key to addressing integration is the workforce. With thousands of NHS vacancies and thousands of social care vacancies, we really need to address that issue. We need a comprehensive, detailed plan on restructuring the social care workforce to ensure it is recognised as much as the NHS workforce.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, although I am not entirely convinced on her point about the absence of Government action. Yes, co-operation has

been happening organically from the ground up, but that has been encouraged and supported by Government action—including various pots of funding, for example relating to discharge during the pandemic—driving that activity and helping to foster that culture of co-operation. She highlights the importance of the workforce and the need for increasing numbers. That is a point I have already acknowledged. I have made clear that the Government have a plan and are already delivering increases in the workforce.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I welcome the White Paper, not least because we have had to put through a very painful tax increase and want the Government to get on with things, but also because the Minister faces considerable challenges, including demoralising intransigence between competing bureaucracies, a hugely complex task of integrating information systems, and the need to rip up and replace the truly horrendous workforce planning system for change of pay and other conditions, as other Members have said. All those things are going to bog the Minister down, so will he do two things? First, will he set up a special taskforce to look at quick wins to start to deliver improvements? Secondly, reinforcing what my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee said, will the Minister agree to put control of, and full information about, patient records in the hands of patients, so that they can use effective choice?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is, I think, alluding to the fact that quite considerable inputs in the form of taxpayers' money and resources go into the system. Members sometimes fall into the trap of talking about inputs as the ultimate result, whereas my hon. Friend quite rightly talks about outcomes for patients and ensuring that money is well spent and delivers reform and improved outcomes. That is exactly what this paper is determined to achieve.

On my hon. Friend's final two points, I will certainly consider taskforces. We have used one on tackling delayed discharge, so I know their value. I also take his point about data, and underpinning that is something that underpins all our work: co-design and doing things with patients, not to them. We must recognise that it is their data and that they should have control of it.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Minister talks about ICBs, but he knows full well that they are able, under his Bill, to delegate functions and budgets to private providers, which represents a clear Government privatisation agenda.

The Minister talks about transferring skills and knowledge across the NHS, public health and social care, but how will that work in practice? Will the NHS be running training courses for private sector care organisations? If so, why should the NHS hand over valuable intellectual property and spend time gifting it to big business? Will he explain what that will mean for NHS staff?

Edward Argar: We have had these debates before. The hon. Lady knows that the pace of privatisation was fastest under the last Labour Government, when the increase in spend on the private sector was much steeper. We have always been clear in our belief in the founding principles of our NHS, which is free at the point of

need, but we have also been clear, as have every other Government since the foundation of the NHS, that there continues to be a role for voluntary sector organisations and private sector providers in that context.

On the hon. Lady's final point, it is important, as in this White Paper, that we bring out the opportunity to help increase knowledge and share skills across the NHS, local authorities and the voluntary sector.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Given this excellent statement, it would be remiss of me not to thank the Minister publicly for the decision to retain the Frimley integrated care system, which was absolutely the right thing to do.

Will the Minister outline his plans for lessons from the best-performing ICSs to be shared across all ICSs, so that we can keep costs down and improve efficiency right across the network?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend knows, by virtue of the outcome, the persuasive and compelling case made by him and other right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the Chamber in respect of Frimley ICS and its boundaries. As so often in this place, my view is, "If you ain't broke, don't fix it," and his ICS is doing a fantastic job and other ICSs can learn from its success. Mechanisms and organisations through which chairs of ICSs get together and share best practice already exist, but we will continue to examine whether that could be better systematised, so that best practice can be disseminated more widely.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): We have heard already how budgets can be pulled, how place leaders can be appointed and, importantly, how shared outcomes can be set between health and care through our health and wellbeing boards with local authorities. Will the Minister assure me that accountability of the single

accountable person will come through democratic structures, such as health and wellbeing boards or local authorities, to ensure that that if the public are unhappy, they can change things by voting them out?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will know from the debates on the Health and Care Bill that we are moving forward with opportunities for local authorities to be engaged not just at partnership level, as some are already, but more directly with the NHS at the ICB level. Health and wellbeing boards will continue to be a hugely important part of that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): There is a lot of what, to me, seems to be rather mind-numbing jargon in the statement, but only one mention of nurses. Could the Minister tell me—ideally without the jargon—about the impact of the statement on the nursing profession?

Edward Argar: As I mentioned in my earlier answers, this White Paper needs to be taken in conjunction with what we announced yesterday in respect of waiting list recovery, the September social care White Paper and, more broadly, our approach to growing our nursing profession, through increasing the skills and numbers in that profession. We are already well on target for 50,000 more nurses in the profession.

This White Paper looks at the specific aspect of the integration of social care and health and permissive ways for local areas to come up with their most effective place-based arrangements, many of which are already in development. It is, quite rightly, not specific about any individual profession, nor do we believe it should be, because it is for local places to develop their own local plans to reflect their local needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his statement.

Point of Order

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Ed Davey, on a point of order in connection with the Code of Conduct, to rectify a failure to declare.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to apologise to the House for not declaring my interest when tabling two parliamentary questions last year: one on 13 May and one on 4 June. I tabled the questions because of my long-standing interest in climate change, and as a result of constituency casework. An administrative oversight resulted in a breach of the rules, and for that I am sorry. I have put in place measures to ensure a similar mistake cannot be made again. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for her time and care in rectifying this matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. There will be no further points of order on this issue.

Seals (Protection)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.56 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to make the intentional or reckless disturbance or harassment of seals an offence; to make further provision about the protection of seals; and for connected purposes.

We are very lucky in this country to be home to more than a third of the world's grey seal population. A globally rare species resident in the UK, grey seals are the equivalent of an African elephant. In addition, the UK is home to 30% of European common seals, which are, sadly, in alarming decline. Seals are present around the UK coastline, with some areas being more visible breeding grounds than others.

I was thrilled to hear from the Zoological Society of London, which conducts surveys on the number of seals in the Greater Thames estuary, that the latest population survey estimated that 700 harbour seals and 3,000 grey seals live in the Thames estuary. As a Medway MP, I was pleased to discover how many seals are drawn to the Medway and Swale estuaries to rest and pup on the excellent mud flats and salt marsh habitat, due to the abundance of prey, including smelt and sea bass. I am pleased to see some Essex colleagues on the Benches, for I know they will be just as interested in the estuary population.

In fact, the Medway houses the largest no-take fish zone in the UK, making it the perfect restaurant for seals. The essential top predator role performed by seals recycles nutrients, helping to keep a balanced marine ecosystem. Notwithstanding the obvious environmental benefits of seals, it is important to recognise, in some parts of the UK, the economic boost that wildlife assets such as seals provide, through tourism, to communities on the coast. But that brings with it dangers—ones that can be overcome but none the less are still there.

Seals are not without challenges but, sadly, they come from us humans. Like many people, I was horrified by the dog attack on Freddie the seal near Hammersmith bridge last year. I know through my work with Mary Tester, a British Divers Marine Life Rescue medic who was in charge of Freddie, how he brought joy to the local community and visitors alike, especially during lockdown. The injuries that Freddie suffered, sadly, resulted in the decision being made to put him down. Unfortunately, that is not the only example of the devastating effects that disturbance, whether intentional or reckless, has on seals. Last month, a runner in the north-east of England caused a stampede of more than 100 seals after he ignored the advice of seal stewards and approached the group that were resting on the rocks. The distressed seals fled back towards the water; the Yorkshire Seal Group confirms that the reckless behaviour would have undoubtedly caused numerous injuries to the fleeing seals and may have led to loss of life for some of the pups.

Seals face a range of issues and pressures, such as habitat loss and chemical and plastic pollutants, that require global solutions. However, preventing disturbance is something we in this Parliament can do with a minor tweak to existing legislation. Doing so would also result in greater awareness.

Disturbance has serious and potentially life-threatening effects, but it can easily be avoided. It is defined as any action that disrupts a seal from a settled state in response to a perceived threat. Disturbance causes stress and wastes vital energy reserves, often resulting in injury, while broken ribs or jaws can prove fatal. Conserving energy is vital for survival in the wild, and seals can quickly enter a fatal energy deficit spiral through chronic disturbance.

Actions resulting in serious disturbance can be intentional, reckless or negligent. Serious disturbance is caused when people are too close, too visible or too noisy. The harm done to disturbed seals may not be immediate or obvious, but minimising serious or chronic disturbance will greatly improve any seal's chances of survival. I am pleased that the Government, together with the Seal Alliance, launched a new awareness campaign in spring last year. The "Give Seals Space" campaign asks for the public to be aware of the impact their behaviour can have on vulnerable wildlife. That includes keeping well away from seals so that the seals cannot smell, hear or see them, keeping dogs on a lead, never feeding seals and taking all litter home. However, there is still more to be done and there is a call for action from across the country.

In a response to the parliamentary petition "Strengthen laws protecting seals", which gained more 26,000 signatures—one from every constituency in Parliament—the Government confirmed that they would be providing funding for signs to be put on the banks of the Thames to help to raise awareness of the impact of disturbance on seals and the importance of keeping dogs under close control. I assure the House that I will be contacting colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Seal Alliance to ensure that we can have some of these fantastic "Give Seals Space" signs on the River Medway, and I encourage other hon. Members to look at the material provided by the Seal Alliance.

Sadly, we cannot rely solely on goodwill and human behaviour. We need the legislative back-up to make intentional and reckless disturbance illegal. Seals are currently afforded a number of protections. They are covered by the 1979 Bern Convention, and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee recognises that the UK has a special responsibility to protect seals on behalf of the rest of the world. Thankfully, numerous pieces of legislation have made it an offence to "take, injure or kill" a seal within 12 nautical miles of the British coast.

However, as I have made clear, disturbing a seal, whether intentionally or not, can have fatal consequences. Therefore, my Bill calls on the Government to make a simple yet crucial amendment to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, whereby someone who intentionally

or recklessly disturbs or harasses a seal shall be guilty of an offence. That would ensure that seals are treated the same as whales and dolphins in British legislation. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee's quinquennial review suggested such amendments be made to the Act to help address the issue of disturbance. It is crucial that existing legislation is reviewed to avoid legal loopholes that prevent prosecution for disturbance caused by a third party: a dog, vessel or drone under human control.

I know that colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognise the issue, and I applaud and thank them, especially the Minister, for the work that has been carried out so far to raise public awareness. I believe the cross-party support for my ten-minute rule Bill and for my early-day motion, and the outpouring of public emotion following Freddie's death, shows that there is the political and public will to make a positive change.

Finally, I would like to say a special thank you to everyone who has helped to get us to where we are today: the public, commercial operators, conservation groups including the Marine Conservation Society, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Wild Justice, and individuals such as Chris Packham and Dr Ben Garrod. I thank leading seal charities the Seal Alliance, Seal Protection Action Group and the Seal Research Trust, the numerous local wild seal organisations and rescue and rehab centres in the UK and Europe, and British Divers Marine Life Rescue. I also want to say a special thank you to Mary Tester of Marine Life Rescue, Sue Sayer of Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust, and Anna Cucknell, project manager at the Zoological Society of London.

I hope that we can work together to ensure that we enjoy our coastal habitats, fully appreciate them, and share our seas successfully with wildlife now and for future generations.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tracey Crouch, Duncan Baker, Andrew Rosindell, Ben Lake, John McDonnell, Henry Smith, John Nicolson, Sammy Wilson, Sarah Olney, Jim Shannon, Dr Neil Hudson and Dame Caroline Dinenage present the Bill.

Tracey Crouch accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 254).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have now to announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (Amendment) Regulations 2022. The Ayes were 303, the Noes were 215, so the Ayes have it.

Police Grant Report

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the debate on the Police Grant Report (England and Wales). The Order Paper notes that this instrument has not yet been considered by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments. I have now been informed that the Committee has considered the instrument, and has not drawn it to the attention of the House.

3.7 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2022–23 (HC 1084), which was laid before this House on 2 February, be approved.

It gives me great pleasure to announce to the House the final police funding settlement for the fast-approaching new financial year.

The foremost role of Government is to keep the public safe from harm. Our effort to deliver that most critical of functions depends to a large extent on the work of our police service. As this settlement demonstrates, we remain firmly and fully committed to strengthening the resources and capabilities available to the police as they confront crime and protect our citizens.

Last year Parliament approved a funding settlement resulting in an increase of up to £636 million being made available for the policing system. This included an increase in Government grant funding of £425 million for police and crime commissioners in England and Wales to continue to strengthen police forces through our officer recruitment programme. I am delighted to say that with this funding, along with the £700 million received for year 1 of the programme, more than 11,000 additional officers have been recruited as of the end of December 2021. That means that we are more than halfway to meeting the 20,000 target, which is something to shout about. However, I assure the House that we are not resting on our laurels. We must keep up the momentum, because every new officer through the door is another courageous individual we can call upon in the fight against crime.

Beyond the recruitment drive, this year we have invested £180 million in combating serious and organised crime, £500 million in Home Office-led police technology programmes to replace outdated legacy IT systems, and £45 million in the safer streets fund to put proven prevention measures in place in areas plagued by neighbourhood crime, and to help combat violence against women and girls. The building blocks are now in place; now it is time to hit the accelerator, and next year's settlement will enable the police to go further than before in confronting crime.

One of the most consistent asks from policing around funding is certainty, and on this we have also delivered. The spending review provides forces with a three-year settlement, ensuring that they have the necessary confidence and stability to pursue long-term strategic planning, as well as maintaining strengthened officer numbers. In 2022–23, the Government will be investing up to £16.9 billion in the policing system—an increase of up to an additional £1.1 billion when compared with last year. Of that significant investment, we have made an additional £550 million of Government grants available to police

and crime commissioners in England and Wales. As well as supporting continued officer recruitment, that funding will allow forces to invest in critical capabilities, while focusing on modernising the police service to meet future demand.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am delighted that the work of the Conservative police and crime commissioner in Cheshire is paying off, with more than 100 new officers in post already. Could the Minister tell me, though, what work is going into ensuring that we retain officers? Recruitment and retention go together, and having spoken to members of the Police Federation, I am concerned that we are witnessing some churn. Is that something that he is aware of and dealing with?

Kit Malthouse: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Cheshire constabulary on their recruitment. I am told that they have recruited 149 officers to their complement, which is a fantastic achievement. They still have to get to their allocation by March, and their allocation next year will, I think, be a further 120 on top, so my hon. Friend should see plenty of uniforms across that beautiful county in the months and years to come.

My hon. Friend is quite right that recruitment is only half the battle; retention is the other half. We are monitoring the attitudes and experience of those new recruits incredibly closely. I know he will be pleased to hear that their satisfaction in the job, the fulfilment of their expectations of the job, is overwhelmingly positive, but we need to bear that in mind as we train them and instil the right values in them. As they hopefully embark on a long-term career, we will be staying in touch with their sentiments very closely.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Will the Minister comment on capital investment support for police forces? My understanding is that the new joint firearms unit between Dyfed-Powys, Gwent and South Wales police will cost around £40 million, and that has largely been funded out of reserves. Clearly, that is not sustainable.

Kit Malthouse: Having been, effectively, a police and crime commissioner in the past, I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the removal of the distinction between capital and revenue receipts and spending would have been a blessed relief. In the old days of local government restrictions in that regard, in the police and in local authorities, there was an entire science devoted to the creation of capital as revenue and the conversion of revenue into capital, to get round the Treasury rules, but we have done away with that division now. *[Interruption.]* Of course, as a chartered accountant, I feel slightly bereft, having been put out of business. It was quite an art form, which was very satisfying to achieve.

However, the removal of that division means that a cheque goes to the police and crime commissioner, and along with the chief constable they may then decide on the division between capital and revenue as they wish. Having handled such budgets in the past, I think that is a very welcome development. I know, for example, that in Wales that has been used to great effect. In Dyfed-Powys the police and crime commissioner, on first coming into the role, made a huge investment in CCTV across the entire force area, which is paying enormous dividends,

and he is able to do that as he wishes, capital and revenue being irrelevant. That is the kind of freedom that we want to give police and crime commissioners as they pursue their mission.

This is a crucial year for policing, particularly on the recruitment programme. The settlement is designed to ensure that we hit that important mark of 20,000 new officers. Forces have made outstanding progress to date, and that is testament to the hard work of all involved in the campaign. The recent statistical release of the police uplift programme demonstrates how many forces have already met, or in some cases exceeded, their year 2 target. PCCs are grabbing this investment with both hands and already a number of forces have more police officers on their books than they ever had before.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister knows that Durham constabulary is an efficient force—it has been recognised as such—but since 2010 we have lost 325 police officers. Even with this funding, we will still be 153 short on where we would have been in 2020. How does he square that?

Kit Malthouse: By the time we get to the end of the uplift programme, there will be a large number of forces who are above the number of police officers that they had in 2010. That will be a function of decisions that were made by police and crime commissioners in the intervening decades.

Mr Jones: Nonsense.

Kit Malthouse: It absolutely is—they had to make often difficult decisions about finances. I was one of those police and crime commissioners, so I know that prioritising police numbers within that overall formula means that some have a better baseline from which to build than others. For example, in London, for which I was responsible, we made a strong case to the then Mayor, now the Prime Minister, that it was our job to prioritise police numbers. As a result, the baseline to build off the uplift programme means that the Metropolitan police now have the highest number of police officers they have ever had in their history, with more to come.

I cannot mitigate the financial decisions made by police and crime commissioners in Durham, the West Midlands or other forces, but, having said that, Durham will receive significant extra police officers in the third year. I hope that with the freedom and flexibility on extra funding that the police and crime commissioner will get through the precept will mean that they might well add to that number as well.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is not me saying that Durham is an efficient force. The inspectorate said that it is an “outstanding” force in that regard. It lost 325 officers. It will still be worse off by 153 officers by the end of the uplift, and the reason for that is the low precept in the council tax base in County Durham. Unless that is sorted out, the force will never be able to afford the Minister’s ambitions, unlike the Chancellor’s constituency, which will end up with 190 more police officers than it had in 2020.

Kit Malthouse: I am happy to continue the argument with the right hon. Gentleman outside the Chamber rather than occupying significant amounts of time on what is—

Mr Jones: You are wrong.

Kit Malthouse: No, I am not wrong. There are forces similar to Durham that will be in a better position. It has to be the case that financial decisions made by police and crime commissioners have an impact, otherwise what is the point of having them and on what basis did they stand for election? The Mayor and I stood for election in London on the basis that we absolutely wanted to maintain police numbers, and I would suggest to the right hon. Gentleman—

Mr Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: I am not going to continue the argument. I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that he goes back and looks at the manifestos that the police and crime commissioner in Durham produced in those elections and see whether they promised to prioritise police numbers or not, or whether all they did was whinge about Government funding. I am happy as a trade to take responsibility for the very difficult financial decisions that this Government had to take after the crash in 2007-08 and after our coming into government in 2010. I take responsibility for that—I absolutely do. Thank God we did as well, given what has happened to us subsequently. However, I will only do that if the right hon. Gentleman will take responsibility for the decisions of his police and crime commissioner in those intervening 10 years. I will move on.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister’s debate with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) comes to the heart of how the Government go about this. The money that is given to the police and crime commissioners is £796 million, I think, as long as the full flexibility of the precept option is taken up. Does that not undermine the whole purpose of the accountability of police and crime commissioners?

Kit Malthouse: I am a bit perplexed by that. No, absolutely not. We are giving full flexibility. They can use the £10 if they want and if they do not they do not have to. All they have to do is justify that decision to the people who elect them. Happily, as far as I can see, every single one of them so far has taken the full £10, which suggests to me by the crowdfunding decision that we got the number about right. In some parts of the country, not least in Wales where they have other flexibility, they might go further. In my view we have given them lots of flexibility and they are using it. I hope that they will use it wisely to raise police officer numbers in Durham and elsewhere.

Mr Carmichael: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: Go on, I will give the right hon. Gentleman a second go.

Mr Carmichael: The purpose of the precept is to give flexibility and accountability to the police and crime commissioners. Effectively, under this settlement the police and crime commissioners have to be accountable for decisions made by the Minister.

Kit Malthouse: I am not sure that the right hon. Gentleman’s logic is right. Absolutely not. If they want to raise the contribution by less than £10, they can. There is no problem with that and the idea of there being an upper limit and a cap is a well-accepted feature

[Kit Malthouse]

of police funding. If a police and crime commissioner wants to raise the contribution by £5, £6 or £7 they can, and in fact if they do not want to spend it on police officer numbers they do not even have to do that. The right hon. Gentleman is making a rather poor argument, and I might say that the settlement has been greeted with pretty universal pleasure and a claim by police and crime commissioners from across the political divide, so I am not quite sure where this dissatisfaction is coming from.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: No, I have to move on.

Police officers, whether new recruits or experienced hands with decades of service, perform a unique and vital role in our society. I must put on record how grateful I am—I know that all hon. Members are—to everyone in the policing family, including civilian staff and volunteers who work tirelessly day in, day out to keep our people safe from harm.

I return to recruitment. It is only right that the Government hold forces to account to ensure that they are delivering the outcomes that the public expect from this investment. The Government will therefore once again create a ringfenced grant to ensure that the success of the police uplift programme is maintained in the coming year. Forces will be allocated a share of the £135 million grant in line with their funding formula allocation. As in previous years, forces will be able to access the funding as they deliver progress on their recruitment targets.

As announced in the 2021 spending review, police and crime commissioners in England will have access to further flexibility around levels of police precept to make additional funding available for local matters for the next three years. The settlement allows PCCs in England to raise council tax contributions for local policing by up to £10 a year for a typical Band D household. If all police and crime commissioners decide to maximise that flexibility, the outcome will be a further £246 million of funding for local policing in the coming year. I must stress that—we have discussed this—council tax levels are a local decision, and I know that police and crime commissioners weigh carefully in the balance what their local people can afford and want to see from policing before they make that decision.

We are also enabling counter-terrorism policing to confront terrorism in all its forms. That is why, for the first time, funding for counter-terrorism policing will total over £1 billion. That significant funding will allow CT policing officers to continue their critical work, support ongoing investigations, and continue investment in the operations centre and in armed policing. In addition to the increase in Government grants and additional precept flexibility, I am delighted to announce that we are investing £1.4 billion to support national policing priorities that will benefit all police forces across England and Wales. That funding will help accelerate progress on key areas of Government focus including crime reduction and improvements to the service received by the public. Of that investment, £65 million will support policing capabilities specifically, including funding to drive improvements in local police performance; measuring responsiveness to 101 and 999 calls; and

funding for a national crime laboratory to push the use of innovative data science techniques to prevent and reduce crime.

The Government recognise the need to maintain focus on cutting crime to make our communities safer. That is why we are also providing additional investment in regional organised crime units so that they are equipped with the capabilities they need to tackle serious and organised crime and to protect the most vulnerable citizens from abuse. We are committed to working with PCCs and other partners to tackle crime and make our streets safer. As announced at the 2021 spending review, we will provide investment in new projects to improve crime prevention as well as maintaining and enhancing existing programmes. Funding arrangements for specific crime reduction programmes will be confirmed in due course and will follow a matched funding principle.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I commend to the Minister the idea of sending a police officer to every scene of a burglary? In that respect, I commend Northamptonshire police's Operation Crooked, which has slashed domestic break-ins across the county by 48% in two years, down from 5,500 burglaries in 2019 to 2,850 in the 12 months to December 2021. That is what the public want to see. It is demonstrably effective and a really good use of the funding that he is giving to the police.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is an eagle-eyed participant in the House, and in the "Beating Crime Plan" that we published last July he will have seen a chapter entitled "Excellence in the basics". In that chapter was exactly the proposal that he outlined from Northamptonshire: that we would purloin that idea and spread it to other forces. For the moment, Northamptonshire and Greater Manchester police will do exactly as he says and visit every burglary, because we believe that forensic and other opportunities eventually drive the numbers down. It is that basic fulfilment of people's expectations that we want to see from this increased funding, and I congratulate his force on leading the way on that.

As I have set out, the Government continue to invest significantly in policing. It is therefore only right that we expect policing to demonstrate to the taxpayer that such funding is spent effectively and efficiently while ensuring the highest possible quality of service for the public. As announced at the spending review, the Government will expect to see over £100 million of cashable efficiency savings delivered from force budgets by 2024-25. For 2022-23, we expect to see £80 million of efficiency savings, which is reflected in the funding set out in that part of the settlement.

With greater investment in modern technology infrastructure and interoperable systems, we expect to see an increase in productivity and therefore the delivery of key outcomes. We will continue to work with and support the policing sector through the efficiency in policing board, with a renewed focus on the improvement of the measurement of productivity gains so that we can show how our investment delivers for the public beyond the rather dry management language in which it is described.

Right from the beginning this Government have made clear where we stand on law and order: on the side of the law-abiding majority and squarely behind the brave

men and women who go to work every day to keep us all safe. This settlement demonstrates our unwavering commitment to ensuring that the police have the resources they need to drive down crime, protect the public and improve outcomes for victims. I commend the settlement to the House.

3.25 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to the people who serve in our police service. It has not been an easy time: 10 years of cuts followed by covid has placed enormous strain on them. Thanks also go to the officers who work here to keep us safe and to those who acted with such bravery on Monday as an angry mob surrounded the Leader of the Opposition shouting claims made by the Prime Minister in this place last week. We must not, though, shy away from recent reports on some of the worrying misogynistic, racist and sexist culture and practice in policing that have shocked many of us and challenged police throughout the country to strive always for higher standards.

The police grant report comes at a difficult time for the country. Inflation is rising, energy prices are rising and taxes are rising. We have had a wasted decade of low growth, the challenges of covid and a Government who have wasted billions and billions on covid fraud and incompetent PPE contracts that never delivered. In April, tax goes up, and inflation is forecast to rise to 6% in the spring. The Government's only answer is a buy now, pay later energy scheme that will not help those most in need or help the economy.

Because of the Government's mismanagement of the economy, the additional funding in this year's police grant will not go anywhere near as far as we need it to go. There has never been a more important time to invest in policing.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Government announce increases in police funding, as the Minister has done today, they forget to tell people that the bulk of that funding will come from local council tax payers? The Government are continuing the policy of the past 11 years of moving the cost of police funding from central Government to local taxpayers.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is completely right: a third of the extra funding now comes from the council tax precept. That is a very high proportion.

Total crime went up 14% over the past two years—contrary to what the Prime Minister said in this place last week, for which he has been criticised by the UK Statistics Authority. As we heard earlier in Prime Minister's questions, there are 14,000 cases of fraud every day—although the Prime Minister and the Government do not count them as real crime. Arrests are down and prosecutions are at their lowest levels. Just one in 50 burglaries result in a charge and, shamefully, only 1.3% of reported rapes lead to a charge. Criminals are getting away with it.

A proper plan backed by proper investment has never been more important, yet we yet have a demoralised police workforce who have declared no confidence in the Home Secretary. Pay in real terms is lower than it was in 2010. Despite the uplift that has already taken place, the total police workforce has more than 17,000 fewer people in it than it had in 2010. The number of police leaving the service with mental health problems is high.

Neighbourhood policing is decimated, with nearly 50% of police community support officers gone and police staff cut.

Only 400 of the first tranche of 6,000 new police officers were deployed in neighbourhood roles. Police officers are backfilling vital police staff roles because forces do not have the budgets to pay the salaries of the number of police staff they need. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has said, despite the uplift many areas will still end up with fewer officers than they had in 2010. Merseyside will be 456 officers short and the West Midlands will be 1,000 officers short. This is the woeful context in which we debate the police grant.

The overriding sense I take from the police grant report is the total lack of any meaningful ambition to come even close to fixing some of the challenges we face, and the lack of any kind of vision or plan from the Home Office to tackle crime and its causes. It is a woeful attempt to make up for a decade of cuts by heaping the tax burden on to local council tax payers through the precept.

Budgets have started to increase, but they are not inflationary increases. We are not back to 2010 levels in real terms. Once money for new officers is counted out of the figures, direct funding to PCCs is rising by only 4.8% at a time when inflation is rising steeply and is predicted to reach 6% in the spring. That means the Tories' failure to keep inflation down will hit day-to-day police budgets and the police's ability to keep communities safe.

While police officers across the country recover from the pandemic, they will be paying higher national insurance and higher energy and petrol costs. Officers and staff will see less value in their income because of inflation. The Government are also demanding £80 million in efficiency savings on top of it all. Members should not just take my word for it; Gloucestershire's Conservative PCC, Chris Nelson, has had to admit that his manifesto pledge to add 300 officers is "unachievable," adding that he would be "jolly lucky" to achieve it.

In Merseyside, it is estimated that inflation will cost £2.3 million, the pay increase will cost £5 million and the national insurance increase will cost £2.3 million, while Merseyside police is making savings of £2.9 million. The additional precept income is being used to cover the cost of pay, price inflation and the national insurance levy. Earmarked reserves are being used to balance the budget in-year, and there is a potential long-term increase in expensive police officers sitting behind desks to cover crucial police staff roles.

With these kinds of pressures, how can arrests and prosecutions increase? How can the police tackle serious violence, violence against women and girls, drug addiction and all the other pressures with the strength we expect? That is Conservative Britain.

The Government expect more and more police funding to come from local taxpayers, but there is a gross inequality in this overreliance on the precept because it is the most deprived communities, those with the fewest band D properties, that will get the least. There should be no winners and losers when it comes to public safety.

Northumbria has the lowest band D precept, and just 18% of Northumbria police's funding came from the precept in 2021-22, whereas Surrey police got 55% of its

[Sarah Jones]

funding from the precept. Budget pressures will be even greater if PCCs are not able to bring in as much as the Government have projected from the council tax precept, as the £296 million increase depends on every PCC making full use of the flexibility to increase the precept. Even if they all do so, as we think they will all be forced into doing, it means more tax rises on local people during a cost of living crisis.

We are debating police funding, so we should return to the age-old question of when the Minister will finally get round to reforming the funding formula. This was vaguely promised by the Minister before the election but, if the Government wait until 2024, they will have spent nine years dithering while police forces have had to make massive efficiency savings and local taxpayers have had to pay the price. Is there any chance of news of progress today?

This settlement should be a real opportunity to recruit a more diverse police service that better reflects the communities it serves. The annual increase in the proportion of black and minority ethnic officers is 0.3 percentage points. At that rate, it will take 20 years to reach 14% black and minority ethnic officers, which is the make-up of the country, so much more needs to be done, so much more.

Only one in 20 crimes leads to prosecution. The “Beating Crime Plan”, whatever the Minister says, has no meat, no ideas and no strategy. It will not do to pretend that everything is okay with press releases that the UK Statistics Authority says

“presented the...figures in a misleading way.”

It will not do to claim that crime has fallen because of the “Beating Crime Plan”, when it has actually risen, and when certain crimes which reduced in number did so largely because of covid restrictions and are now on the rise again. It will not do to allow antisocial behaviour to blight people’s lives, serious violence to make a generation of young people fearful, and women and girls to continue to be the victims of violence and abuse.

We need a properly funded police service, an economy that functions and leadership from the Government. That is what the public expect. A Labour Government would put victims first and ensure that every neighbourhood where people are frightened and afraid has a new police hub and neighbourhood prevention teams, bringing together police, community support officers, youth workers and local authority staff. Labour’s record in government shows that, unlike this Government, we can be trusted on policing and crime. By the time we left government, there were 6 million fewer crimes than in 1997. It took us years to build up neighbourhood policing, and this Government are spending their years undoing that good work.

The Opposition will not vote against the plans, because some funding is better than no funding, despite the poor economic conditions that the Conservatives have created, which will mean that the money does not go anywhere near as far as we need. This Government, like the two Conservative Governments before them, are failing to deliver on crime. They are failing to bring down total crime, failing to deliver justice to victims, failing to rebuild neighbourhood policing and now

failing to control the inflation hitting day-to-day police budgets. They should go back to the drawing board and try again: “Must do better.”

3.35 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister and particularly the Conservative police and crime commissioner for Dorset, David Sidwick, for all their hard work. However, I do not think I am remiss in reminding the Minister that I have been sharing my views with him for some time on the police funding formula and Dorset’s priority in it. I warmly encourage him to accelerate the changes that a little while ago in this House he kindly said he would make.

I feel that there is an assumption within the Government that Dorset is a wonderful place. It is, of course—it is full of rolling green hills, chocolate-box villages and so on—but we have many difficulties to contend with as well. Dorset is an importer of serious and organised crime, including county lines drugs gangs that use our rail networks to get into West Dorset. The population of Dorset trebles in the summer months, when people from all over the country come to our beautiful county. It has such places as the Cerne Abbas giant, Sherborne abbey, the Jurassic coast and Lyme Regis, so we can understand why people would like to visit, but that attraction brings interest from those who wish to deal drugs.

It is important to note that Dorset comes right at the top for demand, which is measured by crime pressure and calculated on the basis of severity of crime and number of officers per force. Demand in Dorset is three times the national average, but our police force is 28th out of 41 for total funding. That does not sound too bad in the grand scheme of things, but it takes into account the local funding from the precept; in the police grant report, Dorset police force comes 40th out of 41. The funding calculations do not take into account the huge seasonal population increase. There needs to be a real understanding that Dorset is the sixth highest region in the country for visitor trips. Regrettably, the methodology used means that Dorset is not eligible for violence reduction funding. I hope that the Minister will consider that point next year.

I recognise that this year’s settlement has increased the funding for all police forces. I put on record our gratitude to the Minister for the 4.8% increase that Dorset has received, but it is a little less than the 5.8% average. I am not petitioning for limitless funding for police support, as some Labour Members and others in the House have done, but I hope that the Minister appreciates my petition to him, to the Government and to the House for Dorset to get its fair share to ensure that we can do what is right by our constituents.

Our police and crime commissioner, David Sidwick and the chief constable have impressive plans to tackle the drug issue in Dorset, along with others. I know it is a national priority, but the reality is that we really need the resources to do it. Dorset requires and deserves its fair share of the police funding settlement, so that we can protect the people who need it and we can take on the criminals who take advantage. The police and crime commissioner has recently written to the Minister, and I have followed that up. I think the police and crime commissioner is doing an exceptional job, and I hope the Minister will be able to respond and meet us in

reasonably short order so that we might be able to address some of these matters. I know that Dorset police want to get on with their priorities and indeed with national priorities, but they need the backing of the Government and funding to do that, and I hope my right hon. Friend will indeed take that into account.

3.40 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I would like to begin by thanking the men and women of Durham police and the support staff for their commitment and dedication, particularly given the difficult time they have had over the last couple of years with the pandemic, and for their support during Storm Arwen recently. I would also like to put on record my thanks to Jo Farrell, the chief constable, for her effective leadership of a force which, despite what the Minister pushed to one side, has been continually rated as outstanding for its effectiveness and efficiency. I am sorry that the new police and crime commissioner did not see fit to brief MPs on the settlement, but that does not matter, because I have been making the same arguments about the budget for the past 11 years, and I possibly know the police budget better than many.

To listen to Ministers today, we would think that the election of the Government in 2019 was ground zero and that nothing happened before then, or that nothing that happened before then was their responsibility. Somehow it is not their fault that we in County Durham lost 325 experienced police officers or, for example, that Dorset, even after the much-vaunted 20,000 officers promise, will still have 70 police officers fewer than it had in 2010. This did not happen by accident; this happened because of the political decisions taken by successive Tory Governments since 2010. It is very interesting that the Minister said that the first duty of Government is to protect citizens and policing is a main part of that, but the main point is that the police funding budget was cut by some 16% over that period.

The other point—and this leads to the problem we have in Durham and, I think, in many forces, including Dorset—is the fact that policing was traditionally funded mainly by the central Government grant and the precept then made up the remainder. What has happened since 2010, and it continues in this latest settlement today, is that that central Government grant has been cut by 30%, which has basically pushed the cost of policing on to local council tax payers. The overall tax burden has gone up since 2014-15 by some 13% on local council tax payers. In some areas, it has gone up even more than that, and I will explain the reasons why in a minute.

The Minister has again peddled the same line today. The Government say that there will be x millions extra for policing, but what they never say is that the bulk of that will come not from central Government taxation, but from local council tax payers. The Minister then says that it is up to the local police and crime commissioner to decide whether to put up the council tax. No, they should read the actual policy. It assumes that the announced funding figure is based on all the councils putting it up to the maximum. Frankly, they do not have a choice in that if they want effective local policing.

All I ask of the Minister and of the Government is to be honest when they make these announcements. When they announce that the budget is going up this year by a certain number of hundred millions, why do they not

split it out into what the Government are doing centrally and what increase the Government are asking local council tax payers to pay?

Kit Malthouse: If the right hon. Gentleman had listened carefully to my speech, he would have heard me say specifically that £500-odd million was coming from the Government to PCCs, and that, if they all took their flexibility, £200-odd million was coming from the PCCs. I specifically enunciated in my speech what the balance was. By the way, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I know that the right hon. Gentleman will not want to mislead the House, let me say that that does not indicate that the bulk of police funding is coming from the precept. It is quite the reverse: the bulk is coming from central taxation.

Mr Jones: I understand police funding, and I understand what the Government have been up to for the past 12 years. When the Minister—and he did this today—or the Prime Minister say that this Government are providing an extra certain amount of money for policing, why do they not put that caveat on it? They never do, because that is the sting in the tail. That has been happening continuously. It happens not just in policing, but in local government funding and in the funding for our fire and rescue services, so this creates a problem for local policing, local government and the fire and rescue service in County Durham. It has got to the point where our fire and rescue service will survive this year, but could actually fall over next year, because of the way in which this Government continue to push the emphasis onto the local council tax payer.

Why is this a particular problem for County Durham? The root of it is that 58% of the properties in County Durham are in council tax band A. In Wokingham, in Surrey, only 2.8% are in band A. So, if the precept for policing in County Durham is increased by 1%, it will raise £3.8 million, whereas in Surrey, it raises £8.9 million. Therefore, what we basically have with this policy, which is slowly pushing more and more funding onto local council tax payers, is that the poorest areas with the lowest council tax banding systems are the losers, while other, more affluent, areas are the gainers.

The Government have this slogan—they govern in slogans—that they will create another 20,000 new police officers, but, again, in County Durham, we have lost 325 officers since 2010. Even with the settlement today and the PCC putting the precept up to the maximum, we will still be, by the end of this, 153 officers short of where we were in 2010. I look forward to the next election when the three Conservative Members for County Durham put out their election leaflets, claiming another 20,000 police officers. I doubt whether they will be honest with the public and say that the party of which they are members has cut the police officers by 153 over that period. The problem is not just about numbers, but about the experience of those officers. Because of those cuts, we have lost some long-serving, experienced officers, who have been replaced by individuals who will logically take a while to gain experience. In any organisation, historical and corporate knowledge is important when it comes to the effectiveness of a police force, so it is not just about numbers, but about the experience of those officers.

As I have said, we will end this period with 153 fewer officers than we had in 2010. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's constituency in North Yorkshire will end

[Mr Kevan Jones]

up with 190 more officers than it had in 2010. That is because every 1% increase in the precept in County Durham raises about £400,000, whereas in North Yorkshire it raises £800,000. Unless we tackle the funding formula, areas such as County Durham—and, I suspect, Dorset—will continue to be at a disadvantage.

That goes to the central point, which is that this is all a result of the Government continuing with a political decision that they took 11 years ago when they said, “We are going to cut central funding and push it on to local council tax”. Let us add to that the fact that policing is just one part of law enforcement, but we have seen court closures in County Durham and cuts in the number of prosecutors in the CPS, which has led to a system in crisis. That comment does not come from me; it comes from talking to local police officers. Even when they are successful in catching criminals, getting them through the court system is time-consuming. I accept that covid has had an effect, but a lot of it is not about that; it is about the capacity of the CPS and courts to find the time needed.

The Minister said that the Conservatives were the party of law and order. I am sorry, but we have to look at our courts system and our justice system today—they are not the party of law and order, given the paralysis in our justice system. The situation is also not fair for victims because they are waiting an inordinate length of time to get justice or even court dates, and in the end, some will think that they have not got justice when cases are dropped because of the time they have taken.

If we do not have a fundamental review of the funding formula, the situation will continue. Even with this settlement, County Durham—I put this on record yet again—which is deemed an “efficient” and “effective” force and as “outstanding” by the inspectorate, is still missing some £10 million for the next few years. Where will that come from? The only way is through more efficiencies. I have spoken to the chief constable and some great things have been done to make sure that there are improvements. However, over the past 11 years, the pressures on our police have not stood still, which has not helped. Legislation has put more demands on them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), the shadow Minister, said, the nature of crime, is changing. House burglaries are traumatic and terrible for individuals, but so are fraud and scams. I found it pretty depressing to hear the Business Secretary more or less dismissing fraud as though it is somehow a victimless crime. Just speak to some victims of that type of crime—they feel terrible. But fraud is a crime that is going to need more specialism. The nature of crime and the demands on our police force are changing, and that needs long-term stability and investment in our police force to provide such specialism. Without that, we will continue this cycle.

The Minister is a very combative individual and, on a personal basis, I get on quite well with him. However, the approach is all front; all smoke-and-mirrors. We need to disaggregate the spin and the headlines about 20,000 officers from the reality of what is happening on the ground. Unless the funding formula is addressed quickly, efficient and good police forces such as Durham will continue to suffer. The only people who will pay for

that are my constituents and people in County Durham, who will do so through higher council tax bills and a potentially poorer service.

3.54 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I wish to start, as I am sure every Member would, by paying tribute to the police officers and staff from Bedfordshire police. Everyone who serves as an officer or member of staff in a police force does so in a noble profession; they keep us safe and look after the most vulnerable. We cannot thank them enough for what they do.

In Bedfordshire, in the settlement, we now have 1,369 officers, which is 135 more than we had back in 2010, and we have a budget that has gone up to £136.1 million, which is an increase of 5.4%. It would be remiss of me not to say thank you for those increases. Gratitude is sometimes somewhat slow to come off the lips of politicians, but occasionally it is due and where it is due I pay it gladly. The Minister knows well that the Bedfordshire police finances have been sustained in recent years only through a series of special grants. Last year, he was kind enough to give us two of £3.6 million each, making a total of £7.2 million. It was only because we had those two special grants, which we have had for a number of years now, that we have been able to balance the books. I am sure he will agree that that is not a sustainable basis on which to go forward, and he will therefore not be surprised to hear me raise again the issue of the funding formula. In Bedfordshire’s case, this goes back to 2004 and the introduction of damping, which has taken about £3 million—the equivalent of about 95 officers on our streets—off our budgets. We are starting to make good on some of that with the increases, but it is not sustainable to leave Bedfordshire police finances where they are with the current funding formula.

This is not just about increases in budgets, because we have to look at what those budgets are asked to do. The Minister will know that we have a high number of organised criminal gangs and of county lines gangs in Bedfordshire. He will also know that from time to time we need hundreds of officers to police things such as Traveller funerals. If we look at Operation Venetic, we see that Bedfordshire had 26 packages of intelligence, whereas Hertfordshire, a much larger county, had only 11 and Cambridgeshire, bless it, did not have any. That illustrates the extent of the demand in Bedfordshire, whose budget has been adversely affected by the introduction of damping from 2004. This is not just about the total officers; it is also about where those officers are based. The largest town in my constituency is Leighton Buzzard. In 1988, it had a police station, with an inspector, six sergeants and 27 constables—34 warranted officers in the town. Now we have a shared emergency services hub. Unfortunately, we do not have a 24/7 first responder presence, which we used to have. It takes time for officers to travel to where the crime is. They do not have magic carpets or a TARDIS to get from A to B. If they are travelling from Luton or wherever, that takes time. It is often low-paid staff in our pubs and clubs who have to deal with the first five or 10 minutes of the fight. That is not the role of bartenders and people working in hospitality, so where those officers are matters and sorting out the funding formula will enable us to deal with that issue.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman concerned that the closure of some police stations might make it quite a long journey to take somebody from an incident to the police station for the processing, taking too much time out of their shift, and we are perhaps getting to a point where there are not as many arrests as we would expect for the types of crimes that our constituents are seeing on the streets and would like to have tackled? Does he share my concern that the closure of police stations is not allowing us to deal with that antisocial behaviour on our streets?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is right; time spent taking offenders to custody suites is time when those officers cannot be on the streets doing their job. However, we cannot spend the same pound twice. I would like to see a 24/7 first responder response, and there are ways we can do that. We have a large public estate, and I think we need to be a bit more imaginative about how and where we base our police officers, because the primary focus is on having officers on the beat in our large centres of population 24/7.

On the police funding formula review, I have been asking every Policing Minister about this since I was elected in 2001, and I was pleased to have confirmation from the Prime Minister recently that we are moving forward and are going to deliver on this. I also received a letter from the Minister himself, in which he said that the consultation on the police funding formula review would take place this summer—so I have it in writing in an official letter from the Home Office. I was very pleased indeed to read that. It sounds as if the train has left the station. This is about being fair to Bedfordshire and those other forces that have been left out, and I look forward to swift implementation. The Minister talked about effective transition arrangements for that review. I want it to be effective but I do not want it to take too long, and I hope he will bear that in mind.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): This is welcome news, but it will be interesting to see when the train actually arrives. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of that review has to involve the fundamental question of what the split should be between central Government funding and what is raised locally?

Andrew Selous: The right hon. Gentleman is right, in that no one likes paying council tax—I have often called it the most unpopular tax in the UK. The primary focus for us in Bedfordshire is to have a well-funded force, to have enough officers and to have them in the right places, and our greatest issue is the resolution of the funding formula issue. This Government have committed to that, and they have done so very publicly. We will have the consultation this summer. It needs to deliver, and deliver quickly.

4.2 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I want to start by paying tribute to the officers and civilian staff in both police forces that cover my constituency: South Wales police and Gwent police. I also pay tribute to the wider police family. I was fortunate enough a few years ago to take part in the police parliamentary scheme, and I did some shifts with the Met here in London. I know that we are all grateful for the dedication and professionalism of all our police officers right across the country.

I obviously welcome any new officers, but it is important to remember that the increase in the number of officers is merely replacing the 20,000 police officers that have been cut since 2010. It is also important to remember, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has highlighted, that the significant resource is now being put on the council tax payer and that in areas such as his and mine that will have a detrimental impact on council tax payers.

Mr Kevan Jones: I know that my hon. Friend's area is similar to mine, in that it has a low council tax base. This is also unequal because, as council tax is a regressive tax, we are asking the poorest people to pay the most.

Gerald Jones: I absolutely agree. I do not have the exact figures, but the number of properties in band A in my constituency, and in his, is significant compared with other parts of the country.

I want to talk about neighbourhood policing, because its decimation has been felt acutely across the country. Neighbourhood policing is a key foundation of policing, and it has two major benefits: providing reassurance and building a rapport across communities; and providing a deterrent against what is often low-level disorder before it becomes a bigger issue. As the shadow Policing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), has highlighted, it seems that only 400 of the first 6,000 officers were deployed to neighbourhood roles. I am pleased that in Wales, thanks to the Welsh Labour Government, we have had significant financial support to employ 500 additional police community support officers, with an additional 100 being added during this current term of the Senedd. These officers support the police and the local authority community safety officers in helping to provide reassurance to residents and to act as a deterrent. Labour's plan for the new community safety hubs will be a huge step forward.

This takes me back to the early 2000s, when I was a county councillor under the last Labour Government. In my ward we had a policing team of four officers—two constables and two PCSOs—who worked closely with the council community safety wardens, youth workers and local councillors. In fact, we carried out monthly door-to-door community safety surgeries with police officers, so that local authority issues and policing issues could be tackled jointly. That certainly had the impact of driving down antisocial behaviour. Sadly, that style of policing has been decimated across the country. We know that total crime is up 14%, not down, as the Prime Minister wrongly claimed. Over the past two years, the reduction in the number of officers has clearly had an effect on that increase in crime, and it is still having an impact now.

Finally, will the Minister consider the unfair position of Welsh police forces in respect of the apprenticeship levy? I understand that Welsh forces are around £6 million worse off compared with English forces due to the Home Office's funding formula. Despite ongoing discussions between the four police forces, the Home Office and the Welsh Government, the matter remains unresolved, so I ask the Minister to examine that issue again because the situation is unacceptable and unsustainable.

4.6 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this interesting debate. I want to heap praise on my hon. Friend the Minister, with whom I have had many dealings and who has been simply fantastic at talking to us in Dorset. We look forward to him visiting us as soon as possible. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who is right here beside me and who spoke on Dorset's behalf. I shall be brief, although I suspect I may repeat some of his facts and figures, but they are worth repeating.

I also thank the new chief constable, Scott Chilton, and our new PCC, David Sidwick. I am glad to say that they are joined at the hip and want to tackle crime—that is refreshing—and protect us on the streets. They are doing a wonderful job, and my hon. Friend and I, and the other Dorset MPs, are right behind them both.

In 2006, when I was selected to be the candidate in Dorset, I remember waving my placard saying, “More money for the police.” I regret to say that we were bottom of the funding formula, but we still are, and the Minister knows that. Out of the 41 forces, we are the 40th, excluding the council tax precept, which many hon. Members have mentioned, including the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—we do not always agree politically, but I will call him my friend and we sit together on the Defence Committee. I agree to a certain extent that this is a vulnerability, but council tax is high in Dorset and paying any more would affect my constituents, many of whom are struggling to pay this dreadful tax. I know my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), a Government Whip, is equally passionate about the police in Dorset.

I now have a few statistics—forgive me, but the Minister will understand. Under the national funding formula, Dorset receives £91.79 a head. The range is from £188 to, say, £90. The median is £109.28. To reach it, Dorset would need another £13.5 million in funding. On net revenue expenditure, Dorset is 28th out of 41 forces—I think my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset mentioned that. The median is £189 a head, and Dorset would need an extra £5.4 million to reach the median.

Dorset is so beautiful that millions of people visit it, and we welcome them. However, the population trebles in the summer, and there is no extra funding or resources for that. There is no extra grant funding to tackle drugs and violence, despite the 10-year drugs strategy. Yet Bournemouth, which is not in my seat but clearly part of Dorset, is ninth in the country for heroin and crack cocaine use. This is a worrying trend, and Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch—town or city; call it what you will—have a growing problem and need the resources to tackle it. We also have no violence reduction unit or Project ADDER funding—the Minister will understand what those are.

I have had briefings from Dorset police that county lines is a real problem for us in Dorset. I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset on this, and the railway police came down to Weymouth to brief me on the issue of 14, 15 or 16-year-old youngsters travelling by train, sent by drug dealers—now, more often than not, armed with knives, which is extremely worrying, or with cash—and getting into Dorset to ply this ghastly and evil trade.

Dorset is 40th out of 41 on the national funding for violence prevention and safe spaces. Our request to join the electronic monitoring of offenders pilot was sadly rejected. The crime pattern between '17 and '21 is well understood and follows an established pattern, but it remains high. We receive more 999 calls than most similar group forces, despite a similar volume of crime. That is mainly due to the peak in the summer and all the millions of people who come to our beautiful county. We are the sixth-highest area for visitor trips, but that is not considered in the national funding formula.

My hon. Friend mentioned the crime pressure estimate, which measures severity of crime using the Home Office tool against the number of officers in the force. Dorset crime pressure in 2020 is more than three times the national average—the highest of any force. Organised crime groups such as county lines disrupt Dorset police disproportionately compared with larger forces. We are a rural area, but the volume of crime we are getting is disproportionate to our ability to deal with it in such an area.

Finally, and extraordinarily, we are just outside the top 10 for armed deployments per 100,000 head of population. That is extraordinary, when we live in what my hon. Friend described as a “chocolate box” area. That is clearly what so many people think we are, but we have our issues, and I know the Minister is aware of that. We look forward very much to him coming down to visit us; I hope that when he meets the new and excellent PCC and our chief constable, we can discuss how to resolve at least some of those issues.

4.12 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to join my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) in paying tribute to the officers and staff of Bedfordshire police, who keep our county and its residents safe.

Crime remains a serious and major concern for many of my constituents, but my contribution will focus on 10 pieces of good news on crime. First, there is the news about the funding formula, an issue that has cross-party support in Bedfordshire. I am so pleased that the Minister has now brought forward that review and that, as he said, the train has left the station.

Secondly, the Minister will know that funding is a partnership between the national funding formula and local councillors. I am sure he will be pleased to learn that the cross-party police and crime panel agreed unanimously, with no abstentions or votes against, an increase in the local precept to support the local policing plan. I pay tribute in particular to the chair of that committee, Councillor Ian Dalgarno.

Thirdly, there is the leadership of our police and crime commissioner, Festus Akinbusoye, and the programme he has put in place to direct those resources in the most effective way. He has said that the funding he is receiving locally will pay for 72 additional police officers and that he will focus them on rural crime teams, which are so important in my constituency. As my piece of good news 5(a), I also commend the Minister on taking forward the hare coursing legislation that is so important for so many rural constituents. Festus has also paid due attention to the responsibility to get the security and policing right at Luton airport—another important issue locally.

Festus has also paid due attention to the responsibility to get the security and policing right at Luton airport—another important local issue. Following the inspiring leadership of the Prime Minister, knife crime reduction—a crucial issue across the country—is now a priority in Bedfordshire. On prosecuting serious sexual violence, Bedfordshire was in the lowest quartile a few years ago but is now the sixth best, which is a tribute to our chief constable. Burglary and detection rates have trebled in the past year, and the rates of solving burglary have doubled.

My tenth and final piece of good news is the strength, confidence and hard work of the officers of Bedfordshire police who, through the covid period, continued to keep us safe, and continue today to provide that quality of service that the British public have every right to expect.

4.15 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): This has been a good debate; if only it was a good settlement. A wasted decade of low growth under the Conservatives is holding back Britain; it has left our economy weakened, with inflation, national insurance and energy prices all putting pressure on the police. Inflation is predicted to rise still, which will put more pressure on our services. The Government have wasted public money through cronny contracts, covid fraud and PPE waste, so there is less funding for policing.

To make up for the lack of central Government police funding, the Minister is burdening local taxpayers. Total crime is rising, prosecution rates are at an all-time low, and criminals are getting away with it. The police do not feel supported; pay is still lower in real terms than it was in 2010. The settlement will not go far enough. There is no leadership from Government on the challenges facing the service and no plan to cut crime.

This was an interesting debate that touched on all the major issues that we have debated on many occasions.

Richard Drax: The hon. Lady accuses the Government of not cutting crime, but I remind her that it is the chief constable and their officers—they do such a valuable job—who tackle criminals, not the politicians.

Sarah Jones: I was not aware of that. I thought the Government had some role in tackling crime, but clearly the Conservative Government think not.

With 17,000 fewer people working in the police force now than in 2010, it is also harder for the police to do the job that we expect them all to do. I was glad to hear about the new train leaving the station on the funding formula, and I was pleased to see Bedfordshire Members in the Chamber—if they were not here making the argument, on either side of the House, I would worry that something was amiss. I am glad that they have an answer on a timescale, but the formula was first promised in 2015 so we are already seven years down the line. I look forward to seeing that.

There was much debate about the council tax precept and the fact that a third of the increased funding must now come from council tax. It is not possible to level up by using the precept to pay for policing. Inequality is bedded in to the formula. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said eloquently that it is the sting in the tail, and the hon. Member for

West Dorset (Chris Loder) agreed with that. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said that no one likes paying council tax; everybody is being forced to put council tax up to its highest level. The Cambridgeshire Conservative PCC, who has asked for a £9.99 tax increase on band D properties, stated that

“if I thought for one minute that we were likely to get substantial financial increases from government then I would’ve happily used reserves to plug the gap and not ask to raise the precept.”

The Conservative PCC for Bedfordshire said that rising costs due to inflation means taxes will need to rise to avoid cuts in police services. He said:

“We are facing rising costs across the public sector because of inflation. This means that next year an increase in the precept will be needed just for Bedfordshire Police to maintain its current position and meet the costs of pay and price increases.”

We heard about police numbers and the lack of policing in our neighbourhoods. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) talked about the 500 additional PCSOs that the Welsh Government are providing, which will make a difference. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham talked about the lack of police officers—the 325 they have lost and how, even with the increasing numbers, they will still be 153 officers short. The alternative universe that the Government try to peddle—that somehow they did not cut tens of thousands of police before they started to recruit a few—will not wash. There are 17,000 fewer people working in police services than there were in 2010.

Crime affects everywhere. The hon. Member for West Dorset talked about the delightful area he represents, but also about the violent criminal drug gangs and county lines that are there. This is an issue that every single one of our constituents cares about. Criminals are getting away with it. Charge rates are at a record low. Victims have lost faith in the criminal justice system. The Government are not showing any real grip on tackling crime. They do not have any ambition to get prosecution rates up. They cannot level up without cutting crime. I hope the Government will go away and think again.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to this debate. It has been useful and I know that police officers up and down the land will have particularly welcomed at this difficult time the tributes to their bravery and commitment to the work they do to keep us all safe. I add my gratitude to them.

There were two key themes coming out of the debate. As the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said, the Bedfordshire “massive” are, as usual, present for these debates, as they have been every year for the last few years, and the Dorset posse have been pushing me hard on the funding formula. I am pleased to confirm that work is under way. The technical oversight group has been appointed and has a chair. We expect to go to consultation this summer and I will begin my parliamentary engagement, shall we say, in late spring, so Members should look out for an invitation to a meeting winging their way quite soon. I explained what might happen with the formula.

[Kit Malthouse]

I would just caution those calling for a funding formula review. This is a very complex process, as those who have been involved in funding formula reviews in the past will know. There are two things to bear in mind. First, all cannot have prizes. There will undoubtedly, proportionately or otherwise, be a redistribution from one to another in a funding formula. Secondly, when particular indicators are pushed, such as tourism, there may be unintended consequences. For example, I get a strong lobby on tourism and visitor numbers from south-west Members, but if that were to be part of the funding formula what would that say about funding for London? How much of the overall cake would then be absorbed from forces across the land to deal with visitor numbers in London? We deal with that in London through a capital city grant and obviously there would be a consequence to that being part of the funding formula. I do not necessarily want to dwell on that point, but I ask Members to think carefully about unintended consequences before they make a contribution towards the consultation.

Richard Drax: London is a metropolitan area and far easier to police. Dorset is a massive rural area with fewer police. The point is that rurality is not taken into account in the funding formula.

Kit Malthouse: There is, actually, in the current funding formula a sparsity indicator, but nevertheless these are exactly the sorts of issues we will have to deal with in future and they are certainly something I want to focus on.

The other broad issue which a number of Members mentioned was dealing with a specific problem in a specific geography that may emanate from elsewhere. A number of Members, particularly those from Bedfordshire and Dorset, mentioned county lines. It is worth remembering that we are spending significant amounts of money on dealing with county lines in London, west midlands and Merseyside, where the vast bulk of the exporting drugs gangs come from. Money spent in London on intercepting and dealing with those gangs will pay benefits in Shaftesbury, Luton and other parts of the country. We make that investment in those forces, but on behalf of the whole country. That is a part of our having to see the whole of policing expenditure as a system, whether that is the National Crime Agency—which is no doubt doing work on the Dorset coast—the Metropolitan police doing work on county lines, or indeed the British Transport police, with whom I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) met. We are funding its taskforce on county lines, which is doing extraordinary work intercepting young people with knives, drugs and cash on the rail network, gripping it in a way that it has not been gripped before.

Andrew Selous: On the point about focusing on where county lines come from, they also come from Luton, which is another reason why Bedfordshire needs to be treated fairly.

Kit Malthouse: As my hon. Friend knows, we have been happy to fund Operation Boson, which has been dealing with serious and organised crime and drug dealing in and around Luton—which, as he says, is a particular hotspot. Our county lines settlement provides some money for receiving, or importing, forces to try to step up to the plate. However, I hope all those forces will realise that there will be a huge impact on violence specifically in their areas if they co-operate with the operations coming out of those three big exporting forces, and I hope that people will look carefully at both the funding formula and the impact of the overall investment package on their force before drawing a negative inference.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: No, I am going to finish, because we have to move on to other business.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) invariably presents a dystopian vision of our work on crime. She is a very hard person to please. Let me now read out the bit of her speech that she obviously crossed out for some reason, in order to remind the House that according to the most recent Office for National Statistics publication, produced just last week, violence is down by 15%, murder by 16%, stabbings by 15%, theft by 20%, burglaries by 30%, car crime by 28%, and robberies by 34%.

Sarah Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: I will not.

I am the first to admit that the fight against crime is always two steps forward and one step back—it is never a linear progression—but after this settlement, and given the history of the Prime Minister and myself in this particular matter of policy, I hope that no one will doubt our commitment to fighting crime throughout the United Kingdom, and I hope that through this settlement we have once again demonstrated our enduring commitment to the police who conduct that difficult job. We are giving them the powers, the resources and the tools that they need to continue this ever-important battle, and I hope that the House will support the financial settlement.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2022–23 (HC 1084), which was laid before this House on 2 February, be approved.

Local Government Finance (England)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now come to the two motions on local government finance, which will be debated together. The Order Paper notes that these instruments have not yet been considered by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments, but I can happily inform the House that they have now been considered. Gloriana. I call the Secretary of State to move the first of the two motions.

4.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2022–23 (HC 1080), which was laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this we shall consider the following motion:

That the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2022–23 (HC 1081), which was laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.

Michael Gove: The House should also note that the Local Government Finance Report has since been updated with a small correction on page 14. Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments for its careful consideration of these reports.

Before I turn to the details of the reports, may I say a brief word of thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), who until very recently served as Minister for Housing and Planning? We will be starved of his eloquence at the Dispatch Box, because he has been translated to the Whips Office, but I know that that eloquence will not be wasted on my right hon. and hon. Friends, who will benefit from his wisdom and gentle guidance as they consider which Lobby to enter in the light of all the delicate matters that we discuss.

I should add that it was on the watch of my right hon. Friend that the number of first-time buyers in the country reached a record level, and that the stewardship he displayed, and also the imagination and attention to detail, were those of a model Minister. He will be missed. I should also add that although his shoes are both difficult to fill and always highly polished, we are nevertheless very fortunate to have in the Minister for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), an excellent new addition to our departmental team. We welcome him to his place, and we know that he is a doughty defender of the interests of the north of England, of local government overall, and of those who aspire to live in and to own a decent home. I am therefore grateful for the fact that he has joined the team.

The local government finance settlement makes available, to local government in England, core spending power of £54.1 billion for 2022–23. This is an increase of £3.7 billion on 2021–22, a real-terms increase of 4.5%.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the considerable eloquence of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) will be deployed inter alia in drawing attention to the years from 2010 to 2017–18 when there were necessary economies in local government spending.

I suspect, although I cannot be certain, that she will for partisan reasons, entirely fairly, seek to contrast the restraint in public spending during those years with the increases that we are now making to suggest that the increases do not make up for the previous restrictions on public spending, but it is impossible to consider those restrictions without appreciating the context of the economic circumstances that the coalition Government inherited in 2010—I do not wish to make any partisan points—and that required us to deal with the inevitable consequences of the financial crash.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am not going to delve into history; I would just like to talk about the pandemic of the last couple of years. In my constituency, Newham Council is about £10 million shy because of covid spending, which will have ongoing consequences. Much of it has come from revenue accounts for temporary accommodation. Newham has the largest housing list in the country and the second highest rate of child poverty, yet we are still having to cope with covid costs of £10 million and counting without any respite from the Treasury.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a series of important points. Newham Council faces serious pressures for a variety of reasons, as do so many in local government. This provides me with an opportunity to draw attention to, and to praise, the efforts not only of elected councillors but of those who work in local government in Newham and elsewhere who, in dealing with the strains of covid over the past two years, have shown immense determination, energy and forbearance.

Whichever party had been in power, these covid costs would have been inevitable because of the nature of the pandemic. I would argue that the big choices made by the Prime Minister on the vaccination programme and the approach we took immediately before Christmas in the wake of the omicron wave have been vindicated by events. I would also argue that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's adoption of the furlough programme ensured that our economy weathered the storm more effectively than other economies did. Because of those big decisions made by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, we are now in a position where the spending review can increase expenditure by 4.5% in real terms.

Ms Brown: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning how very difficult it has been to be a councillor or officer in local government over the past two years. They have had a terrible job, but it is not made easier when they were told that their costs would be covered only to find themselves £10 million shy and counting. I hope he will take that away and think about how he can give respite.

Michael Gove: Absolutely. The position of those who are served by Newham Council has been very clearly outlined by the hon. Lady. Within the context of the settlement we are debating today, we will look at all the additional support we can give to those who are dealing with the consequences of covid.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Boroughs such as Newham will benefit from £38 million under the settlement, compared with rural areas such as Dorset, which will receive nothing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that should be borne in mind?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but it is vital not to pit urban against rural or Dorset against London. In the debate on the police grant report, he and my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) drew attention to particular crime challenges that Dorset faces, with major cities such as Bournemouth in the broader Dorset area, issues of county lines and rurality, and pressure on public services overall. They were absolutely right to do so. We have sought to ensure that in the settlement we provide Dorset's police and fire and rescue service with appropriate resource, but of course we keep things constantly under review.

For the benefit of the House, I will briefly run through the details of the funding settlement. Overall, the settlement funding assessment—in essence, what used to be the revenue support grant allocation—comes to some £14,882,000,000, a truly significant amount and a significant increase. In the local government finance settlement, we are also increasing our compensation to local authorities for under-indexing the business rates multiplier. We are making sure that local authorities have the opportunity to raise the council tax precept by 2% on the social care precept and that they benefit from an improved better care fund from the new homes bonus. The rural services delivery grant, which helps to address some of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) so ably raised, is being held at £85 million.

Perhaps the two most substantial changes are the increase in the social care grant, to take account of the particular pressures on local authorities as a result of the challenges that adult social care services face, and the additional £822 million that has been made available in a specific services grant. That money is unringfenced, and it is in keeping with the direction of our “Levelling Up” White Paper and of the Government overall in recognising that, wherever possible, those in local government are best equipped to meet local needs. That principle of devolution and local discretion will be in our mind as we consider how to reform local government finance further in future.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. He will know that Salford City Council has faced budget cuts of £232 million since 2010 and has stated that the approach to funding that he outlines does not adequately reflect the demand that it faces. Does he agree that true levelling up requires funding to meet actual demand, and that it requires differentials for poverty, inequality and council tax payers' ability to pay to be effectively factored into Government grant methodology?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. As we review future reforms to local government finance, I look forward to working with her and other colleagues to make sure that her point about deprivation, which affects a considerable number of her constituents, is reflected in our overall approach. It is important to say that the most relatively deprived areas of England—those in the upper decile of the index of multiple deprivation—will receive 14% more per dwelling in available resource through this year's settlement than the least deprived areas. The settlement serves the cause of social justice with a redistribution towards poorer areas, but of course we keep these things under review.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Why does the Secretary of State think that the Conservative chair of the Local Government Association, James Jamieson, has criticised the settlement for not including sufficient funding to tackle the considerable additional pressures on local services, particularly with respect to vulnerable adults and children?

Michael Gove: I talked to James Jamieson this morning, as I do most weeks. One reason why he leads the LGA is that he is a brilliant Conservative council leader. If James were here, I think he would say he was not criticising but encouraging us, as any friend would, to do even better. It is striking that the welcome that the local government sector gave this year's funding settlement was broader, deeper and more cordial than it has been for some years. Politics being politics, any sector will always, entirely understandably, want its champion to be someone who can ask for more.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I note that the Secretary of State does not want to talk about what has happened in the past, but my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) raised a point about need. It was no accident that the Government took the needs formula out of the local government settlement, meaning that areas such as mine and hers, which have high demand for social services—County Durham has over 900 looked-after children in care—have been the net losers. I am sorry, but it is not about pitting cities or areas against one another; it is just a matter of fact that certain areas have higher demands because of their demographics. That has to be taken into consideration, but the Secretary of State's Government took the needs formula out during the coalition era.

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman makes a number of points and ensuring that I addressed them all would mean that I would be here well after the moment of interruption. We could discuss the difficult economic situation that the coalition Government inherited in 2010. We could discuss the way that we unringfenced funding to ensure that local authorities could respond to that. We could discuss the particular way in which some local authorities, irrespective of political colour, were able to use their resources more effectively. We could discuss the way in which interventions beyond direct local government funding under the coalition Government sought to address deprivation. It is striking, for example, that between 2010 and 2014 the Education Secretary—whoever he was—managed to introduce a pupil premium that saw millions flowing to the very poorest students, an initiative that had not been introduced under the previous Labour Government and that helped to close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is an brilliant campaigner for citizens in Stanley and North Durham. He makes his case effectively and he is right to remind us that when we look at local government finance it is important to bear in mind need and deprivation. That is what we are doing as we look overall at how we can review local government funding later on.

Mr Jones *rose*—

Michael Gove: I can never resist the right hon. Gentleman, so I am happy to give way again.

Mr Jones: The Secretary of State just does not get it. Those were not options; they were political choices taken by the coalition Government. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles and I are making is that on issues such as looked-after children and adult social care—he should remember that in County Durham life expectancy has gone down in the past 10 years—it is not optional for councils to intervene. They have a statutory obligation to do so and if that is not taken into account in the formula, councils in areas such as County Durham and Salford and Eccles will always be at a disadvantage because the right hon. Gentleman's Government, of which he is a part, took that out of the funding formula.

Michael Gove: Again, the hon. Gentleman—my apologies, the right hon. Gentleman, and quite right too—makes three important points. On looked-after children, the whole position that we have had to take over the past 10 years on children in social care has been driven by a variety of factors that mean that we deal with the challenges of looked-after children and children at risk of abuse and neglect in a more intense fashion. That is why Josh MacAlister's review of children in social care is so important and I hope that when it is published the right hon. Gentleman will welcome it.

On adult social care, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a greater degree of pressure, not just because we have an ageing population, although I note his important point about life expectancy in County Durham, but because we have more people moving into adulthood who, thanks to advances in medical care, also require social care. That is why in this settlement local authorities can make use of more than £1 billion of additional resource specifically for social care. On top of that funding, as was outlined in the presentation of the White Paper earlier today by my hon. Friend the Minister for Health, £162 million in adult social care reform funding is also being allocated to help local authorities.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I could recognise the valuable approach the coalition Government took under the then Secretary of State in removing ringfences, but we can contrast that with the number of pots that are being created that local authorities have to bid into, which seems like ringfencing by another name. The Secretary of State mentioned Councillor Jamieson, the chair of the LGA, who said at the Select Committee that we cannot sort out local government finance until we sort out social care funding. The LGA is looking for a big solution and it is disappointed that the levy highlighted as solving the problem actually gives no mainstream money to local councils to deliver important social care services.

Michael Gove: The Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee makes two very important points. First, there is the tension, which always exists, between ensuring that we devolve as much funding as possible and simplify the funding landscape. There is also the need from time to time to respond to specific challenges. The one relates to the other, because local government, as he made rightly clear in his second point, wants additional funding for adult social care made available to it, and worries, for well-rehearsed reasons, that much of the additional funding will be

devoted to the NHS's immediate needs rather than long-term reform. I believe that the White Paper introduced earlier today on the integration of adult social care between the NHS and local government to an even greater degree will help address those issues. However, I recognise that they are serious ones and that the House will want to examine both the White Paper and any legislation that we introduce in due course.

I am conscious that many Members across the House will want to use the debate both to praise those in local government and to make specific cases for future funding reform. However, the settlement that we have secured marks a real recognition of the importance of local government and the Government's determination to ensure that we strengthen its hand in dealing with the social ills that our country faces. That is why I commend the increase in the local government finance settlement to the House.

4.46 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I enjoyed the Secretary of State's debate with himself on what I was about to say; let me try to enlighten him. I must say, having treated us to a lecture about the causes of the global financial crash and the reasons for the deep and harsh cuts inflicted on our communities in the past 12 years of Conservative Government, he struck a different tone from that struck yesterday with northern leaders at the convention of the north. When he was challenged by the *Liverpool Echo* about whether the Government accepted that they—and he personally—played a role in the problems that he has been dispatched to solve, he said:

“You can never know with...hindsight whether”

those decisions “were judged just right”. I will leave it to Members to decide whether the Secretary of State is saying one thing to the House and another to the north of England. To misquote Eminem, “Will the real Secretary of State please stand up?”

The trouble is that the core spending power that the Secretary of State has trumpeted in press releases comes from our pockets. Bills have gone up and shopping costs more, so, as he should well know, people across the country are trying to keep their heads above water. Surely he can see the problem with the settlement that he has brought to the House today. For a decade, people have had money stripped out of their places and taken out of their pockets by the Government. The council tax rebate does not compensate us for that; nor does his settlement for councils. He has given us a partial refund on our money and asked us to be grateful.

Unsurprisingly, the Secretary of State was not asking people to be grateful for that last week when he was touring the country trying to sell his White Paper to a sceptical public. He did not say to people in Grimsby, Blackpool and Liverpool that this is the offer on the table from the Government: they can pay more to stand still or pay the same and get less. For all the gloss on this announcement, he is continuing to cut the central fund to councils in real terms, so, if places want to get the spending power that he promised, taxes will have to go up. That is a direct consequence of the decisions made by Ministers and the Tory Government.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is actually worse than that? For local authority funding, in the last 10 years—we continue to have it today—we

[Mr Kevan Jones]

have had a movement away from central Government funding and on to local council taxpayers, and areas such as County Durham, where 56% of properties are in band A, are severely limited in their ability to raise that revenue, whereas areas such as Surrey can raise a lot more. The net effect is a movement of resources away from areas such as County Durham to places such as Surrey.

Lisa Nandy: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. Worse than that, it is at a time when people can least afford to bear it. Walk into any community in any part of the country and we find people talking about the impact of runaway inflation under the Government and their inability to pay their gas and electricity bills and meet the costs of the weekly shop. How can the Secretary of State look them in the eye and tell them that he is forcing council tax rises on them of 3% in just a few months' time, and that is on top of the increases in national insurance that his Government are so determined to bring in?

In 2019, the Secretary of State promised that people will keep more of what they earn and more will be invested in public services. That was an election promise, and it turns out that neither of those things is true. In the past seven years, the proportion of funding for local councils from central Government has nearly halved. The Government are doing less, so people are having to do more, and they have made people pay £10 billion more in council tax this decade.

Just yesterday, the Secretary of State was in Liverpool telling our northern leaders that they should “judge us on our actions in the future.”

How about we judge him on his actions right now? How on earth did he get here—a Conservative politician, who once promised that hard-working people would keep more of what they earn under a Conservative Government, throwing new taxes on struggling families like confetti and treating the British public like a cash machine? This is the consequence of a high-tax, low-growth Government, and in every community people are paying the highest possible price for this Tory Government.

How can the Government have got their priorities so wrong? This week, BP announced £10 billion in profits, but while we said that oil and gas companies should pay more in tax so people could keep more of their own money—remember that phrase?—the Secretary of State backs the oil giants, and all this Government have done is offer families a dodgy loan to ease the pain now and to be paid back later. They have stripped £15 billion from our councils over the last decade, and in the last couple of weeks, with one stroke of a pen, they wrote off £13 billion of our money to fraudsters and dodgy contractors.

Where is the investment we were promised? Even after getting levelling-up funding, in 144 areas, people are £50 million worse off. North-east Lincolnshire, Dudley and Hyndburn have all lost under his deal. Blackpool, which the Secretary of State visited last week—and it is a town, by the way, not a city, if he wants to let the Prime Minister know—is down 1.92% in real-terms in funding to its council. Does he not understand what councils are dealing with? We are still in a pandemic, and these are the people who stepped up to run test and

trace services when the Government failed. These are the heroic people—the council workers, the public health workers, the NHS workers—who rolled out the vaccine in record time.

Two days ago, the Government cut the public health grant in real terms, telling councils to pick up the slack. These are the same councils that have a half a billion pound funding shortfall for children with special educational needs. Remember the Sure Starts that the right hon. Gentleman closed—over 1,000 of them across the country—when he was the Education Secretary? Remember the time he lost a High Court battle for slashing funding for nursery children? On his watch, he set in train a process that saw spending on vulnerable children fall by half over this decade.

Actions have consequences. The Secretary of State said yesterday that he understood why we would be cynical about a Government Minister coming and promising us the earth. Well, we are not cynical; we are furious. We are still paying for what he did as Education Secretary, so when he rocks up and tells us that we can have less to do more, and talks about renaissance Florence and the rise and fall of the Roman empire, we have had enough. Our local leaders, meanwhile, are living in the real world—grappling with climate change and rising transport costs—and having to compensate for what the Government have taken from us and our communities, with all the added costs that come from inflation at a 30-year high.

The Secretary of State must know that by far the biggest factor driving up costs is the crippling cost of social care. We have just had an exchange about that in the House, because it affects every single community in this country. However, this is also at the heart of levelling up, because it is our towns that are ageing as good jobs have left and young people have had to get out to get on. These are the places where pressure on social care is most acute, but they are also the places where property prices are lower and the rise in council tax that he is promoting and forcing on people across this country produces the least. When his Department steps down, as it is doing today, these are the places least able to step up.

That is how we get a settlement in which parts of this country have fallen further and further behind while others have pulled further and further ahead. This is what he was tasked with fixing. That is before we even consider that, for six years now, the Government have been wasting our time, announcing and re-announcing intentions to review the system, yet all we have again for the fourth year in a row is a one-year settlement.

“Levelling up requires a focused long-term plan of action”.

Those are not my words, Mr Speaker, but those of the Secretary of State in his White Paper that he published last week.

We are getting sick and tired of the spin and the hype. Levelling up surely has to mean levelling with us and being honest about what this Government are doing. We are getting big promises and nothing to show for it. People are not fools, though; they can see through the shine, through the press releases, and see that life is getting harder and harder under this Conservative Government. Today should have been the day when the Secretary of State set that right, but instead he came with more of the hype, more of the slogans and more of the spin. It will not do.

4.55 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate and a pleasure to be here with my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax). We are here today to represent Dorset and to make sure that the Government take on board the priority of Dorset, particularly for me as the Member for West Dorset.

I was busy looking through the revenue support grant spreadsheet the other day when it had just been announced to see whether Dorset was in it. I did not see it. I thought that that was an error, but, regrettably, Dorset does not feature in the revenue support grant. My neighbouring colleagues and I have been looking for a meeting with the Secretary of State for a little while now. I am very grateful that there has been a bit of a flurry of action and that, hopefully, we will have that meeting very soon, but I just want to say how disappointed we are that, after the draft finance settlement was put forward, and despite my colleagues and I hoping to meet Ministers and, indeed, the Secretary of State, we have not been able to do so in order to make the case on behalf of the residents, not just of West Dorset but of the wider Dorset Council area.

The last time that I had a look, Dorset had the second highest council tax in the country at band E level—£2,233 for a band E property before any discounts, with a revenue support grant of zero. Wandsworth's band E council tax is £845 per annum, yet it has a revenue support grant of £24.3 million. In Dorset, 30% of the population is over 65 years old, with all of the associated social care costs, difficulties and challenges that go with it, compared with Wandsworth, where only 10% of the population is over 65. London receives 10 times the amount per passenger journey than we do in Dorset to support local transport and bus services. Indeed, only more recently, we hear of billions more going to support Transport for London, yet we are struggling in Dorset to run a bus service.

In Dorset, we have a railway line with the worst frequency in the country. I was looking through this wonderful levelling up document, which is very good and I commend it to the House, but, although it contains many excellent initiatives for the country, regrettably there is not much in there for Dorset. I say to the Secretary of State that we would be very grateful if he considered the letter that the Leader of the Council sent to him just a week or two ago to help us with this issue, particularly in terms of the local plan. That would be much appreciated. Also, in terms of future levelling-up plans, any influence he might bring to bear ahead of a future six-year contract to be signed with the DfT and one of the local railway companies to operate that railway line with the worst frequency in the country would be much welcomed.

I shall conclude, because I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset wants to speak and I do not want to steal any of his thunder. The point that I shall repeat for the House is that whilst the perception from many in the House is that Dorset is a well-off community—a chocolate-box area with plenty of lovely thatched houses—we have more than our fair share of difficulties. Conservative-led Dorset Council has done an excellent job managing those difficulties over the last

couple of years and I think it is fair to say that we are very grateful to the Department for many of the things that have happened in recent times.

I particularly welcome the fact that, as I understand it, the Dorset local enterprise partnership is under review. We would be very grateful if that could be expedited imminently; it will run out of money with which to operate quite soon. As the Minister knows, I am a clear advocate of change because I do not think it has delivered much, and I think the effectiveness of the LEP is an indicator of how much or little there may be in the levelling-up plan to benefit rural Dorset.

I will be supporting my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's motion today. I understand that he has had many difficult things to navigate, but I want to put clearly on the record that it is not acceptable for us, going forward as Dorset MPs, and particularly for me, as the Member for rural West Dorset, that we continually end up in this place, where we have some of the highest council tax rates in the country, with zero revenue support grant, when others, who have some of the lowest council tax rates in the country, have considerable millions of pounds of support.

5.1 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right: the settlement this year is better than in some previous years. The core spending power is up by 7.4%, though I think his definition of inflation is somewhat different from mine. The scrutiny unit of the House of Commons told me that the Bank of England's inflation rate is 5.4%, so that does not give quite such a big increase in the real-terms rise in core spending as the Secretary of State indicated. But it has to be set against the background that since 2010, local government has had the biggest cuts of any part of the public sector.

The Secretary of State was explaining how the coalition Government had to respond to a financial crisis; but there were choices in the way that response was made. One of the choices was to single out local government for those spending cuts. Perhaps the suspicion was that it was easier to pass the responsibility on to others to decide which bits of the public sector were to be cut—libraries, parks or bus services, or whatever else local authorities had to resort to in order to reduce their expenditure.

It is also, I think, uncontested that the poorest parts of our country had the biggest cuts. That is a reality with the Government grant. The Secretary of State made the point—he produced the figures—that the poorest areas have done slightly better this year. I accept that: I think the figures show it, but it is slightly better on top of substantially worse situations for the previous 10 years, and they are having to recover from that. I will return to the issue of levelling up later.

For my own city of Sheffield, the grant cut has meant that £3 billion-worth of grant in real terms has been lost since 2010. That is an awful lot of money when thinking about what could have been done with that in terms of levelling up. Yes, the situation has been better since 2015. Government figures show that spending power has gone up by 2.1% in real terms. Actually, per head, though, it has fallen by 2.2%. So even since 2015, real spending power per head has fallen across the country.

[*Mr Clive Betts*]

Some significant themes have continued this year that we ought to reflect on for the longer term. The Secretary of State has been talking about the longer term; I think it is right that we should view these settlements in a longer-term context for the future. First, council tax in my own city of Sheffield was 41% of council spending in 2010; it is now 59%. That is a really significant switch of where the money comes from. Spending on social care is now two thirds, as opposed to about half. Again, that is a switch in what the money is spent on. My real concern is that although councils have properly responded—not just in Sheffield, but all over the country—to the pressures in social care and given it a priority, for very obvious reasons, it means that all the other day-to-day essential services that councils provide have been cut even more. Many libraries across the country are shut; the services in parks have been reduced; cuts have been made to bus services right across the country—we have heard Conservative Members complaining about those; money has been cut from road safety schemes; and cuts have been made in terms of the availability of public health inspectors to go into food shops. One issue I know the Secretary of State is really concerned about is planning departments, where a significant cut has been made to resources. There is a real democratic issue here: most people do not receive services from social care, but the public do, as a whole, look at their street cleaning, parks, libraries, buses and other important services, and they are paying more council tax—I have just described the extra money that comes from council tax—and getting less for it. There is a real challenge to our whole democratic system if we allow that to continue. I think the Secretary of State probably recognises that and we need to address it.

In the face of that, councils have done remarkably well. They have probably produced more efficiency savings than the rest of Government put together; if the rest of Government worked as well as councils have done, we would all be in a much better place. Most councils, like Sheffield's, have used reserves very prudently; they are only able to get through the social services crisis we are in because of the reserves we have. Great credit must go to council officers and councils across the country, particularly to those in my city of Sheffield. Councils have also done a remarkable job during covid, be it on food parcels for the elderly and people who are shielding, on working with the health service jointly to deliver effective services, or through directors of public health doing test and trace far more efficiently and effectively than that the national system, at far less cost. We can be proud of what local government has done in those circumstances.

There were one or two disappointments about the settlements, but to put it slightly more positively I will call them “challenges for the future”. First, this is a single-year settlement. Local councils want multi-year settlements; we can all agree on the reasons why, and that is important. Secondly, on fair funding, it cannot be right that we have a settlement here based on 2014 data, with some of it going back to 2000. I accept the challenge; one person's fair funding is another person's unfair funding. That is going to be an interesting challenge for the Secretary of State, but I would say that levelling up has to be part of a fair funding review. It cannot be

about individual bits of money; levelling up has to be about mainstream core funding and getting the distribution of that right to reflect the need for levelling up.

We have to get a new source of funding for social care. We have to get money from a levy or whatever source to come in. I welcome the attempt to integrate health and social care. I do not think it should be brought into one giant service; getting local councils and the health service to work together is right. They have done brilliantly well in Sheffield during the pandemic, with the clinical commissioning group, the director of public health and the director of social care working together. One of my worries is that in the reforms to the health system we do away with that place-based approach that a CCG gives. I welcome the letter that the Secretary of State has just sent and the offer to meet officials. It is really important that that place-based delivery of services—councils and the health service working together at a local level—is maintained. I hope that that is absolutely seen through.

The other two issues are still waiting to be done: business rates reform; and protection for the high street as part of that, with some sort of digital sales tax. When are we going to get it? Everyone seems to think that we ought to have one, but we have not actually got one. I mentioned the level of council tax now—the amount out of the totality of council spending. Council tax is regressive. If we look at the amount people pay compared with the value of their houses as they go up, we see that it is completely disproportionate. So we need a council tax review reform as well as a business rates reform if we are going to deal with this for the future.

Finally, I come to one regret. I look at the public health grant, where there is a 2.8% increase—if inflation is 5.4%, that means a reduction in real terms. The public health service has done a brilliant job, and I give credit to Greg Fell and his team for what they have done in Sheffield, but covid has shown us the health inequalities in our communities that need addressing. Is that cut not therefore a complete mistake at a time when we need more prevention and more attempts to reduce those inequalities?

In Sheffield, if I get on a bus in the west end of the city and go to the east end, life expectancy changes by 10 years. That simply cannot be right. Our public health director and his staff in that service, working with the health service, are key to addressing those problems. It is disappointing that their reward for all the work they did during the pandemic is to see a real-terms cut in their spending.

5.10 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow both the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who is sitting beside me.

I give credit to our leader, Councillor Spencer Flower, and our chief executive, Matt Prosser. I also agree with the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) that we should thank all staff and officers, who have done a fantastic job over the pandemic in particular. I welcome the good news that they are all heading back to their offices now—the sooner the better, frankly.

I have huge respect for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and I know he understands, being a true Conservative, that the best way to raise money is to lower taxes. The sooner we have some really bright blue Tory policies to do that, we will get more money for the Treasury, which can hopefully be better spent for local authorities and all the public services we need to spend money on. Otherwise, we will have to keep raising taxes—as Labour, of course, would do—and the pips will squeak for all of us, but particularly for the less well off, who are struggling, as we all well know.

Dorset, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset has said, sets one of the highest council taxes in the country, and the unfair proportion of it lands on the Dorset council tax payers—a point that has already been made—with precept rises in various areas of council tax. I am grateful to him; we lobbied hard for the one-year settlement and we got more than we expected; we budgeted for between £4 million and £8 million, and we got £10.4 million.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Drax: I am going to crack on, because I think there are many colleagues who want to speak; I know the right hon. Gentleman will have something to say later when he is called. We got £10.4 million, for which I am extremely grateful, although some has been ring-fenced and £3.1 million is for one year only.

Statistics are incredibly dull and can be misused, but I will just utter some to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the 2021-22 Budget, to exemplify our particular issue. Our income is 85% from Dorset taxpayers, versus 67% on average for other unitary councils. The business retention rate is 14% for Dorset and 24% on average for other unitary councils. The revenue support grant, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset said, is zero—nul points.

That counters the notion that we have moved to a unitary council, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State knows, we have led the way in the country—I know the Government want to go further with other authorities—and we cannot be seen to fail. I emphasise that and ask him to take it into account. So much has been done and so much money has been saved and cut that statutory services are under huge pressure. I know he is aware of that, but let me say it anyway.

The key issue, as we have heard, is that too much is one-off funding, when we need time to plan and far more funding for further ahead: three, four or five-year funding would be fantastic, so that we can plan and have certainty. The unfair distribution of the revenue support grant means that we get none—nil. The business retention rate, as I have said, is lower in Dorset than elsewhere, and the rural authority has additional costs that are not accounted for. That is where the funding formula needs to change.

We also have an accumulated debt of £70 million on the high-needs block for children with special educational needs. The Department for Education's support is needed to eliminate that debt. For example, one child I know is costing the council £1.5 million to get the care that they need—and rightly so, but that care has to be provided from outside the county and that is costing Dorset Council vast sums of money.

Next year's budget proposals include a 3% increase in council tax and an almost 1% increase for the social care precept. That means that for adult social care there is a 10% increase of £13 million to £141 million. For children's services, there is a 4% increase of £2.7 million to £74.5 million—mainly for children in care and for disabled and SEN children. On climate and ecological emergency response, £10 million in capital investment has been put aside over the next five years. Finally, £750,000 will go to support new homes under the registered provider scheme.

Those are all extreme pressures facing a rural constituency such as mine, that of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, and those of other Dorset MPs. Again, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is aware of that, and I am grateful because, since my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset spoke, I understand a meeting has kindly been organised by the Secretary of State's staff. I look forward to discussing these issues, and more, with him in person, along with the council leader and chief executive.

5.15 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Before I get into the substance of what I want to say about this settlement, I want to make a couple of remarks to the Secretary of State. There was a debate yesterday in Westminster Hall on local government funding in Merseyside—the Liverpool city region, as we now call it—which was covered by the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). In his response, he chose not to answer any of the questions asked by me or my hon. Friends from the city region. The Secretary of State is unfailingly polite and always pays attention to what people say, so I say to him ever so discreetly—of course, no one else can hear what I have to say—that he needs to have a word with the Under-Secretary of State, who should understand that one of the basic requirements of replying to a debate is to respond to what people said during it.

Unfortunately, the local government finance settlement, as others have said, is still 20% lower now than it was in 2012-13. I will return to the implications of that for Knowsley, but I will first make some general comments, some of which have already been made, about the overall implications for local government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) pointed out, it represents a one-year settlement and, in a typically fluent, well-informed speech, she made it clear why that is unacceptable. I simply add that it is impossible for local government to plan ahead unless local authorities know more than a year ahead—preferably three years—what they will receive in grants. I am sure the Minister and the Secretary of State are well aware that that is an impediment for local authorities, and I hope that they will address it in future settlements.

My hon. Friend also mentioned that the Government promised—if the Government deliver on this, I am sure that it will be welcomed—that the next settlement will better reflect local levels of need. That would be important if it did address the disparities in deprivation between local authorities in different parts of the country, rather than to continue with the shift towards sparsity and population-based measures, which are manifestly unfair

[*Sir George Howarth*]

on those areas with the greatest need. I therefore ask the Minister—perhaps he will take the time to answer this at some point—to confirm that need will be properly accounted for in any new grant distribution system.

There is also justifiable concern that if Knowsley does not increase council tax by 2.99%, it would forgo permanent funding that the Government might assume will be available when determining future funding allocations. Will the Minister reassure me that the Government will not penalise those local authorities that, for whatever reason, decide that 2.99% is unaffordable to their residents?

I also worry that the settlement will be insufficient to cover inflationary pressures—for example, democratic pressures, legislative cost pressures, and pressures as a result of the health and social care levy on national insurance and energy price rises of up to 50%. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) pointed out, the general level is already above 5% and could, by the end of the year, be as much as 6%. That will mean that the settlement will be less generous than it appears to be at the moment. Will the Minister again give us some assurance that any additional inflationary pressures that influence the way that the grant will work for local authorities will be considered sympathetically?

The settlement includes funding for new burdens, such as adult social care, children's social care and home-to-school transport. Unfortunately, however, it is wholly inadequate and will not cover, for example, the £12 million that Knowsley faces as a result of these additional demands.

I turn to the specific implications of the settlement for Knowsley. As the Minister will know, since 2010 Knowsley has had its grant support reduced by £116 million. That figure was referred to in a debate yesterday. The cumulative effect of that on a small borough such as Knowsley—the third most deprived authority in England, by the way—is enormous. It means not only that services that are badly needed by people cannot be extended or grown to meet need—I have referred to some of the pressures that brings—but that people's life chances are impaired, sometimes irreversibly, by the lack of support that they get. That is nothing to do with any intention on the part of Knowsley; it is simply a matter of the money not being there to do everything that it needs to do. Will the Minister undertake to start the process of reversing that unfair and unacceptable trend whereby areas with high need, such as Knowsley, end up having some of the highest cuts in grant support anywhere in the country?

The picture I have painted so far is one of unrelieved gloom, particularly for Knowsley, so let me make a couple of positive points. First, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the 8.5% increase in core spending power that Knowsley will get is welcome, although, frankly, it does not do anything like address the problem of the £116 million that we have lost over the past decade.

Secondly, despite the crushing loss of grant that we have experienced, Knowsley Council, amazingly, managed to bring about some transformational changes, including the regeneration of Kirby town centre. As a result of the fact that there were years and years of successive private sector owners who failed to regenerate the town centre, the council, very bravely, bought it and is now in the process of wholesale regeneration, which is obvious

for all to see. There is also the Shakespeare North project, which I do not know whether the Minister is aware of—probably not.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien) *indicated assent.*

Sir George Howarth: I am pleased to hear that, so maybe he is not completely a Shakespearean tragedy. The Shakespeare North project, into which, to be fair, the Government have put a substantial amount of investment, is a huge success. I pay tribute to the Government for putting money into the Arts Council, to Knowsley Council for putting in a substantial amount, and to the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and metro Mayor Steve Rotherham for also contributing. I should also mention the private donors, including Lady Anne Dodd—the widow of Ken Dodd—who put £400,000 into the project for a comedy space.

Knowsley Council has been the driving force behind Shakespeare North, on which it should be congratulated, and much else besides that I do not have time to go into. However, there are important projects still awaiting Government support that we had hoped would come from the levelling-up fund, such as the regeneration of Huyton town centre. Knowsley Council put forward a really good project for regenerating Huyton town centre, and I totally reject the assertion that such projects were selected on merit alone because, frankly, this project would have been far better than some that were funded. As I said yesterday, there is real concern that the levelling-up fund has so far been politically skewed in a way that means Knowsley, yet again, loses out.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government's fixation on competition for such funding is inefficient and is clearly being used by the Government as a pork barrel? It puts a lot of pressure on councils such as Knowsley Council, which have already faced cuts, to put in the officer time to make such bids. Would it not be better to scrap the whole nonsense of bidding for this type of funding?

Sir George Howarth: My right hon. Friend makes a typically forceful point, and I agree with him.

Frankly, it is pretty grim to say to one local authority, "You have to be set against another authority for any project, and it won't necessarily be based on the need of the community; rather, it will be based on a political choice that might not reflect that need." In Knowsley's case, the decision does not reflect the need.

As I said earlier, Knowsley is the third most deprived borough in England and it received nothing from the levelling-up fund—it was not 0.1%; it was nothing. That cannot possibly reflect a fair distribution of those resources. I made that point to the Minister during yesterday's Westminster Hall debate, and he did not respond. I hope he will now take this opportunity to do so. I suggest to him—again, he overlooked this yesterday—that he grants a meeting to me and Knowsley Council to discuss what can be done to get the funding we need through the levelling-up fund for the regeneration of Huyton town centre.

There are some small but encouraging signs that the Government might be beginning to recognise the gross unfairness that the last decade has meant for areas such

as Knowsley. I give them a small amount of credit for that, but those of us who are more fair-minded recognise the importance of need. The Government are now talking about accepting need as an important part of funding mechanisms, but we do not yet have any evidence to support that assertion.

Finally—I notice you are looking at your watch, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I had better be quick—there was a time when I chaired the local authority finance committee and understood the distribution mechanism then, which was based on multiple regression analysis. I do not know whether the Minister is familiar with that, but I have to confess that I am not so well informed on the current mechanism. I am reminded of Palmerston being asked, many years after the event, to explain the Schleswig-Holstein affair, which was a border dispute between Denmark and Germany. He replied that only three people ever understood it: first, Prince Albert, who by that time was dead; secondly, Bismarck, who by that time had gone mad; and thirdly, Palmerston himself, and unfortunately he had forgotten.

When it comes to talking about local government distribution mechanisms and formulae, I feel I am very much in the Palmerston category, but I shall undertake to do better in future. I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Wigan are now much more expert on the subject than I am. We welcome the fact that some small harbingers of change have been promised and will watch very carefully for them actually to come about.

5.31 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I fear that, in local government terms, I am perhaps in the same vintage as the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) and have perhaps also experienced the Palmerston effect over my years in local government finance. Since I was elected to Havering Council in 1974—as a very young man, I might add—the nature of the finance settlement has changed and things have come and gone. We had the rate support grant and then the block grant, then we had standard spending assessments and then the revenue support grant, and there were any number of combinations thereof. The one thing that has been constant is that nobody has ever been satisfied with the settlement and, almost by its nature, nobody ever will be.

I remember, in the days when I was a young councillor, the late Lord Healey, when he was the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, telling the local government sector that “the party is over”. The difficulty of getting the balance right in the funding of the local government element expenditure from the centre has bedevilled Governments of all parties. In a sense, it is a problem that will always be there while we have the highly centralised local government finance system that we have in the United Kingdom. That contrasts with the much greater levels of financial and, indeed, fiscal devolution to be found in local authorities and the local government sector in the rest of Europe and in the United States. That is a long-term issue; I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is up for long-term issues and imagination, so hope he will take that away for the future.

If it is really to be delivered, it seems to me that levelling up can be sensibly achieved only if we look at fiscal and financial devolution as well. I commend to

my right hon. Friend and his Minister the excellent work done by the London Finance Commission—I must admit to having served on one of its iterations—which was set up by the then Mayor of London, who is now the Prime Minister, so it has good provenance for the Minister to look at it in those terms.

The Secretary of State will remember that he and I dealt with local government when he was a rising young shadow Minister in the 2005-2010 Parliament, and I know he takes a real interest in the subject. When subsequently I was a Minister, it was generally delegated to the junior Minister to make the local government financial settlement statement, perhaps because there was less generous news to be given than is the case today. Nevertheless, I am delighted that the Secretary of State has been able to bring us some positive news in person. We can, of course, all make the case, genuinely and on a cross-party basis, that we would like to see more for our individual local authorities and for the sector, but it is noteworthy that London boroughs—including my local authority, Bromley—have seen a real-terms increase of 4%, which is a significant difference from the situation that has pertained in the past. For a number of reasons, I will say that it is not enough, but I recognise it as a step in the right direction.

I take on board the point that has been made by other Members that that increase is welcome, but in the long term we need, as well as a much deeper reform of the system, to move away from single-year settlements, because they make it extremely hard, even for the best organised of local authorities, such as Bromley, to plan on any long-term basis. No business would operate on the basis of single-year financial planning and we need to move back to multi-year settlements as soon as possible. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be well seized of that point.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chairman of the Select Committee, made a number of important points and speaks with great wisdom on these matters. I join him in commending the work done by officers and members in local government, with which I have always been proud to be associated. The chief executive of Bromley Council, Ade Adetosoye, was recognised by the Prime Minister in the Chamber on his appointment as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his transformational work, but many hundreds of thousands of others in local government are doing their bit, and we ought to salute them and the elected members who do a lot of hard work at the grassroots.

On where we should go forward from here, may I posit some observations from the point of the view of the London Borough of Bromley, a well-run, low-cost—I will return to that—and efficient authority. It is the only London borough to be entirely debt-free, but also it levies, I think, the second-lowest council tax in Greater London. That is not helped by the precept from the Mayor; it would be even lower without that. It is also an authority that has matched the reductions in expenditure from central Government and gone further with its own cost savings through an innovative approach to the way it delivers its services, to outsourcing and to investing wisely to generate income from its significant reserves, all of which have seen it through difficult times. It is a model of how a local government ought to be run, but none the less it faces very significant cost pressures.

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

One of those pressures is that we have the highest percentage of over-65s in Greater London. The population of Greater London has grown by more than 1 million, but in many of the outer boroughs the demographic change includes a mixture of young families moving in from the centre in one part of the borough and a static, ageing population at the other end, which creates pressures on both the schools and adult social care elements of funding at the same time. In Bromley's case we have an additional factor, which is our proximity to inner London. A raft of other changes—the benefits cap and so on—has undoubtedly put pressure on a borough where the journey from Bromley South station to Victoria station takes 20 minutes, so there are considerably increased pressures on our homelessness budget as well. The difficulty of any formula-based system—back to my point about devolution—is that it is never easy to pick up all the nuances that any local authority will have. That applies even within London, never mind across the country.

The position I hope that the Minister might be able to move to is this: social services and the NHS are intimately connected. We had a further statement earlier today about integration. Although there has been a significant increase in funding for the national health element and the services it delivers, the local authority social services element of the same population—we need both elements to support the growing elderly population—has not had an increase in funding to the same degree. We can therefore get the bizarre and perverse situation where the ability of NHS funded services to help people is compromised, because there is not the same level of care when patients leave hospital and go back into the community. I hope that we can consider a better approach to joining up and better aligning the funding from those two elements.

Bromley, by the way, has done pioneering joint working between the two. I hope that the Secretary of State might like to come down to Bromley at some point—he has many fans there—and see on the ground what is being done. In particular, I commend the point made by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, about the importance of not losing in these reforms the place-based element that we see from clinical commissioning groups. Our CCG and our Bromley place director, Dr Angela Bhan, are absolutely magnificent at pushing that local element, and we do not want to lose that in the reforms.

Although we recognise that the capping of care costs and the fair cost of care reforms represent additional funding, there are considerable additional commissioning costs that first would have to be taken onboard. There will also be significant reductions in income further down the track from the reforms. Therefore, we need to look at smoothing out fairness of funding overall. Bromley's overall estimate is that the changes will bring an additional funding burden of more than £10 million per annum, which is not currently covered. We need to find means of addressing that funding gap, and since that comes from a central policy, they ought not to fall upon the taxpayer.

The other issue that we need to look at is the public health grant, which has remained flat in real terms over three years. As we move to a post-covid situation, there will be long-running consequences, not least the impact

of long covid on some of our population and many other things that will need to be picked up. We need to look again at how we deal with that.

Another element that is not directly within the local government finance settlement but that I hope the Secretary of State, as a former Education Secretary will take on board, although it is not in the general fund, is the shortfall in funding through the dedicated schools grant, particularly to meet special educational needs. That will create a deficit situation for Bromley and many other London boroughs and local education authorities in future years, as part of demographic changes. There have been some changes: the tightening of the ring fence on the dedicated schools grant, and introducing a statutory override last year. That was helpful, but it is not a long-term solution.

I hope that we can press ahead, as a Government, with the SEND review, and therefore find adequate funding to go with it. There is a particular perverseness that while some of the increased cost pressures on children's social care can be funded, SEN transport is not funded from the dedicated schools grant. Since they are all part and parcel of the same package of the child's educational needs, it seems strange that, although we can cover the cost of the education itself, we are not able to cover such costs out of the same pot.

I hope that we can look at the way the system operates. We need a system that rewards efficiency. We do not have any financial mechanism at the moment that rewards efficient, low-cost authorities such as Bromley. When I was a Minister in the Department, I was told politely by one of my officials, "Surely, efficiency is its own reward, Minister." That is nice, but it does not really help when trying to balance the budgets and not pass on unfair costs to council tax payers.

We need a system where behaviour that leads to long-term efficiency and saving, as Bromley has demonstrated, is incentivised and rewarded within the local government grant system, until we move on to something more sophisticated in future. I was never able to crack it, and the then Secretary of State, the noble Lord Pickles, was never quite able to, although we made efforts, with the Localism Act 2011 and the Local Government Finance Act 2012. Perhaps the Secretary of State will be able to go further than we were able to, to reward good behaviour by elected members in a way that is demonstrable to their voters and communities. That, surely, would be a worthwhile thing to achieve.

We need to look at area cost adjustments. Bromley has one of the lowest area cost adjustments for the London area. The way that London property markets and other costs have shifted over recent years is such that there is really no distinction to be drawn between the costs of delivering services in Bromley, and, say, Richmond and Kingston in south-west London, which are much better compensated by the area cost adjustment. We need a review of how that works. I also hope that we can look at giving local authorities more freedom to raise and spend their own resources across the piece.

I mentioned the homelessness budget. Our difficulty, which I must say links to planning, is that there is pressure on housing, for the reasons I have set out. Bromley is willing to build new housing in the right place—the right place is important. Even with planning reforms, however, the private sector either is now too expensive for low-income households—in areas such as ours, it is usually taken up

by young professionals who work in the City or the west end and are not yet able to get a mortgage—or falls into the lower grades of accommodation, if I may put it that way, with houses in multiple occupation that are not suitable for families and that we would not wish to see families in. We need to join up all the policy areas of housing, planning and local government funding to ensure that we do not create a perfect storm and leave families falling through the gaps in the system. That is part of the reason that Bromley has significant pressures on its homelessness budget, which as an outer London borough it had not had previously.

Finally, we expect Bromley's population to grow above the national average, but funding is not currently being relocated on the basis of population growth. Surely, with our much better technology to store data, we could be more fleet of foot in updating these things. We have a projected increase of 18.9% in over-65s, compared with 12.1% in the rest of London. That will be a problem across the country, but surely we must make cleverer use of our data to update the figures on which we base the payments made centrally.

I could say much more, but for the sake of time I will not. I commend to the Secretary of State and the Minister the London Borough of Bromley's 13 January submission to the consultation on the provisional settlement, in which Mr Peter Turner, our excellent director of finance, sets out many of the issues in detail. I would be happy to meet the Secretary of State and the Minister to discuss in more detail how a good and successful local authority can come up with ideas to help the system to work even better.

5.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I pay tribute to all those who work in local government, particularly for the immense efforts that they have made over the past two years to meet the needs of their local communities, and to the elected members in all parties who serve their communities for not much recompense. It is a noble calling and something I enjoy doing; we should pay tribute to them. I must also throw in a mention of those who serve on parish and town councils, most of whom do so without any recompense whatever and have stepped up to the plate.

Over the past few years, as we have effectively seen caps on public spending in the principal authorities, the ability to raise a precept without going through the process of a local referendum has meant that many parish and town councils have really stepped into the breach. For their sake as much as for principal authorities, we should regret that we are still on one-year budgets. To have a single-year settlement for a fourth year disrespects all local government authorities—the parish and town councils that are not in direct receipt of grant support, as well as the principal authorities that are—and makes it very hard for them or the organisations that depend on them to plan. That is not an argument about the amount of money; it is about levelling with authorities and ensuring that they can plan ahead and serve their communities efficiently and with ambition.

There is an awful lot that we could talk about, but I do not want to take too long or tick every box, so I will make just a few observations. Like other hon. Members, I regret very much the failure to keep public health spending in line with inflation, or anything like it, as we

learn more and more about the importance of preventive healthcare, both physical and mental. I pay tribute to Colin Cox and all those in Cumbria's public health team who have worked utterly tirelessly through the pandemic, keeping us safe and giving us the advice, confidence and reassurance that we all desperately need. They have been responsible for excellent systems throughout this very difficult time.

It is worth bearing in mind just what this means—not funding public health well. While tiers 2, 3 and 4 of the mental health support framework for young people are provided through contracted services, through the NHS and through child and adolescent mental health services, tier 1 is the responsibility of public health services run at county level. The poor funding for public health in our county means that the amount we spend on young people's preventive mental health care in Cumbria equates to 75p per child per year.

Let us ignore for a moment the moral wrong of that small amount of funding. What does it mean in terms of the consequences in later life? I carried out a survey last year and found that 28% of young people referred to CAMHS were waiting over six months to be seen. Unless we invest in tier 1 preventive mental health care, we will increasingly see people cropping up further down the line with conditions that are much more tragic and much more difficult and expensive to treat. I ask the Secretary of State to think again about investment in public health throughout the country, not just in mental health and not just in Cumbria.

We have seen no real-terms increase in the rural element of the grant, and the lower-tier services grant has not been increased. District councils, which are much more likely to be in rural areas, are not receiving the support that they need. I do not want to see a push-and-pull and a fight between rural and urban communities—such activities are often misplaced—but it is worth pointing out that those who operate services in rural communities do so relatively inefficiently, because they are dealing with the same sort of issues but with much smaller numbers. There may be only 30 children at a school in the south lakes, for example, not because it is of poor quality and unable to recruit pupils but because only about 14 kids live in the catchment area, and 30 pupils mean that it is over-performing. In my constituency there are two high schools—secondary schools—with fewer than 200 pupils, and probably about a dozen primary schools with fewer than 60. I can think of two with fewer than 30. They have small school rolls not because they are not good schools, but because they represent vast areas of land in the Lake district and the dales. The lack of an understanding of rural needs means that the needs of those schools become greater and greater.

When it comes to funding formulas, one issue in particular concerns me. It depends on which metric we look at and whom we believe, but I do believe that Cumbria may have the worst pothole problem in the country, for one reason in particular. Ours is, I think, the second biggest county in England, and I think that therefore we have the second biggest number of roads. We have one of the smallest populations in any county—we certainly have the smallest concentrations of population anywhere in the country—and yet we have colossal numbers of visitors, 38 times more each year than the number of people who live in the county. The tourists who are so welcome in the lakes and the dales and elsewhere in

[Tim Farron]

Cumbria are helping to contribute to the wear and tear of our roads, but they are not contributing to the upkeep. I should like the Secretary of State to think carefully about how he can compensate rural communities like mine—particularly tourist-heavy communities—bearing it in mind that although, after London, the Lake district is the most visited place in Britain, it does not receive any compensation to help it to fund the services that are used by those visitors, which is a terrible shame.

We should bear it in mind that over a third of the increased funds available to local authorities this year is money that councils have to raise, with a £1.4 billion increase in council tax. Council tax is an unfair form of taxation: it is disproportionately paid by those on lower incomes, and it puts a greater burden on household outgoings. Combined with the national insurance rise that is coming in a few weeks' time, this puts an additional burden on people with low and middle incomes which they cannot afford.

The increase in council tax is, broadly speaking, for social care, and no sensible council will miss the opportunity to find that money to protect its social care provision. The national insurance rise is being sold as a measure that will help social care provision, but it is not really going to do that. It will not lead to what we really need, which is an upgrade in the terms and conditions and pay for people working in social care. Without that, we will neither recruit nor retain the people we need. In Cumbria, we have seen a 32% reduction in social care beds in just six and a half years. It is deeply troubling for people to have a rise in taxation outgoings both to the local authority and nationally but to see nothing for it, and nothing that will help retain those people whom we clearly need working in social care.

One reason why we have great difficulty in meeting social care needs in Cumbria is our inability to provide places for the workforce to live, which is a major responsibility of unitary and lower-tier authorities. As the Secretary of State knows—I think he has agreed to meet me to discuss this issue—rural Britain in particular faces a massive housing crisis, which is costing us in so many different ways, and while we have had this crisis for many years, through the pandemic it has become a catastrophe.

Two things have happened. First, roughly speaking, 80% of house sales in Cumbria during the pandemic have been to the second-home market, weakening communities and leaving them with an ever smaller permanent population. That means that we lose the services. If we lose a number of kids at a school, we may lose the school as well as the bus service, the post office and what it is to have a life in a community. The other thing that has happened, since the end of the eviction ban last year, is a massive increase in people evicted from relatively affordable private rents to turn those houses into Airbnbs instead.

Hon. Members can imagine the existing number of holiday let properties in a place such as the Lake district, and in my district alone in a 12-month period last year they increased by 32%. Where did those properties come from? Ordinary families in my community have been evicted—kicked out. They may have been there for years. I think of one family who raised their kids there for 16 years and were kicked out with little notice. They

had to leave the community and move their children because the Government did not scrap section 21 evictions having promised to do so. That leaves us with no staff available for care homes or all the other provision that we need. It is a moral outrage, and it practically undermines our economy.

As we look to support local government, I would love the Secretary of State to look at the ways in which he can affect that by, for instance, changing planning law so that a family home cannot be turned into a second home or a holiday let without asking the planning authorities for permission. That would keep a lid on the problem and maintain and protect the communities represented by me and others in other beautiful parts of the country. That would not cost anything—perhaps a bit more resource for planning departments for enforcement—so there is a way of adding value to our communities without necessarily spending any more money.

I have one final ask via the Secretary of State to the Chancellor of the Exchequer: why do we not consider following the Welsh Government's lead in providing local authorities with permission to double council tax on second homes? That would be a disincentive for second homes and protect communities from too many of them. It would also create a revenue stream, which those communities could invest in supporting new affordable homes and protecting local schools that would otherwise have too few kids to be viable. I would love him to look at and think about those things. As we suffer through many other challenges such as the cost of living crisis and recovery from the pandemic, I want him to focus in particular on the housing catastrophe that affects the economy and community in so many rural areas such as mine.

5.58 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): This has been a really interesting debate. I want to pick up a few points made by hon. Members. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) gently—and rightly—chastised the Government for not offering a multi-year agreement for local government and asked what has happened to business rates reform. He and my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) rightly made afresh the point about the need for a fair funding review to focus genuinely on need and poverty if the Government's levelling-up agenda is to have any substance.

If I may, I will also praise the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and his point about fiscal and financial devolution for local government. Sadly, we remain one of the most centralised nations, certainly in Europe, in the way we approach local services. Like him, I would strongly support the Secretary of State's taking up the challenge of negotiating with the Chancellor of the Exchequer for more fiscal devolution for local government. Nowhere is the argument for such fiscal and financial devolution more pertinent than in the scandalous treatment of Transport for London, with the Secretary of State for Transport demanding that the Mayor of London put up council tax to pay for concessionary fares for the elderly and the young—of which more anon, if I may. I also thought the hon. Member was right about special educational needs and the need to provide more dedicated funding, particularly to London authorities as virtually every London borough is facing huge additional pressures in that area.

Local councils are fundamental to the quality of the places where we live. They are not always universally loved, but they are essential for keeping our communities safe and our streets clean. They help create the environment in which we all want to live—for example, through the planning decisions they take—and they drive opportunities for young and old to access high-quality education, the arts, sports and leisure. Yet, tragically, they have been neglected for a decade under the Conservative party.

Too many in our communities up and down the country feel that they are not able to influence the future of the area in which they live, and that they have too little control over how their area looks, how it changes and the services they can access. If we are to help constituents shape the areas they live in and drive improvements in the services they depend on, then one—not the only one, but a crucial one—of the essential routes to doing that is to empower local councils. That means tackling the legacy of the active neglect of local councils which, I am afraid to say, has characterised the Treasury and much of the Department in recent years.

A number of bodies over recent years have published studies that paint an all-too-similar and familiar picture of declining support from central Government to local councils. Those funding cuts have made it easier for developers to do what they want where they want, and the 600-plus changes to planning law that Ministers have brought in have certainly helped in that regard. The funding cuts have made it harder to strengthen community-run services, and they have put pressure on councils to sell community assets and slowed down investment in crucial local services.

The National Audit Office has charted how the spending power of local councils, funded by central Government, has fallen in real terms by more than 50% in the last 10 years. Those cuts in funding have coincided with growing pressures on council-run services through bigger populations; the increasing numbers of the elderly, vulnerable adults and young people needing vital care and support; and, in London in particular, the rising number of homeless families. All of that has helped to squeeze the discretionary funding that councils have to spend on enforcement action against antisocial behaviour and rogue developments, as well as on street cleaning, services such as libraries, and supporting local charities, all of which have together impacted slowly but steadily on the quality of life in our towns and district centres.

Across London, since 2010, councils have seen a 25% reduction in funding, even though there are 1 million more Londoners. Harrow remains one of the lowest-funded councils both in London and nationally. We are fortunately well led by Councillor Graham Henson, we have strong officers and, certainly over the last four years, we have had very strong finance leads in Natasha Proctor and Councillor Adam Swersky. However, over the last 10 years, the main source of funding from central Government to Harrow—the revenue support grant—has reduced by 97% to just £1.6 million, a reduction of over £50 million for Harrow. There are other grants, but they are ringfenced to a large extent. To maintain balanced budgets, the council has had to find £150 million of savings as well as ways to raise new income, and has had to decide between making cuts to services or raising council tax. It has been able to make savings and efficiencies of some £98 million over that time, but it

has had to reduce services and consistently to increase council tax in line with the Government's expectations.

Despite all those steps, every year it remains a huge challenge to balance the council's budget. Harrow has a good track record of financial management. It has strong collection rates and has not reported a revenue budget overspend for many years. It has not had to use its small reserves to prop up its budget. It is a remarkable tribute to officers and councillors in Harrow that they have such a good record of financial management, but of course in the past two years in particular they have done all that while managing the disproportionate impact of covid on the borough. Of course, the pandemic has affected every part of the UK. In Harrow there has been a significantly higher than average rate of infection compared with the rest of London, yet Harrow has received one of the lowest allocations of emergency funding of all London boroughs. In 2019-20, Harrow's core spending power per head was estimated to be £170 lower than the London average and £75 lower than the England average. The fair funding review that has been promised needs to tackle that disparity.

Despite the considerable financial challenges the council has faced, it has succeeded in securing the future of vital community assets. The future of Harrow Arts Centre is now secure, investment in the Sir Roger Bannister athletics stadium has been achieved and the Harrow Museum has a new funding future. That is all positive and the council is trying to increase support to the victims of domestic violence and to young carers, as well as to improve street cleaning and to increase enforcement activity and investment in local parks. However, it is not able to increase support or invest at the level that it and local residents would want because of the financial challenges that I have set out.

Councils are far from universally popular, as I have said. They can seem too remote and their services can be frustrating to access, but in my experience in Harrow there are proud and committed staff in every part of the council who are determined to do what they can to make Harrow an even better place to live. Harrow councillors, those from my party and those in the opposition ranks, who challenge them, are remarkably dedicated given that most are paid very little and have to manage their responsibilities alongside other jobs. I want Harrow to be an even better place to live, and first of all that requires the Government to invest more in the ambitions of local people by supporting Harrow Council more than they have to date.

I also want to mention London and how the Mayor of London is being pressured into raising council tax to protect vital travel concessions for young people and the over-60s and to provide further funding for policing. Indeed, I understand that the Secretary of State for Transport personally told the Mayor that council tax had to go up. The pandemic has had the same devastating impact on the finances of TfL as it did on privatised rail companies, yet those failing privatised rail companies were bailed out straight away and without any strings attached.

Despite the Mayor's doing the right thing to protect Londoners during the pandemic, the Transport Secretary is still refusing to fund TfL properly, offering only another sticking plaster deal. As I understand it, the Transport Secretary is refusing to meet the Mayor to discuss those issues.

Chris Loder: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Secretary of State for Transport and this Conservative Government have—I understand for the second time—given the Mayor a multibillion-pound settlement to help with the operation of TfL, which has been to the detriment of constituencies such as mine in West Dorset, where we are not able to get the transport, in favour of Transport for London?

Gareth Thomas: With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think it will help the people of West Dorset or the rest of the UK in general if we leave London with a poor transport service. Just as I would like to see his community getting better support from the Secretary of State, I hope he might have the grace to recognise that Harrow and London in general also need to be properly supported as we come out of the pandemic.

Mr Jones: Is not the reason why Dorset has one of the highest levels of council tax that the Government who have been in power since 2010 have reduced the revenue support grant directly to that council and pushed it on to local Dorset taxpayers?

Gareth Thomas: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I do not know whether the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) has been challenging the Government in that regard—I think I heard a bit of gentle criticism, but perhaps he needs to make some more pointed remarks to the Secretary of State in private.

We are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, and Government Ministers are demanding further council tax rises to fund local councils, the police and transport for the elderly and the young in Harrow. That is yet another financial blow to hard-hit families. If, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on the Front Bench rightly said at the outset, the Conservative party had not allowed so much money to be wasted on fraud, corruption and personal protective equipment that could not be used, there would be money to invest in more policing in local councils such as Dorset and, crucially, Harrow, and to invest in better services for local people in my borough and beyond.

6.11 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): We have just heard it in a debate on the police grant, and we have heard it in this debate with the Secretary of State: the Government are treating 2019 like year zero. Anything that happened before then was nothing to do with them. He is increasingly trying to push the narrative that decisions around funding, local government, policing, fire or anything have somehow happened by accident. They have not: they have happened because of deliberate political decisions that, in some cases, the Secretary of State—who I think has been in the Government since 2010—has taken.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said that the most savage cuts have been made to local government, with a 56.3% cut in the past decade. The Cameron-Osborne approach was to cut the central Government funding to councils from central taxation and push it on to local council tax payers, thereby deflecting the blame when local councillors and council officials had to take some very tough decisions. We have had the galling situation over the past 10 years in County Durham of Conservative councillors standing

up and blaming the Labour council for raising the council tax, when they know the real reason is that the formula being used has shifted the way local government is funded in this country from central to local taxation.

In County Durham's case, that means that the county council's budget has been cut by £232 million a year—40% of the council's budget. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) referred to Lord Pickles, and in the early days, we were told, "Don't worry about this; it can all be sorted out if councils get more efficient"—that if they had fewer pot plants in council offices, as I think was said at one stage, or stopped serving tea and coffee at meetings, or sacked all their chief officers, somehow that would fill the gap. Well, that is absolute nonsense.

Another issue that affects counties like County Durham is that we now have an inbuilt mechanism that deliberately moves money from the poor areas with the highest need, to more affluent areas. That is no accident, but the result of a political choice. I take as an example County Durham, where 58% of our properties are in council tax band A, so if we raised the council tax by 1% we would raise £3.8 million. There are a couple of higher-band properties in my constituency—there is at least one castle, which may well be in the higher tax bracket—but there are very few higher band properties across County Durham. That should be compared that with Wokingham in Surrey, where only 2.8% of properties are in band A, so if it raises council tax by 1% it generates £8.9 million. Add to that the fact that we are not just moving that money to areas of lower need, but are ensuring that the poorest people in County Durham, or Knowsley or any other deprived community, pay the most, because we all know that council tax is a very aggressive form of taxation.

That is continuing. We again have a one-year settlement, and councils are now having to work out what they will do in coming years. The Policing Minister told us earlier that when it came to the fairer funding review on police funding, the train had left the station. He gave no indication of when it would arrive. Unless we tackle this issue, councils such as County Durham will always be at a disadvantage.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said, there is a lot of press and PR. The Government work on the basis of slogans, gimmicks and spin, and the latest one is levelling up. I might be one of the few people who have actually read the entire levelling-up White Paper, including the annex.

Mr Betts: Sad.

Mr Jones: Yes, I am, and the hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) called me an anorak, so possibly I am both.

The White Paper's analysis is not bad in that it raises the issue that we should be tackling, but it offers no solution to enable us to do that. I really enjoyed the undergraduate thesis on the Venetian city state and how Babylon was built, but again it did not reach any conclusions. Nevertheless, we have a Government who talk in terms of levelling up. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East is right: you cannot have levelling up if you exclude the way in which local government is financed.

The other sad thing is that the Government's approach has mainly been around capital projects. I think it is because the Prime Minister has a fixation—he has a fixation on quite a few things—on projects where you can see that something is being built. No doubt a Minister or local Conservative Member of Parliament can unveil a plaque and say, “This is what we have achieved.” As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) said, if it was a fair process, fine.

I used to have a saying, when I was in local government, that any idiot can spend capital, which they can. The more difficult thing is to get the revenue streams into the future. Like my right hon. Friend, distantly I used to understand local government finance, but no doubt my knowledge is a bit out of date. What I do recognise is that we can spend as much capital on projects as we like, but what is needed is the revenue funding to go alongside it for the day-to-day needs of our local communities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley covered the bidding process very well, but the point is that, if it were a fair process, then fine, but it is not. Quite clearly, it is a pork barrel approach to the doling out of money to certain Conservative seats. Let me give an example in County Durham. Which constituency has either got new towns funding or levelling-up funding? The answer is Bishop Auckland.

Michael Gove: A great place.

Mr Kevan Jones: I do not disagree with the Secretary of State. County Durham is a wonderful county. It has some great towns and, more importantly, great people. But why did Bishop Auckland get that money as opposed to any of the other towns in County Durham? Well, it has a Conservative Member of Parliament. I doubt that it will be getting much funding in the future, following the recent antics of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), with her criticism and plotting against the Prime Minister. She will be on the naughty step for a while, and will not get any future funding. The important thing is that this must be clear. I also question the bidding process. The problem with the process, as my right hon. Friend has said, is that it takes a lot of time and effort to take this through. Officer time is taken up, and councils are limited in the amount of officer time that they have. Then they have to go into some beauty parade, which is clearly rigged by the Government. The real issue in terms of levelling up is this—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I did not want to jump in as a kneejerk reaction, but I have been considering what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. He has made a very serious criticism of a Member of this House. I just want to check whether he has given notice to the hon. Lady that he intended to criticise her on the Floor of the House?

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not aware how I criticised the hon. Lady, Madam Deputy Speaker. If you could illuminate and tell me how I did, I would be quite happy. I would not necessarily want to criticise her.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman most certainly made reference to another Member. My interpretation was that he was criticising her, but the point is that he made specific reference to her. I just want to check that he gave her notice of his intention to do so.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry, but I do not know where in Standing Orders it says that you have to give notice. If a Member is criticising someone or raising a point, I agree with you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but when a Member is referring to a Member, which is what I did there—

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman can try to argue with the Chair for as long as he wishes. I am concerned about keeping good order in this Chamber, and my interpretation of what the right hon. Gentleman said was that it was a serious criticism of the hon. Lady. Perhaps the most subtle thing for him to do is to undertake to tell her that he criticised her on the Floor of the House and apologise for not having given her notice of his intention to do so.

Mr Kevan Jones: I have to say, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am not known for my subtlety. I am not sorry. I do not quite understand the point. The point I made was in reference to what has been in the newspapers. I was not criticising the hon. Lady. Frankly, if she is working against the Prime Minister, I would congratulate more than anything, not criticise her. I do not think that it was a criticism—

Madam Deputy Speaker: We do not need any more of this. I have said what I have said. It is not for the right hon. Gentleman to argue with me. Will he please now continue with his speech?

Mr Kevan Jones: I will, and I will take this up further, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I now come back to the main points? We are talking about some really serious things, and I am sorry that we have been diverted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said, if levelling up means anything, it means building up those communities. It is not necessarily about bricks and mortar, but about trying to pull the fabric together.

County Durham has high levels of deprivation, with people more likely to need social care and intervention by the health service at a lower age—in their 50s—than in most places. There are huge demands on adult social care. One thing that makes me very angry is the fact that in the last 10 years, life expectancy in County Durham has actually been falling. The idea that there is a part of this wealthy country where our citizens' life expectancy is falling is deeply disturbing and wrong.

This brings me to the issue of public health. I give full credit to Amanda Healy, the director of public health in County Durham, and her officers, who have worked tirelessly, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East that if we had given test and trace to them, they would have made a damn sight better job of it than the billions that were wasted nationally. We now have a situation where we have a cut in the public health grant. The last time the Government were consulting on the public health grant, County Durham was going to lose 40% of its funding. The problem is that if we really want to tackle the inequalities, we have to do it in terms of public health. It is no good trying to shy away from that.

We now have a situation whereby, as part of the levelling-up agenda, everything seems to be tied to changing the local government arrangements. County Durham has been offered a county deal. I do not

[*Mr Kevan Jones*]

understand why the Government are looking at changing the local government structures of an area—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are interrupting what I am saying. I can't hear myself think.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will simply withdraw what he has just said.

Mr Jones: I will, but it is just irritating, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure that it has irritated the right hon. Gentleman, and I am sure that he has never irritated anyone himself. Irritation is something that is allowed in this Chamber; indeed, it is endemic.

Mr Jones: I am glad it is, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Turning to the devolution deal, one of the bare minimums that we have looked for is a replacement for the money that we would have received from the European Regional Development Fund. The Government gave a clear pledge that, once we left Europe, that money would be matched, but it is quite clear from looking at the Treasury Red Book that it will not be. That money is important in County Durham because it allows us to fund programmes such as DurhamWorks, which works with young people who want to get into work. It has been a tremendous success, but its funding ends in 2023 and there is no more after that, so it is important that at a bare minimum we get the equivalent of that funding. However, if we have to bid for it, the bidding process will take up the time and effort of our officers, and there is also the question of the transparency of the process.

I will turn now to the White Paper, which I have read. I actually like the Secretary of State; he is a thinker. It was certainly a loss when he was demoted from the post of Justice Secretary, because he had some great ideas around how to reform the justice sector. I plead with him to take some of the ideas in the White Paper, ensure that we have the funding review that has been put alongside it, and stop this nonsense of tying resources to a requirement for devolution or to messing and tinkering around with the governing structures locally. He must then ensure that that system tackles these issues and puts back what is needed in the formula, which is a needs-based assessment.

As I have said, County Durham has more than 900 children in care. That is not cheap and it has led, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said, to adult social care and looked-after children gobbling up nearly 70% of the budget. That is not sustainable over the long term for doing the other things that my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley mentioned, when he talked about ensuring that everything else that people expect—parks, services and basic communities—is there.

There is an opportunity here, and one thing we can say about the Secretary of State is that he is a thinker and he wants to drive change. I think he was out of the Chamber when I said that the main themes in the White Paper are correct. It is about not getting bogged down in the detail of governance, deals and devolution that does not actually mean devolution; it is just about trying to get the funding in place.

I have been a leader in local government and also a Minister, and I think that if the Secretary of State looks at some of the innovation taking place in local government, he will see that the quality of some of the officers in local government is fantastic—there are some great people there doing some great things. What we have to do is free up their time, give them credit when they are doing things and support those politicians who are actually there. Let us get away from the idea that mayors are the answer to everything or that these people do not have the responsibility. This issue affected our Government as much as it has affected his. The Treasury just does not trust these people, but frankly it should, because in local government we have some great innovators. We have people who will tackle the real issue, which, as I say, is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about making the real change that happens at a local level.

I wish the Secretary of State well in his ambitions. I hope he has a good fight with the Treasury, to ensure that he gets the resources so that if we are going to make real change at the local level, we will actually make a real difference. We have political differences in this place, but we do actually want what most people want, which is the best for their local community.

6.32 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): There have been some excellent contributions, from Members across the House, highlighting the brilliant work that many of our councils—yes, I include parish and town councils—right across the country have been doing in these challenging periods. That has been noted by hon. Members today. We heard interesting contributions from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who has been mixing it up a little on the issues of region versus region, and rural versus urban. I suggest to him that he should probably get the broadband sorted out in Ilfracombe, so that when the Chancellor is there in the future he can send a positive tweet to the likes of the Prime Minister.

Chris Loder *rose*—

Mike Amesbury: I must move on—I have acknowledged the hon. Gentleman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who chairs the Select Committee, referred to the political choice of austerity over a 10-year period and the stark consequences for Sheffield City Council—I think £3 billion was cut from the council. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) referred to the need for three-year settlements. I believe we are now in the fourth year of one-year settlements. How can we plan resources effectively—how can we plan for the future and invest in early years—when we have continued one-year settlements?

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) rightly referred to the need for genuine fiscal and financial devolution, and I concur. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) spoke about the public health grant, which is being reduced in real terms, and the pressures on mental health. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) referred to devolution, concurring with the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) referred to the cut of more than 50%, as

measured by the National Audit Office, that has been imposed over the past 10 years in communities up and down the country.

If the levelling-up White Paper did not already out the Department as being devoid of any real ambition or strategy to better the lives of people across our regions, this settlement is the confirmation. It might not be 300 pages, and I might not have learned much about the last 10,000 years of urban settlements, but it once again reminds us that this Government do not truly back our communities, do not back our councils and certainly do not back our country. No wonder that Tory councillor and Local Government Association Chairman James Jamieson, whom the Secretary of State phones on a regular basis—

Lisa Nandy: Every morning.

Mike Amesbury: Every morning, I think. No wonder he stated that he was disappointed that council tax went up by a massive 31% between 2010 and 2021 while the area base grant has been cut, on average, by 37%. Tory Ministers have just piled the pain on to hard-pressed families, who pay more while receiving fewer services that are vital to making life work in our communities.

The Secretary of State has been waxing lyrical about the core spending power. Does he think that our residents, communities and constituents have missed the fact that inflation is at its highest for 30 years? Taking that into account puts this settlement for what it is: a 2.2% reduction compared with last year. It is a settlement that assumes local authorities will all raise council tax by the maximum amount without needing a referendum, meaning that councils will have to choose whether to raise much-needed funding while being well aware of the real financial pressures on households. The social care precept on top of the social care levy create a double whammy of taxation for residents, while providing insufficient resources for adult social care, according to the Tory leader of Surrey County Council. Indeed, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst raised exactly that point.

The draft of the settlement also came with another announcement, because the Government have once again kicked local government finance reform—the fairer funding review—into the long grass. It is desperately needed. Council tax as the main source of local authority income, as hon. Members across the House have said, is inherently unfair and regressive. We need that funding review very soon indeed.

The reform of business rates is another thing that we apparently will not see this year. We desperately need a new system that reflects the modern nature of business, that has some relation with money that goes through the till, that rebalances our high street versus online, and that boosts local economies rather than stifling them. However, we are of course not getting that. Could there be a clearer sign that the Government do not have a real plan?

The Secretary of State mentioned the announcement earlier this month of the £150 council tax rebate. We would very much like to see the detail of that, because we have had little so far. Indeed, our councils' financial officers and leaders have had little information. How are councils to be involved in handing out that money? Will it be by cash, cheque or electronic payment? In some areas, such as Manchester, 49% of residents do

not pay by direct debit, so there are some real practical difficulties there. Have the Secretary of State or the Minister estimated how much the administration will cost?

These woefully inadequate short-term fixes will not stop the cost of living crisis. The Government choosing to put taxes up on working people—the Government cannot escape the fact that they are now at a 70-year high—while cutting benefits and utterly failing to tackle rising food and energy bills simply pushes more people into poverty. Of course, the money is spare change compared with the £15 billion that our communities have had taken away over the last 12 years. Finances have gone that could have kept vital services open. Instead, the public now do not have 921 libraries, over 1,000 children's centres and 368 swimming pools, to name but a few. The public health grant has been cut, but we are not quite out of the covid/omicron crisis at the moment. Real-terms increases are desperately needed.

We do not have a Secretary of State for Levelling Up; he is quite rapidly becoming the Minister for closing down, boarding up and laying off. The Government have kept our regional towns and cities down and held them back. No wonder this week's newspapers representing communities across the north used their front pages to plead with the Secretary of State not to leave them behind, after 12 years. They pointed out the fact—this is a damning indictment of the inequality under this Government—that a baby girl born in Salford will, on average, die 10 years earlier than one born in the Secretary of State's Surrey constituency. I know that he will not be at all proud of that fact, but he really needs to do something about it.

In conclusion, the sad truth is that the Government have left people and communities behind for over 12 years. We now know that they simply do not have a plan to change; they just have a scorecard with 12 mission statements of failure over the last 12 years. We know that, as a nation, we can do better than this. Any genuine levelling up of our communities will chiefly be delivered by local authorities. They need three-year settlements. The funding needs to be adequate, with long-term resources, devolved freedoms and budgets that reflect the work that local authorities put into their communities—communities that are genuinely powered up to deliver the fair and green future that our constituents and our nation require.

6.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): I begin by paying tribute to the work of councils across the country. Over the last two years, they have been our foot soldiers in the fight against covid. They have innovated, worked hard and done incredible things to keep our vital services going, and they cannot be thanked often enough. I also thank officials in central Government and the Minister for Levelling Up Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), for their work in producing this balanced settlement today. She is away following the death of her father but she has done a lot of work to bring us to this point.

I also thank Members from across the House for their thoughtful and considered contributions to the debate. I would like to take some of them in turn and, as

[Neil O'Brien]

I do so, I will highlight what the settlement will mean for their area's spending power. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder)—the spending power of his area will go up by 6.8%—made the important point that even though areas may look pretty, or “chocolate box” to use his words, we must recognise that there are areas of serious deprivation in some of them. That is one of the reasons why we are maintaining the rules over such grant. It is at the highest level—£85 million—that it has been. I know that his council leader has met with the former Minister for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), and the letter that they sent has been replied to. I look forward to further conversations with my hon. Friend.

Chris Loder: I really appreciate my hon. Friend responding to these points. I should be clear for the record that I, my colleagues and the leader of the council have been asking to meet Ministers for a very long time. I appreciate my hon. Friend's comeback, but it is important to note that we would appreciate it if the meeting were expedited. I do not think that it has taken place.

Neil O'Brien: I assure my hon. Friend that we will expedite that.

Let me turn to the thoughtful comments made by the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)—the spending power of Sheffield will go up by 7.6% under this settlement. He noted, to use his phrase, that the settlement was better than in some years, which may be faint praise, but we will take it. He raised the very important long-term issue about the relevance of upward pressure on social care caused by an ageing society, and one in which we do a better job of caring for the sick and disabled. As a party, we have taken difficult decisions to adequately fund that and the NHS, and difficult decisions on tax. We are also taking steps, as we set out in the House earlier, to promote the integration of health and social care, because we all know that is one of the crucial things we can do to make that sustainable in the longer term.

Mr Betts: I mentioned the letter from the Secretary of State offering a meeting with officials. Perhaps it could be a meeting with Ministers, and perhaps I could be allowed to bring someone from the CCG and someone from the city council, who are doing great work together, to explain what they really want to see to marry up this place-based approach to health with local government.

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely, and the hon. Gentleman anticipates the point I was about to make.

Of course, deepening devolution is one way of driving the integration agenda to save money and produce better services. The hon. Gentleman referred to the important health and life expectancy gaps, and the White Paper sets out the steps that the Department of Health and Social Care will take through its health inequalities strategy and its new tobacco strategy.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) noted the importance of keeping taxes down, and I strongly agree. That is why the settlement keeps

the increase to 2%, with 1% for social care—far lower than the double-digit increases we saw in many years under the Labour party.

I will reply at length to the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth). This morning I relayed all the points raised in the important debate on funding in Merseyside to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and we talked it through. I completely agree about the need for a multi-year settlement. We had to have one-year settlements because of the turbulence around covid, but we aim to have a multi-year settlement. Yes, it will take account of the need for levelling up and of inflation.

I am pleased the right hon. Gentleman mentioned Shakespeare North, as I was previously involved in its central Government funding. It is a brilliant project, and he rightly paid tribute to some of the individuals who are helping to make it happen.

The right hon. Gentleman also made some important points about the levelling-up fund. Seventy-five per cent. of the money has so far gone to top-priority areas, and only 6% has gone to bottom-priority areas. It is highly skewed towards the poorest areas and, in the first round, £20 million went to Liverpool, next door to Knowsley, and £37 million went to the Liverpool city region as a whole. It is not correct that there is a political process. There is competition, and there are arguments for having non-competitive funding, which is why there will also be an allocation through the UK shared prosperity fund. There are arguments for competition to get good bids, but we must not traduce civil servants who score the bids and allocate the money.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) will see spending power in his constituency go up by 6.2%.

Sir George Howarth: If, as the Minister says, I am wrong about how these decisions have been arrived at, will he apprise me of what was wrong with the Knowsley bids?

Neil O'Brien: Again, the right hon. Gentleman anticipates my next point. I am happy to facilitate a meeting between officials in Knowsley and officials in central Government to talk about the bid, but this is done on an objective basis. [*Interruption.*] It does not seem that the right hon. Member for Knowsley wants to make an intervention, as he is chuntering from a sedentary position. Liverpool, as I said, has received funding, so it is not politics; it is about getting the best bids and the right money to the right places. The spending settlement means an extra 8.5% for Knowsley.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made a verbal slip when he talked about when he was a young man. Of course, he meant to talk about when he was an even younger man, so I correct the record. He and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who is sadly no longer here, made important points about the public health grant, and those points are why we are protecting it in real terms across the SR period and why we have an extra £300 million to tackle obesity, an extra £170 million to improve Start4Life and children's mental health services and an extra £560 million to improve drug and alcohol treatment.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale also made an important point about second homes, and we recently closed the tax loophole to try to address that issue.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), in whose constituency spending power will go up by 6.8%, made the case for more devolution to more places. I agree: we are both widening devolution through the county deals process and deepening it where we already have it. I should point out that the only place in England that had devolution under the previous Labour Government was London, which is just part of the country; there was no devolution for the rest of England and we have put that right.

I hope that the right hon. Member for North Durham will reflect on the point he made and his serious criticisms of my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison). Let me simply say that my hon. Friend is a superb, dynamic young Member of this House who has a lot of ideas and is making things happen for her constituency. Likewise, the same is true of the new council in Durham, where Labour is out of power for the first time in 100 years. Why is that? I do not seek to make partisan points in this speech, so let me simply say that perhaps one reason why voters in County Durham have turned away from Labour is that they are looking for people with a positive agenda who will get a devolution deal, and not people who just criticise from the sidelines.

Let me move on and address some of the other points made by the right hon. Member for North Durham that were slightly more becoming of him. He talked about having read all of the levelling-up White Paper; he will realise, then, that it marks an approach distinctly different from that under the previous Labour Government, when we saw the increasing concentration of research and development spending in Oxford, Cambridge and London. In the “Levelling Up” White Paper we increase spending outside the greater south-east by 30% over this spending review settlement period; we bring devolution to the rest of England, not just to London; and we get central Government back into the business of driving major urban regeneration in 20 places. Central Government were taken out of that business by the Labour Government’s decision to get rid of English Partnerships—a decision that, in retrospect, I think Labour will regret.

I am conscious that I am taking up time, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the year ahead, councils in England will be boosted by up to £3.7 billion in extra funding. That is a real-terms increase of 4.5% and includes an extra £822 million for services through a one-off services grant. The settlement puts councils on a firm footing for the year ahead—one on which they can build and grow. It maintains the things that are already working, such as the rural services delivery grant; it raises funding in areas where more support is needed, such as through

the extra £72 million for the revenue support grant; and it makes sure that no council anywhere in England will receive less money by updating the funding floor.

The settlement reflects the reality of 2022 and the acute pressures faced by the social care sector, with an extra £1 billion made available to alleviate pressure in the year ahead and £162 million to pave the way for the landmark social care reforms we are putting on the statute book. With a core referendum principle of 2%, plus an extra 1% adult social care precept, the settlement protects taxpayers with the lowest expected average council tax rises since 2016-17.

Several Opposition Members made points about the wider context, which includes the £1,000 extra that people working full time will get from our massive increase to the national living wage—a Conservative achievement. It also includes the £1,000 extra that 2 million households will get because of our changes to the universal credit taper rate so that people can keep hold of the money they earn.

We are being asked to believe that there has been a road to Jericho moment and this is now a low-tax Labour party that also wants to spend more money on everything and cut the deficit. It simply does not add up. There have been moments in this debate when Labour Members have said, in short terms, that the funding for public services is paid for by taxation; we are on the edge of an intellectual breakthrough, Madam Deputy Speaker! If only they had learned that lesson before they left behind the biggest deficit in this country’s entire peacetime history—a deficit that we had to spend many years clearing up, with our coalition partners. On that non-partisan note, let me bring the debate to a close. I commend the settlement to the House.

Hon. Members: More!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): No, no more.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2022–23 (HC 1080), which was laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.

Resolved,

That the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2022–23 (HC 1081), which was laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(Steve Double.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to motion No. 4—[*Interruption.*] No, no, we have finished that one. Arguments can now be continued behind the Chair, which is perfectly reasonable, but not here.

Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That Dame Diana Johnson and Mark Pritchard be removed from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under Schedule 1 to the Justice and Security Act 2013 and Maria Eagle and Jeremy Wright be appointed to that Committee under section 1 of that Act.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

6.55 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I will not detain the House, but it seems a suitable opportunity just to say a word of thanks to the two members of the Intelligence and Security Committee who are leaving, and a word of welcome to the two who are joining.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) is well known for the calmness and conscientiousness of her approach to politics, and her good sense and good judgment on all issues to which she turns her hand. Our loss is the Home Affairs Committee's gain. I felt honour bound to vote for her for that position, even though we knew that we would be losing her services which were much valued on the ISC, but we wish her every success in her new post.

My right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) brought his keen enthusiasm for the subjects with which the Committee deals strongly to bear and, as a result, has significantly shaped the make-up of our future programme of study. We are grateful to him for all his contributions.

The fact that we are gaining a former Attorney General, in the shape of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), is particularly apposite, because who better than a former Attorney General to be around to remind both the Government and the agencies of their obligations under the Justice and Security Act 2013? Sometimes those obligations are slightly overlooked, and we look forward to the strength and legal underpinning which his skills will bring to the ISC.

Finally, it is a pleasure to welcome the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who entered the House at the same time as I did in 1997. I particularly remember working with her on a cross-party basis on a very moving campaign that she undertook in relation to the tragic loss of the MV Derbyshire with all her crew. This was the largest ship of the British mercantile fleet ever to be lost at sea. As a result of her campaigning, and that of her predecessor in Liverpool, the wreck was eventually discovered and the crew absolved of any blame for the loss that had claimed their lives. It was a pleasure to work with her on a cross-party basis then. I, and I am sure all other members of the Committee, look forward to working with her on a cross-party basis in the future.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I thoroughly endorse the recommendations in the motion.

6.58 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate the new Leader of the House on his appointment and wish him all the best.

As the senior Opposition member of the ISC, I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for his contribution to the Committee. I do not think that I am betraying any confidences by saying that the Committee did not always agree on everything, but his commitment and dedication to its work cannot be questioned. I wish him well for the future.

I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I agree with the Chair of the ISC, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), that the Home Affairs Committee's gain is our loss: she was a dedicated member of the Committee and took an active part. She will be missed; I wish her well in her endeavours.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to the Committee. Like the right hon. Member for New Forest East, I have worked with her for several years. I know that she will make a positive contribution.

7 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That at this day's sitting, Standing Order 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.—(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

Debate resumed.

Main Question again proposed.

Mr Jones: I also look forward to working with the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), who will be an asset to the Committee. The Committee does a lot of work that is often not seen. I know that our two new members will add to the Committee's important role in the scrutiny of our security services.

7.1 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As this is his first appearance at the Dispatch Box as Leader of the House, may I welcome the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) to the role? The shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), is very much looking forward to their exchange at business questions tomorrow. I know that she would want me to place on record her thanks to the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). She very much appreciated his courtesy in communication outside the Chamber and their robust exchanges in it.

Like the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), I thank on the Opposition's behalf the outgoing members of the Intelligence and Security Committee. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) have served the Committee, Parliament and this country diligently. We thank them for their service and wish them well in their new roles.

The Opposition welcome the appointment of the Committee's incoming members. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) will approach the Committee's serious and important work with diligence, objectivity and a sense of service to their country. We wish them well and thank them for taking up their important roles.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I welcome the newly appointed Lord President of the Council to the Dispatch Box.

7.2 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. After my five years in the Whips Office, I hope that the House will indulge me for the next hour as I set out my thoughts.

I thank the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for their kind words of support; I hope that they continue tomorrow morning. I look forward to business questions. I will not speak tonight about my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg); I think that that deserves a wider audience, so I shall do it tomorrow.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for their service on the Committee. I wish my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) good luck. They were selected by a very wise former Chief Whip, so I am sure that they will serve on the Committee with expertise.

I hope that the House will support the motion. I wish both new members well as they join this important Committee. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That Dame Diana Johnson and Mark Pritchard be removed from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under Schedule 1 to the Justice and Security Act 2013 and Maria Eagle and Jeremy Wright be appointed to that Committee under section 1 of that Act.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FAMILY LAW

That the draft Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.—(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Industrial Waste

7.4 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 70 constituents who are concerned about a permit that has been issued by the Environment Agency, allowing thousands of tonnes of industrial waste to be spread on one of the most beautiful parts of the United Kingdom.

The petition states:

The petitioners...request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and urge the Environment Agency to withdraw the permit allowing industrial waste to be spread on the Musden Low area.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Environment Agency should reconsider the permit allowing thousands of tons of industrial waste to be spread on the Musden Low area; notes that this is one mile from the conservation village of Calton and within the Peak District National Park; declares that there has been a detrimental impact on wildlife, especially the RED listed Curlew which was common in the area before the spreading started but has now virtually disappeared; further that the spreading has caused a pungent smell which penetrates people's washing and homes and makes it unpleasant to be outside; further that there is unsuitable access for road tankers, which are causing damage to roads and verges; further that several public footpaths cross into the designated spreading area; and further that the risk assessment presented to the Environment Agency had various points that were questionable or omitted such as underground water courses and soil type.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and urge the Environment Agency to withdraw the permit allowing industrial waste to be spread on the Musden Low area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002712]

Neonatal Leave and Pay

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Steve Double.)

7.5 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Every year in the UK, tens of thousands of babies receive neonatal care. For the families of these children, the experience can be life changing. Neonatal care is the type of care that a baby receives in hospital if they are born premature, full-term but with a condition or illness that needs medical attention, or with a low birth weight. Rather than families bringing their child home shortly after birth, the child is admitted to a specialist neonatal care unit to receive the support that ensures they receive the best possible chances of survival and quality of life.

A wealth of evidence already exists that shows that, for children in neonatal care to have the best possible outcomes, they need their parents to be as involved in their care as much as possible and as early as possible. The Government already agree with this, and that the current leave and pay entitlements do not adequately support parents when their child is born sick or premature and requires neonatal care.

Many parents and campaigners have welcomed the proposals wholeheartedly to deliver neonatal leave and pay that will allow parents to take additional time off work when their child is in neonatal care, ensuring that they are no longer in the impossible position of having to choose between keeping their job and spending time with their baby. I am grateful to have secured this Adjournment debate to highlight the importance of delivering the Government's commitment to delivering neonatal leave and pay by a set target date of 2023, and to make the case for how those in all parts of the House can work together to overcome the challenges and provide this vital support for families at the earliest possible opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this Adjournment debate. I welcome this discussion as an essential part of employment reform, and I support him fully in his wish to expedite legislation so that both parents can take this leave together as a shared benefit. For that reason, I understand he will have lots of support right across the Chamber to achieve his goal.

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support because for me, like for so many parents, this is personal.

In my own family's case, my wife was admitted to hospital 22 weeks into her pregnancy following a number of complications, and we were completely unprepared to be told at that point—22 weeks in—that she could give birth at any time and that she would have to stay in hospital for the duration of the pregnancy, as well as that if she did go into labour, our baby might not survive long after childbirth, and if they did, the overwhelming likelihood was that they would live with significant disabilities or challenges.

Even with the incredible and compassionate support that you receive from neonatal intensive care unit consultants, taking you through every step and answering every question, there really is nothing that can prepare you for that type of conversation or for the choices that

you are asked to make. I know that all parents deal with that in their own different way, but for me it left a mark that I know will never really leave me.

In our case, like so many others, this meant staying in hospital and praying every single day that the pregnancy lasted as long as possible. Every day feels like a month, but also like an incredible accomplishment, and I was in complete awe of my wife and so many other women who handled everything so magnificently. Six weeks later, our son, William, was born on 6 January last year, weighing just 2.4 lbs.

We did not know that our son was not breathing when he was born—we found that out a lot later; I cannot remember exactly when—but I do remember being told that he was going to be okay, and my wife was able to hold him for a few moments before he was taken to neonatal intensive care, where he stayed for 72 very long days before coming home. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the incredible team at Southmead Hospital and our midwife, Bev Alden, who was genuinely superb in going above and beyond the call of duty to support us.

The reason why I have highlighted this point about the journey before birth to the Minister at the start of this debate is to make the serious point that, for so many people, having a premature child is a very long journey. It does not start the day the child is born; it can start weeks or months beforehand. Delivering neonatal leave and pay supports families in one part of that journey, but not for the whole journey. There is more that Government, businesses, organisations and individuals can do to support them, but neonatal leave and pay is one thing the Government can do quickly.

Currently, the parents of a child in neonatal care rely on their existing statutory leave entitlements so they can be off work while their child is in hospital. That means that parents spend a proportion of their maternity or paternity leave with the baby in hospital. Babies who have spent a long time in hospital after birth are usually at an earlier stage in their development when their mother or parents go back to work, in comparison with their peers. That can be particularly challenging for mothers, many of whom would have liked to have additional time with their child but cannot afford to take any more time off. That leads only in one direction—less parental involvement in care, causing immense stress and leaving parents unsupported. It reduces the opportunity for bonding time with their child.

The current system is also a massive barrier for fathers and non-childbearing parents in particular. Earlier this week, 75% of parents who responded to a survey from Bliss, the incredible charity, said that they or their partner went back to work before their baby was home from hospital. Some of those children will still have been on ventilation and receiving critical care. Previous research suggests that the most common reason for that is they simply cannot afford to take more time off work. That is happening every single day, right around the country, to families of premature and sick children.

Paid leave for parents of babies in neonatal care already exists in different countries around the world. In Ireland, paid maternity leave is extended by the amount of time between birth and the original expected birth date, and there is a similar system in Germany. In Sweden, maternity leave begins at the point the baby is discharged from hospital, rather than the birth date.

Here in the UK, the Government and we, generally, have a record of supporting parents to be proud of. We have a generous and flexible system for many parents. The Government and the Minister are committed to making the UK the best place possible to live and work, and that includes the ability to grow and raise a family. That is why so many people were delighted by the Government's commitment to finally deliver on neonatal leave and pay and to put it in the last manifesto.

I want to make the point of the significant mental and emotional toll on parents in the situation of having a child in neonatal intensive care. Research by Bliss back in 2018 shows that 80% of parents who have a child admitted to neonatal intensive care felt that their mental health suffered, and a huge 35% of parents report that their mental health was significantly worse after time on the neonatal unit. Regardless of the circumstances, parents want to be with their children. That is obvious; all parents will say that. But when your child is so small and vulnerable, it is painfully difficult to be apart from them. You just want to be there.

Even when they are in the best possible hands, a NICU can be a really worrying and scary place to be. They take some getting used to, because you are with lots of new people, there are children in very difficult circumstances and just because of the noise—the constant beeping from equipment around the unit takes getting used to. The mental pressure on parents is huge. I would say to anyone trying to understand the experience, imagine having to sit with your child in an incubator or having to learn how to feed your child through a tube, while worrying whether you can afford to pay your bus fare home. For too many people, that is the case.

Imagine going through this journey while feeling guilty about not spending time with the children you have at home, because you are in the NICU every spare minute of the day. You feel guilty, because you are unsure how to hold and support your child. When you do have time at home, I promise every spare minute is spent in a permanent state of worry about receiving unscheduled telephone calls from the hospital bearing bad news, which, for too many, do come. You worry about the pressures that it puts on you as a family, and about how you would cope as a family unit if the worst were to happen. I distinctly remember our darkest day when we were told that our son was going downhill quickly and he was going to be treated for necrotising enterocolitis, and that one potential outcome for which we would have to be prepared was for him to be transferred to a hospice.

Let me make this point to the Minister: we cannot expect parents to be worrying about whether they will have a job to go back to while dealing with these situations. The Government agree with this—there is no disagreement—so it is time for us to work together to deliver it. The Government want to do it, and I know that the Minister does as well. He has been hugely supportive to me and to colleagues on both sides of the House who have talked to him about this issue on a number of occasions. I thank him for his help, and I also thank the Government for the work that they have done on the issue since the general election.

In the March 2020 Budget, the Chancellor reaffirmed the Government's ambition to deliver this important reform, and earmarked the necessary funding to deliver the policy in 2023-24. In the same month, the response

to the consultation was published. It confirmed a number of further details about the delivery of neonatal leave and pay, including the intention to legislate through the Employment Bill. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister, during Prime Minister's questions in November last year, repeat the commitment to deliver legislation "one way or another".

So we all want to do this. The question is how are we going to do it, when, and through what vehicle in Parliament? Ministers have made clear that they want to do it through the Employment Bill. The argument I would advance to this Minister is that the Employment Bill is significant and substantial legislation that will take time to pass through Parliament. While neonatal leave and pay enjoys widespread cross-party support, many wider aspects of the proposed Bill are likely to face far greater opposition. Despite the uncontroversial nature of the proposal, tying its successful delivery to the more controversial Employment Bill is not the fastest way in which to secure its introduction.

Generally when we are introducing reforms of this type, they take effect from April, at the start of the financial year. In order to meet the 2023 target for which the Government have set aside funds and to which they have committed themselves, neonatal leave and pay legislation will need to have passed through Parliament before that date, in enough time to ensure that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and employers are given sufficient notice. If we are to meet the commitment to deliver this on time, we need to start now.

I wrote to the Minister about the issue in October, and he kindly wrote back to me, informing me of the progress that his Department was making. He also made it clear that significant work was required for the policy to be delivered, including the extra work that would have to be done by HMRC to ensure that staff were ready to upgrade the necessary IT systems. The policy will take time to implement, and that is why I think there are legitimate questions to be asked about the delivery vehicle for this reform. I should be grateful if the Minister could confirm that the Government still intend to deliver it from April 2023.

I think that one clear way in which this can be delivered on time is through a stand-alone Bill. The policy development and the consultation have already taken place, and there is a precedent for passing reforms of this type through Parliament quickly. The Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018 provides a clear model for us to pass this legislation. It is uncontroversial, and it has cross-party and cross-sector support. In the past, the Minister has made a point that I completely appreciate—that this will have to be delivered alongside other measures in the Employment Bill—but I should be grateful if he could explain exactly what those measures are, and also explain why they cannot be delivered as part of stand-alone legislation. I also ask him whether he will meet me, the new Leader of the House—assuming that my right hon. Friend is willing—and other Members to discuss how this can be delivered on time, which is what we all want to see.

I do not want to give too long a list, but I should be grateful if the Minister could update the House on the work that he and his Department have already done in anticipation of delivering this policy, to ensure that it will be ready on time and ready to go once we can find a

[Luke Hall]

legislative vehicle to deliver it. I should like to know whether, for example, the guidance is ready for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and HMRC, and how much work has been done. Finally, I should like to know whether the Department is starting to explore alternatives to deliver support for families if it proves difficult to legislate. I hope I have managed to convey at least a sense, on behalf of many families around the country, of how important this commitment is and how grateful we are to the Minister and the Government for making it. We all want to see it delivered and rolled out as quickly as possible. It is down to us to find the right vehicle for that, because delivering neonatal leave and pay will enable the thousands of babies born into neonatal care every year to benefit from their parents' being where they should be, by their side, providing that vital care. It will also deliver support and reassurance to all those new mothers, fathers and carers who need it the most in the most vulnerable and stressful days of their lives. I say to the Minister, "The solution is clear, it commands widespread support and it is within our grasp—please help us to make it happen."

7.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) wholeheartedly on securing today's debate. This is an important issue, and I am very grateful to him for bringing it to the attention of Parliament in the way he did, baring his soul. I know Roisin will be proud of him today.

We have heard his personal account that the impact of having a young baby in neonatal care has on parents, and the additional pressure that having to balance employment with caring for their child places on them. My hon. Friend has spoken with such depth of personal experience and it brings home that what we do here, when we are looking to bring forward the Employment Bill, and all the work the officials do matters. This really matters on a human scale to people on a day-to-day basis, as we have just heard. I am grateful to him for his candour, and for raising awareness of this issue. It is a shame that the rhythm of this House means that that speech has not had the audience in the Chamber, but I know people will be watching it and reading the account in the Official Report. Bringing this matter to our attention is amazing.

In the UK, an estimated 100,000 babies are admitted to neonatal care every year following their birth. Many of those babies spend prolonged periods of time on a neonatal care unit in a hospital as a result of having been born prematurely, or for other health conditions. It is, as we have heard, an incredibly worrying and stressful time for parents. They will naturally want to be able to focus their attention on getting through that period, supporting each other and their baby. However, some may have concerns about their ability to do that and keep their jobs. I sympathise with anyone who has found themselves in that position.

Currently, parents in those circumstances tend to rely on their statutory leave entitlements, for example maternity or paternity leave. In practice, that means a considerable proportion of their leave may be used while the baby

in still neonatal care or that they do not have sufficient leave to remain with their baby for the necessary period.

A survey conducted by the charity Bliss in 2019 found that 66% of fathers had to return to work while their baby was still receiving specialist neonatal care, and that 36% of fathers resorted to being signed off sick in order to spend time with their baby in a neonatal unit. That can, in some cases, have a negative impact on their employment record. Fathers and partners may also experience negative effects on their physical and mental health from trying to combine work with caring for the child and the mother. Other parents of babies in neonatal care have reported that they had to return to work earlier than they had planned due to suffering financial hardship from being away from work.

Considering those different scenarios, it is clear that the current leave and pay entitlements do not adequately support parents of babies in neonatal care. In March 2020, following a Government consultation on the issue, we committed to introducing the new entitlement to neonatal leave and pay, and I can assure my hon. Friend that we remain very much committed to that. Our planned neonatal leave and pay entitlement will allow parents to take additional time off work in circumstances where their child is admitted to neonatal care, ensuring that they are no longer in the incredibly difficult position of having to choose between risking their job and spending much-needed time with their baby.

Neonatal leave and pay will apply to parents of babies who are admitted into hospital up to the age of 28 days and who have a continuous stay in hospital of seven full days or more. Eligible parents will be able to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave on top of their other parental entitlements such as maternity and paid paternity leave. Neonatal leave will be a day-one right, meaning that it will be available to an employee from their first day in a new job. Statutory neonatal pay, like other family-related pay rights, will be available to those employees who meet continuity of service and minimum earnings tests.

While we understand that the introduction of neonatal leave and pay will create a small burden on businesses, we believe that the benefit to business will outweigh any costs. Policies such as neonatal leave and pay that enable parents to participate in the labour market and to succeed and progress in work not only benefit individual employees but give employers access to a bigger pool of talent. Such reforms will also help businesses, because employers who embrace family-friendly policies are so much more likely to see greater employee loyalty, commitment and motivation.

In addition to our plans to introduce neonatal leave and pay, the UK has a range of policies in place that support employees to balance work with family life and other personal commitments and responsibilities. They include: a right to request flexible working; generous family-related leave and pay entitlements; and protections from detriment for parents who take or seek to take family-related time off work. The UK's maternity leave system is one of the most generous in the world. Pregnant women and new mothers are entitled to take up to 52 weeks of leave—that is a day-one right with no qualifying period of service—and up to 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay if they are eligible. Maternity leave can be started up to 11 weeks before the expected week of childbirth.

Fathers of premature babies have the flexibility to take their one or two weeks of paternity leave and pay within eight weeks of the expected date of birth rather than having to take the leave within eight weeks of the baby's actual birth, if they wish. We also have a manifesto commitment to make paternity leave more flexible and will set out our response on that in due course.

The right to emergency leave—time off for dependants—allows all employees a reasonable amount of unpaid time off work to deal with an unexpected or sudden emergency involving a child or dependant and to put care arrangements in place. Additionally, all employed parents have a right to up to 18 weeks of unpaid parental leave for each child up to a child's 18th birthday.

The Government are committed to introducing new employment measures as we seek to build a high-skilled, high-productivity, high-wage economy that delivers on our ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to work and grow a business. I reassure my hon. Friend that further detail on reforms to our employment framework will be published in due course. Naturally, covid-19 has affected our progress in introducing the new entitlement to Parliament, but we remain committed to doing so as soon as parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, we are moving forward with the work. That includes working with lawyers on our legislative approach, which is likely to include both primary and extensive secondary legislation, as well as considering how the entitlement will be implemented. It will also, in due course, require accessible and thorough guidance for both employers and employees.

As I mentioned, delivery of the new entitlement will need primary legislation as well as changes to the HMRC IT payment system to allow employers to administer statutory neonatal pay on behalf of the Government. Officials are in discussion with HMRC colleagues about the establishment of that IT system. It is a large-scale

project, and we are ensuring that the relevant teams in HMRC are as prepared as possible, that they fully understand what is required and how much resource will be needed. We are doing the necessary groundwork so that we are in the best position to implement neonatal leave and pay once legislation is in place.

I recognise my hon. Friend's points about whether the entitlement could be delivered through a stand-alone Bill or alternative measures. Due to pressures on parliamentary time, it might be challenging to introduce a stand-alone Bill, but we remain committed to introducing neonatal leave and pay and will do so as soon as parliamentary time allows. We understand and sympathise with the position of parents with children in neonatal care and remain fully committed to the introduction of neonatal leave and pay. In the meantime, we have other parental leave entitlements that are available to new parents and we encourage employers to continue to respond with flexibility and compassion to parents in that very difficult position. I have spoken to a number of businesses that have great schemes in place to deal with such life events, such as ASOS. I try to showcase that good work, because they do not need to wait for a legislative framework.

I close by thanking my hon. Friend for his incredible contributions to the debate and I thank everyone who has worked hard to raise awareness of the difficult situation of parents remaining in employment when their children are in neonatal care. As always, I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and other Members of the House to discuss the issues further as we move towards getting these provisions on the statute book.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

FINANCIAL SERVICES

That the draft Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 6 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 215.

Division No. 186]

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse

Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Dunne, rh Philip
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, rh Lucy
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian

Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cheryl
Macleay, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
Mercer, Johnny
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel

Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa

Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Hanna, Claire
 Hanvey, Neale
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast
 by Pat McFadden*)

Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
 cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian

Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate

Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 February 2022

[YVONNE FOVARGUE *in the Chair*]

Special Educational Needs and Children's Mental Health Services

9.30 am

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members to observe social distancing and to wear masks.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered special educational needs and children's mental health services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Ms Fovargue. It is timely to be holding this debate in Children's Mental Health Week. Today I want to focus on one aspect of mental health—specifically, the conditions that fall under the wider banner of special educational needs.

The difficulty that families in West Berkshire experience in seeking a diagnosis has been raised with me since I was first elected, but it was not until I conducted a constituency-wide survey last summer that I understood the extent of its prevalence and urgency. For many people in West Berkshire, accessing CAMHS—child and adolescent mental health services—for diagnosis of a potential learning difficulty is an extraordinary uphill battle. Waiting times regularly exceed two years for an autism diagnosis and can be substantially longer. I know that this problem also exists in other parts of the country.

When I was preparing for this debate, I asked affected families to get in touch with me, and was overwhelmed by responses, which came from everyone from mums and dads through to headteachers and GPs. The Minister whom I expected to respond to the debate, the Minister for Care and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), is not in her place, but I had a word with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), in advance. The issue as it affects West Berkshire is less about a lack of funding—the Berkshire West clinical commissioning group has received additional investment for this—and more about accountability and the adequacy of the service. I have had too many letters and emails to refer to them all, but I would like to tell hon. Members about three of my constituents, whose stories capture the issue more widely.

The first is Steffi Whelan, who told me about her 11-year-old son. He has been waiting more than two years for a CAMHS appointment. His problems began seriously in year 4. What began as outbursts of screaming in class evolved into something more disruptive. Sometimes he would tear up work or behave in a way that was completely unsustainable for the teacher. In time, he was moved from that primary school to another, and his parents have been told that he will not be emotionally able to move on to an ordinary secondary school. He is now nearing the end of year 6, and despite all of that, the family are still waiting for their first appointment.

Melanie Fenemore told me about her nine-year-old son, Archie, who was strongly suspected to have autism. Melanie was first referred to CAMHS in October 2018. She filled out a load of complicated forms, and in January 2019 was told that her son was on the waiting list and to expect a 20-month delay. In fact, she waited 27 months before he was seen in April last year. At the time of the assessment, the view was formed that he probably did not have autism spectrum disorder but had something more equivalent to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and he was referred to the ADHD team. Again, Melanie was sent a bunch of forms, which she described as “pretty much identical” to the previous ones, and her son was sent back to the bottom of a waiting list. The family have been told to expect a 36-month wait. If that projection is correct, Archie will have been on a waiting list for six years, from the age of six to 12, by the time he receives his first appointment. During this time, Archie's mum tells me, he has

“expressed a desire not to be alive.”

He has a tendency towards violence, born out of frustration. She says:

“I am sometimes at the receiving end of Archie's violent outbursts which hurt more as he gets older.”

The Buller family's young daughter, Daisy, has been waiting more than two years for an autism diagnosis. By the time her mum contacted me last July, her daughter was self-harming and barely attending school, even though she was in the crucial year 10. Her mum wrote to me:

“This is 5 years since we first started struggling and we are no closer to helping my daughter. Simply one question Laura, in today's age, how is this Ok.”

One headteacher of a primary school described the waiting times as “absolutely awful”, with another saying that the situation has got worse in recent years. Valiant efforts are made by West Berkshire Council to offer support through its Emotional Health Academy, but that is not a substitute for a clear diagnosis. A head at a primary told me that until they get a CAMHS diagnosis,

“The child may be excluded or at risk of exclusion, their anxiety will often worsen and they don't attend school, the school can try but it cannot put in the support that it is required until there is an Educational Health Care Plan in place and CAMHS diagnoses are critical to this.”

The headteacher of Kennet School in Thatcham said,

“While schools will have an indication of what a pupils needs may be, a diagnosis through CAMHS leads to targeted work and accessing additional services to further support the child and their family. A huge part of a SEND diagnosis is the support”.

It enables the young person to

“understand themselves. Where a diagnosis is not yet given, this delays the essential step for the young person, causing more erratic behaviours and often fall-out at home as well as at school.”

The short point is that a timely CAMHS diagnosis is often crucial for life chances. It hardly needs to be said that a child who is repeatedly excluded can easily end up in a pupil referral unit. People with neurodiverse conditions are significantly over-represented in the prison estate and the youth estate. Their employment opportunities are often compromised, anyway—it is said that only one in five people with autism sustain full-time employment—and in teenagers there is a significant correlation with depression and self-harm. Timely diagnosis and the correct support is crucial for addressing that.

[*Laura Farris*]

I want to focus on the Government response so that my speech does not sound like a barrage of criticism. I know that the Government attach significant importance to improving outcomes for those who are neurodiverse. The SEND review, to be published soon, is a testament to that, as is the work being done to ensure that children with autism will have a designated key worker within the next year or so. Hundreds of millions of pounds of additional funding was made available for CAMHS in the spending review, and I have to concede that West Berkshire is one of the first 25 areas that will pilot the schools-based mental health support teams.

I said at the start of my speech that Berkshire West CAMHS received significant investment from the Government last year—£1.6 million in April 2021. In fact, when I spoke to the service a few months ago, it said that funding was no longer the problem. The money will enable it to recruit another 27 members of staff that it so badly needs, although so far it has managed to recruit only 12.

Despite a detailed local transformation plan published last September, in which some laudable ambitions were set out, including a goal of reducing waiting times for diagnoses to just a year by next month, when I spoke to Berkshire West CAMHS, it conceded that there is in fact no fixed deadline for reaching that target, so it is not really a target at all; it is nothing more than a general ambition. There is no consequence if the service fails to reduce waiting times. I regret to say that that is not good enough.

The overall impression of Berkshire West's child and adolescent mental health service is that there is a serious lack of urgency or accountability. Dr James Cave, the well-respected medical director of the Downland Practice in my constituency, wrote to me:

"I think it is important that you understand the depths of despair GPs feel about the local CAMHS service. Remote, unresponsive, closed, uncommunicative sums them up. It feels as if they are always looking for a way NOT to have to see a child. They demand detailed referral forms from us...and then find reasons not to see a child. If they do accept a referral the wait is forever and then often the intervention is a fixed predetermined intervention that does not take"

into account

"the needs of a child."

I am not seeking to humiliate anyone, but families in West Berkshire are being failed, and it is my role and my responsibility to fight for them.

The Health Secretary has said time and again that the Health and Care Bill currently making its way through the House will deliver better accountability. Speaking in the debate in July, he stated:

"The third theme of the Bill is greater accountability."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 430.]

He said that people have the right to expect "clear lines of accountability" for how every priority is delivered. So my plea—a *cri de coeur*—from the many families in West Berkshire is that the Department demands better accountability from CAMHS in West Berkshire and across the country. We want details of how that £1.6 million will be spent, and firm commitments to reduce waiting lists, with consequences if managers fail to deliver.

The issue is not confined to West Berkshire, but it is stark within it, and I therefore speak today for the families that I represent and all those families across the country who are experiencing the same struggle.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): As there is considerable interest in the debate, I will set a formal time limit of four minutes for speeches.

9.39 am

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for securing this important debate. I was not expecting to be called quite so early.

I will focus my remarks on my own personal experience of having ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, none of which were recognised during my schooling. I want to highlight this because it is a journey of things going wrong and children not being fully supported.

By the age of 12, the average child with ADHD has received 20,000 more negative comments about their behaviour than their peers. "Lazy," "distracted," "too chatty," "fidgety," "failing to meet potential," "disorganised" and "in disarray": those were all comments that were levelled at me as a child, and they stick in my brain to this day and make me consider all my actions daily. This has led to huge feelings of anxiety and depression—a feeling that I am always doing something wrong. My ADHD was diagnosed only last year, and I have only just started taking medication, which has been life-changing.

There are two sides to the coin on this issue. When children and young people are supported at home and in school with the love and understanding that they deserve and need, they can flourish, as I feel I have flourished. I thank my family for the support that they showed me throughout my education to enable me to get to where I am today.

However, I meet too many children whose stories are still the same: their needs are not recognised or are not severe enough to merit critical help, and they are stuck in the middle, reaching their potential in some subjects and failing in others. They also feel that they are not listened to, that they cannot access support and that there is something critically wrong with them. They internalise negative comments about themselves, which is really damaging in the long term.

There are also lots of huge positives to being neurodivergent. Neurodivergent people are more likely to be entrepreneurs, and to take the risk of setting up businesses. However, the dark side is that they are more likely to try illicit drugs and to get involved in crime. There really are bright and dark sides. To any young person who is struggling at school, I say: "Don't worry. There is always something else for you to strive towards. You just need to find what you are good at, and you will relish that opportunity." No one should be held back because they have a diagnosis of ADHD, autism, dyslexia or dyspraxia. All children should be supported to get the best out of themselves.

However, far too often our education system is one-size-fits-all. I am really proud to chair the all-party parliamentary group for special educational needs and disabilities. It is so important that we change the classroom and home environment for these children, so that their behaviours are understood, and they can fully experience school and get to where they need to be.

So many things have gone wrong during the pandemic. Some children with autism have flourished through online learning, but others have found themselves isolated from their friends, peers, teachers and support. Several organisations are yet to start providing the therapeutic interventions that they are meant to provide under children's education, health and care plans, and this is causing huge disruption to the ability of those children to thrive. Three quarters of disabled children have seen progress in managing their conditions and overall development regress in the pandemic. This is urgent and critical. Those who receive a diagnosis of dyslexia should also be screened for ADHD or other neurodivergent conditions, because the crossover is huge. We are letting our young people down by not helping them to get the tools they need to understand themselves—first and foremost—and how they fit in with the world.

I hope that the Minister will think more about how we can intervene as early as possible to avoid young people becoming incredibly depressed and anxious about just who they are—because they are round pegs trying to fit into square holes. It is critical that we support young people to thrive and give back to our society and economy by being the great pioneers and entrepreneurs that we all want to see.

I also have the privilege of having someone with autism in my family—

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): Order. I call Aaron Bell.

9.44 am

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue, and a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), who made a powerful speech. Sharing her personal experience in this place is a brave thing to do. It has informed our debate, and I am sure that the Minister will refer to that when she sums up.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) on securing the debate. Like her, I have been contacted by so many distressed parents of children with special educational needs. Their experiences of trying to get support for their children are summed up in exactly the word she used: a battle—it is really a battle. EHCPs are the entry ticket to specialist support, but the whole application and appeal processes seem designed to be difficult and time-consuming. As my hon. Friend said, too many times people have to repeat things that they have already said again and again. We must ensure that we have a tell-it-once approach to such things, however long the waiting list might be—she spoke movingly about that as well.

My constituent Samantha King's four-year-old, for example, was receiving one-to-one nursery support in Wales before they moved to Newcastle-under-Lyme. She supplied extensive documentary evidence of the child's need when they moved, yet she described having her child's application refused on the basis that she had not included the reports that she had in fact submitted. That is all too common—things get lost and people have to fill in almost exactly the same form again or for another authority. It is extremely tedious and it breaks people down, and that is why this is such a battle.

Parents then find that they have to appeal to SENDIST, the special educational needs and disability tribunal, as the main route to access an EHCP. We need to analyse the proportion of successful appeals. If local authorities are turning down applications that are successful on appeal, those at the top of that league table need to think about why that is the case. They need to consider applications more carefully in the first place.

Even when someone gets an EHCP, the battle continues. Parents in my constituency report annual reviews not taking place, or the plans not being updated for months following review, severely impacting on a child's progress through education. A lot of things go wrong in the transitions between stages of education or into work.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning transition, because it is there that a condition such as autism or ADHD can turn into a mental health condition. Does he agree that one of the key issues for the Government to consider is the training and availability of clinicians? Funding is now much better than it was, but we still do not have the trained clinicians who could cut through the waiting lists, which are causing so much frustration to far too many families.

Aaron Bell: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely correct about the availability of clinicians. His intervention also speaks to the point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam that if these conditions are not treated at school, they can lead to severely negative mental health outcomes later in life.

My constituent Mr Winkle has fought for many years to obtain suitable educational and therapeutic support for his son. Following a tribunal decision last month, he was sent a revised EHCP that still contained a number of inaccuracies, including out-of-date details about his son's residential placement. I want to talk a little about residential placements, which have not been raised much so far, because the lack of suitable placements causes distress to many families.

One constituent described how the 14-year-old in her care only receives an hour's at-home tuition a day, because a suitable therapeutic placement with a small and consistent staff team cannot be found. Alternatively, children are given residential educational provision that is unsuitable, which can cause them to regress and even, in one case, to self-harm.

Another common complaint is that social workers change too regularly, so the social worker does not truly know the child. Parents may not be told who the new social worker is and many have described the difficulty they experience when trying to get in touch with professionals, as telephone calls are not returned.

Despite parents being the ones with the most knowledge of the child or young person they are caring for, they struggle to be heard. Should they then complain, they describe encountering a complaints process that is frankly not fit for purpose: timescales are not followed; complaints sometimes seem to be ignored completely; and it is only possible to complain to the ombudsman with a final response, but that often never seems to arrive, and even when they do complain, it will take months for the ombudsman to reply. Furthermore, adults involved in the care of children can become fearful of complaining, in case there are reprisals in the form of their contact with the child being blocked.

[Aaron Bell]

Added to that is the struggle to obtain adequate mental health treatment. One constituent of mine was told that the priority waiting list for CAMHS—not the list to which my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury was referring earlier—is 11 months in Staffordshire. That is the priority list. Only this week, a constituent described how she is desperate for respite provision, having accepted a child back into her care on the basis that the local authority would support her.

The local authority has been good at keeping in touch, but its hands have been tied by what it says is a lack of resources. As well as struggling to find an educational placement for the young person, it has only just found an agency to take him on outings twice a week. After five and a half months of caring 24/7, my constituent is exhausted and in the terrible position of considering having to say that she can no longer look after the young man. She has been let down by a breach of implied trust—the local authority told her that it would support her, but it has not been able to.

As Members of Parliament, we inevitably hear the failures, rather than the success stories, but I welcome any support that can be given to improve the experience of so many. As my constituent Mr Winkle said:

“In this journey I have communicated with many regulatory bodies each claiming to have the child’s interests wishes and safety at the forefront of their agenda...but as I have experienced this is certainly not so...my assumption is that it’s a closed circle and these entities do not know how to facilitate or co-ordinate any kind of solution and just want it to ‘Go Away’.”

I am sure that is not the full truth of it, but that is the experience that people are having out there.

I welcome the imminent Green Paper and the additional funding, but too many people have been failed for far too long. I hope the Minister will be able to address that when she responds.

9.50 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) on securing the debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake). I have a friend who was diagnosed with ADHD in his 50s. He is a very talented musician but he really struggled at school and with the basic things in life. He, too, says that the medication has made a huge difference.

As we have heard, life is a never-ending battle for many parents of children with SEND. They have to deal with their child’s physical and mental health needs, trying to get the right diagnosis and all sorts of things on top of that: hospital appointments, physiotherapy, daily meds, vulnerability to viruses, communication issues, issues with trying to get their child to eat properly, and behavioural problems. They face all those things at home, and then they have to battle with bureaucracy, and they often feel that they are at war with the very people who are meant to be there to help them. They feel that the system is stacked against them and that sometimes people would rather they went away and stopped being such a nuisance—what the hon. Member for Newbury said about CAMHS in that context very much resonated with me.

The first battle that parents often face is to get the right diagnosis for their child. Then there is a battle to get the EHCPs. Then the councils say they do not really have the power to enforce them. If a child develops mental health problems, it is often a battle to get support from CAMHS, and parents of neurodivergent children, in particular, sometimes find that they are being bounced around between CAMHS and SEND provision, with nobody stepping in to help them.

In 2019, it was estimated that 6.8% of children in Bristol had special educational needs or disabilities, and it is true that Bristol City Council has struggled to meet the needs of those children—as we have heard, that seems to be case with many councils. We had a pretty damning Ofsted report in 2019, and the council says it is now absolutely committed to trying to do better with its Belonging strategy and a three-year, £6.1 million education transformation programme. There are concerns about getting schools to buy into that, and some parents have said that a significant number of schools are batting away struggling pupils even though they have a legal duty to meet the needs of SEND children.

Children should never be put in the “too difficult” box, but I have heard many examples of children being out of school without any support or just having part-time schooling or perhaps hospital school tutoring—if a child has to go into hospital because of their underlying physical disabilities or illness, they will have education there, but not when they are at home. Parents complain about schools having a one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with children with additional needs, while there are complaints from schools that they can no longer afford teaching assistants, who are so valuable in providing children with the one-to-one attention they need.

Delay can make a huge difference to children’s wellbeing and future attainment, as we have heard. We know that half of all mental health problems are established by the age of 14. Tragically, in some cases, young lives will be lost if we do not intervene early. In 2017, suicide was the most common cause of death for both boys and girls aged between five and 19.

I would like the Minister to commit to provide mental health support in every school, early interventions so that we can spot the signs—otherwise, problems will increase in severity—and respect for a child’s individuality. I know that that costs more and needs more resources, but the problem with these pathways—the hon. Member for Newbury talked about fixed, predetermined interventions—is that it does not help to refer a child with autism for counselling based on cognitive behavioural therapy, because their minds just do not work like that. Finally, we also need better in-patient services, because sending children hundreds of miles away from home, when they need intensive support, is absolutely unconscionable.

9.54 am

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve before you, Ms Fovargue. I commend my constituency neighbour in Berkshire, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), for securing the debate. I also pass on the best wishes of our right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who regrets that she cannot be here today. She asked me to point out that she fully supports every effort to increase the provision of mental health support for

children in Berkshire and beyond. Finally, I want to welcome Dr Priya Singh, who is the new chief executive of the Frimley integrated care system and who I met yesterday to discuss this issue.

Time is short but, in brief, local NHS CCGs spent £12 billion in 2020-21 on mental health support. NHS England spent a further £2 billion, making a total of just over £14 billion. That is great, but I was horrified to learn that CCGs spent 14 times more on adult mental health support than on services for children. We need to invest much more heavily in that area.

East Berkshire, where I reside, has £2.6 million in funding for children's mental health, including £1.4 million for CAMHS and £200,000 for eating disorders. That is not enough, which is my opening contention to the Minister. The Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, based in Bracknell, does a fantastic job, but the demand for mental health assessment in children has gone up by 60% in the past five years. Since the pandemic, it has gone up by a further 27%. We have a problem. A constituent wrote to me only yesterday to tell me that the current wait for a child to be seen by CAMHS is 30 months; prior to the pandemic it was 18 months. Families are being left unsupported at this time.

As politicians, we spend lots of time admiring the problem, but perhaps not enough time thinking about the solution. What do we need to do? The first thing I would say to the Minister is that the SEND review is still awaited. It was promised last year and has failed to materialise. Will she please ensure that we get it as soon as possible? We also need to invest in our children with SEND as never before. That requires money, patience, determination and a much clearer Government strategy.

Why might that work? By providing the right care in the right settings we can give our children the focus they need to be productive, employable, law-abiding and responsible citizens. Prisons are sadly full of people who have made the wrong decisions or acted impulsively, perhaps because they were not diagnosed at an early age. Let us invest in more specialist educational settings, so that people's needs can be addressed. Yes, that is expensive and resource-heavy, but the cost of not doing so will always be greater, and this is non-discretionary spending.

I would like to see every local authority in the UK comprehensively reviewing its SEND provision, so that it becomes available in every area. Specialist and dedicated settings are the way forward for those who need them. We need to give our teachers better training with education, health and care plans. Those should not become a magic bullet—a passport for the lucky few—but a rightful passport for every child to get the support they need.

Lastly, CAMHS across the UK need 20,000 volts put straight through them. For families to wait two and a half years for a consultation is not only immoral but frankly inept. The irony will not have escaped anybody here that a GP cannot prescribe medication for ASD, ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, Asperger's or any other mental health condition, without a diagnosis from CAMHS. We have to focus on CAMHS right now.

To conclude, let us please get spending, diagnosing and treating, and let us give all our children, not least in Berkshire, the future they deserve.

9.58 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) on securing this timely debate in Children's Mental Health Week.

Over the past year—frankly, five years—the number of parents writing to me about their children and the lack of support has grown exponentially. I was a teacher before I was an MP, and I commend the speech made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), because she is right that this is about allowing young people to be themselves. The word “special” is the right one: just look at the number of Nobel prize winners with neurodiversity in their make-up. When I taught maths and physics, these children were often the brightest, most interesting people in the room. They should never be seen as a burden.

The way the system treats families and children who are neurodiverse makes it so difficult for them that it is understandable how that goes on to affect their mental health. One family contacted me about Poppy—I have changed her name—who is 12. As previously described, there was violent behaviour in the household, and the family was incredibly worried. It took months to even get the GP to refer to CAMHS. The mother said to me:

“Mrs Moran, to be honest, you are my last hope. I am suffering with both my physical and mental health and quite honestly I do not have the energy left to continue fighting the system.”

We are also in a perverse situation where even more professionals are writing to me. I would be curious to know if that is the same for other hon. Members. This is new. GPs are also writing to me, as are educational psychologists, because they all recognise that CAMHS is broken. I had one psychologist write to me saying that he no longer refers to CAMHS. He said that social services and CAMHS are so broken that the only thing he can do is keep children on his books because he worries that if he loses contact with them they will not get anything at all. How is this system not failing our young people? It absolutely is.

My first question to the Minister is on the lack of educational psychologists in this country. My local county council is doing its very best; it is one of the F40 councils and is twelfth-lowest in the country when it comes to the high needs block. I said, “If you had a magic wand and could ask for anything from the Minister, what would it be?” and the council said, “More educational psychologists.” We currently fund only 200 training places in the country. There is only one educational psychologist for every 5,000 young people, which is nowhere near enough. Tackling that issue would go a huge way towards immediately helping to alleviate the backlog.

In the interim, there are amazing third-party groups that are helping. There is Shift, which is an informal parent group in Abingdon, set up by Sally and Andy Foulsham. They run it, provide support and help families navigate the system. There is also The Abingdon Bridge, which is the only wellbeing and mental health charity for young people in Vale of White Horse. It focuses on 18 to 25-year-olds. It is particularly worried about the 16 to 18-year olds that it finds because, if they are

[Layla Moran]

referred to CAMHS, the waiting lists are so long that they then drop off that cliff edge. Strangely, the charity cannot access funding from the CCG because of the way that the funding works. Could the Minister help me help The Abingdon Bridge to access more funding?

To conclude where I started, we absolutely must appreciate that these children deserve the best, and deserve more, but the current system is failing them. There is a perverse disincentive in the system, where a school must basically pay the first £6,000 of the funding. We need a national SEND strategy that solves the problem once and for all. Without that, we risk failing our children and our country in the future.

10.2 am

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for bringing forward this important debate.

I do not think we realise the crisis that our children face on mental health. It is hard growing up—we all remember growing up—but our young people face an even more traumatic time following the pandemic. I truly believe that our children and young people have been badly affected by the pandemic and also by social media—we did not have social media, growing up, with that extra, 24/7 pressure.

On educational attainment, I have a 17-year-old daughter going through A-levels and a 15-year-old son going through GCSEs, and I can speak with authority about just how much pressure they are under. However, I cannot imagine how families cope with all the extra pressure when that is compounded by a special educational need.

I want to speak about people's actual experiences in schools. I recently spoke to the head of a Westminster secondary school, who is a very experienced teacher. She said that she has never, in her 20-plus years as a teacher, known such a crisis in the mental health of young people and particularly teenagers. The pandemic has obviously compounded that, but we are now seeing far more anxiety, self-harming and suicidal thoughts. That is what she explained to me. The pressure that that head and her staff are under—to help and support the young people going through these things—has created even more of a burden for them. They are taking advantage of the Mind counsellors and the extra help that the Government are providing, but it simply is not enough.

There seems to be a disconnect between the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, because there is no one Minister taking control, and I ask the Minister to really consider that point. We cannot just leave it to schools to try to navigate special educational needs and support for families. We must make sure that there is one place for teachers to go for that support. There is such pressure on budgets now in schools. The head I spoke to told me how much they were now spending on extra support for pupils, which comes out of the general budget. I plead with the Minister to try to secure more funding for this issue from the Department for Education.

In Children's Mental Health Week, I pay tribute to the local authorities in my constituency. This week, Westminster launched a trial of a keyring, which will reach 4,000 young people. They simply scan a QR code to take them to a special hub, which will give them the advice and support they need. That is the kind of practical help we need to give our children, but this is also about getting the funding that our schools need, to ensure that our young people have the future they deserve.

10.6 am

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for calling this important and timely debate. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I agree with everything she said. Our young people are facing a mental health crisis. They need vital support and funding in our schools.

For my Vauxhall residents, the mental health impacts of measures to tackle covid-19 have been some of the hardest of the seismic effect of the pandemic. Since March 2020, people have had severe restrictions on who they can meet and where they can go. We have seen park benches taped up. As a mother of two young children, that was difficult for me as well. People have seen their friendship groups shrink. They have had to deal with being shut at home, not going out and not seeing loved ones. They have missed loved ones for many months. In some cases, they have missed those vital last minutes. That situation has taken a toll on all of us but, most importantly, it has taken a toll on our young people.

Schools develop vital skills in subjects such as maths and English, but for our young people they are also a place to make friends, solve conflicts and develop vital interpersonal skills that help us all to navigate our lives. Those skills are vital in developing mental health resilience in our young people.

The Health and Social Care Committee has found that 1.5 million children and young people under 18 will need new or additional mental health support after the pandemic. That places a tremendous strain on already stretched mental health provision. Although extra funding has been promised, too few children are getting the treatment they need.

Several hon. Members have highlighted the many difficulties that parents, carers and, most importantly, young people face in accessing SEND provision. I am sure the Minister is aware of the data on the disparity and the barriers that black and minority ethnic children and their families face in accessing that provision.

I went to visit Lansdowne School in my constituency last December. Lansdowne is a specialist school for young people with autism, communication difficulties and speech and language delay. On my visit, I spoke to the headteacher about the fantastic work teachers and carers did during lockdown, providing vital support for children with challenging needs. I also spoke to the head boy and head girl and said that, in return for their giving me a tour round their school, I would give them a tour round my workplace, here in Parliament. They had such smiles on their faces; they beamed with joy. I saw a mural that students have worked on with local artists.

With the right support and funding, our young people with special educational needs will flourish. We have to believe in them.

For many young people with special educational needs, finding the right support is vital. I am proud that the National Autistic Society decided to open another school in my constituency, on Kennington Road—the Vanguard School. Unfortunately, because of the many lockdowns, we have not been able to have the official opening, which has been postponed three times. I hope that when that opening finally takes place, the Minister will come to visit this excellent school, which provides state-of-the-art services for young people with additional needs.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and violence reduction, and through my work on youth violence, I see the effects of youth violence and mental health trauma faced by our young people. If we fail to tackle the mental health crisis among them, we will continue to see them develop lifelong problems and not have access to vital SEN provision. Most importantly, we may see some of those young people taken too soon. I urge the Minister to look at providing vital support in this area now.

10.10 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for securing this debate, which, as many hon. Members have identified, is important for all present.

Identifying special educational needs and early diagnosis is a particular problem given the complexities surrounding this issue. Early diagnosis is absolutely key. I have heard from constituents many harrowing stories of people trying every channel and route possible, including schools and local GP services, to identify special educational needs at an early stage.

Children's mental health and special educational needs are complex. Their conditions can often be misdiagnosed or not even identified at an early stage. The signs of autism, for example, can be put down to a child experiencing a dislike for something such as going to school. Of course, the recent challenges of the pandemic have not made things easier.

Early diagnosis is key, but the process of getting a formal diagnosis is far too inaccessible and long-winded for many of my constituents. One constituent told me that there was no point in even entertaining the process, because they would have to wait three or four years for their child to receive a diagnosis. That is completely unacceptable. Likewise, private companies that offer such services are currently working their way through a huge backlog that accumulated during the pandemic. Too many of my constituents also find themselves priced out of any private offering.

In spite of those difficulties, there are a number of fantastic groups across Keighley and Ilkley that support young people with special educational needs and mental health issues. Take Margaret Nash, Helen Millar and the rest of the team at AWARE—Airedale and Wharfedale Autism Resource—which provides support to families with children and young adults on the autistic spectrum, with no formal diagnosis required. My thanks also go

to Lesley Brook and everyone at the Nebula Girls Group, a Keighley-based organisation that helps young girls in Keighley who suffer with special educational needs.

I want to emphasise the issues of appointments and referrals. Battling their way through the bureaucracy and red tape, parents and young children find that the challenges of navigating a complex diagnosis system are not easy at all. As many hon. Members have identified, the transition from primary to secondary school—and then into the job sector—is extremely difficult, whether or not a person has been diagnosed.

That is where I would like more emphasis from the Government. Emphasis should be put on not only funding and providing targeted support, but providing businesses with the support they need to help people with special educational needs beyond the education system and into the work environment.

I appreciate that this issue is not being ducked by the Government, and I recognise that the Department for Education will continue to increase funding for children and young people with the most complex needs. However, we cannot stop there. All hon. Members present have recognised that CAMHS is not fit for purpose—we must ensure that it is. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury, I call on the Minister to make sure that the SEND review is released at the earliest possibility so that we can try to get better mechanisms in place. There are some fantastic efforts being made at a local level, but we cannot rely on voluntary groups to sort this issue out. The Government, local authorities and CAMHS have got to do the utmost to make the whole process fit for purpose.

10.14 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Ms Fovargue. I apologise to the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for not being here earlier—I was at the launch of an inquiry that I chair. I spoke to you, Ms Fovargue, to ask for permission and I thank all hon. Members for the opportunity to make a contribution.

Special needs education is a key issue. When the news of lockdown for schools came, my initial concern was for those going through exams. My next train of thought was for those special needs children whose parents simply could not take them on. They were difficult times, as everyone present knows, and the hon. Member for Newbury knows that better than most.

We had parents ringing our diverted phones crying because they literally could not settle their special needs child who was waiting on their school bus and could not understand the concept of lockdown and what it meant. For special needs children, it is important to have a routine and a simplified version of life, so that they can try to cope with it. It is not an exaggeration to say that children with special needs were distraught, and it quickly became clear that the impact on them was large. I was thankful for the Tor Bank School, the special needs school in my area, which kept its doors open for its own pupils and took a small number of students from other schools that were unable to open. Our office referred one pupil whose mother was distraught, and they took the child in until their own school reopened. These schools took special steps to enable things to happen, and we are in debt to them for that.

[Jim Shannon]

My thanks go to Peter Weir MLA, the former Education Minister, for allocating specific funding to special needs schools for tailored catch-up programmes and mental health support, as well as to mainstream schools for the wellbeing of pupils. Recognising the impact of isolation on individual children, and on children as class groups, is an essential part of helping them process and deal appropriately with the remnants of isolation. I am thankful that Ministers have rightly acknowledged the difficulty of lockdown for our children and that it is our duty to do our utmost to repair it.

The briefing that I received from Parentkind merely underscored my opinion of the damage done to all schoolchildren, but particularly children with special educational needs. I want to quote from it because it illustrates the problem. I know people say there are lies, damned lies and statistics, but I tell you what: these statistics tell a story. I hope nobody else has stated them already.

Some 55% of children with special educational needs experience homework-related stress, as opposed to 37% of children without SEN. Anxiety affects 55% of children with SEN, as opposed to 34% of ordinary children. Other figures include 46% versus 32% for exam stress; 45% versus 27% for bullying; 34% versus 16% for pressure to constantly engage with social media; 38% versus 11% for depression; 35% versus 11% for cyber-bullying and online abuse; 30% versus 6% for self-harm; 28% versus 5% for eating disorders; 25% versus 4% for sexual harassment; and 23% versus 3% for substance misuse.

Those statistics clearly illustrate the impact on those with special needs. These figures underscore the greater vulnerability and the higher risk facing children from less advantaged backgrounds or with additional needs or disabilities. The data shows that they were more susceptible to mental health impacts and social challenges in their peer group. It is clear, as this debate shows, that there is a problem, and we in this House need to ensure that the solution is available and is long term.

It is good to see the Minister in her place. We have a special friendship, and she does extremely well when it comes to answering these issues. We look to her to address the impact on England. This issue is not her responsibility when it comes to Northern Ireland, but it is always good to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to these debates, as well as to illustrate to the hon. Member for Newbury that we in Northern Ireland have similar pressures.

10.18 am

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for bringing this important issue forward. I hope that Members will forgive me because, based on the contributions that have already been made, I am going to give a completely different speech from the one I had intended to make.

I certainly do not like doing this, but I feel that I have to bring my personal experiences to the debate. My son is on the autistic spectrum.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Daly: It is fine. My wife and I waited many, many months for a diagnosis. When we had the diagnosis, it was a relief, but when it happened we were told, "Well, nothing changes. Just carry on as normal." We were not referred to services—we have not been referred to services throughout the whole of my son's time in education. We have been given a diagnosis and essentially asked to carry on as normal. My son is a beautiful boy, and he is in mainstream schooling. He has challenges, but he does not have the complex needs that other families have, and that was it.

I can tell Members from personal experience that the length of time people have to wait for a diagnosis is a disgrace, but in many cases nothing happens afterwards. To help, aid and support my son, we are reliant on the special educational needs co-ordinator at his school. SENCOs are brilliant people, but they often do not have the expertise we would hope them to have in these situations. If the levelling-up agenda is to mean anything—and I fully believe in our Government's levelling-up agenda—we have to find ways to ensure that those people with challenges in their lives are able to achieve and maximise their potential. I have not raised the issue of my son for any other reason than this: I do not believe that the support that he has received, and that other children are receiving at this moment in time, allows that to happen.

I was in a debate yesterday with many Members who are in this Chamber today. The issue of funding is a very legitimate concern to raise, but my borough in Bury has spent £40 million over the past financial year on special educational needs and mental health. We have to go beyond just saying, "Give more money". We have to have local accountability, strategies and bespoke support services for each individual child in our country to allow them to achieve their potential.

I support one of the things that the Labour party said yesterday, and I support what the Government are doing. We have many family hubs, which I support, and they provide fantastic support for this agenda. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), talked yesterday about mental health hubs. We can call them anything we want, but every town in our country needs a bespoke, 24/7 support service that schools, individuals and families can turn to in the knowledge that they are not just a statistic—they are human beings—and so that local services can respond to the individual needs of each individual child, who we must cherish.

10.22 am

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly).

In a few months, I will have been in this place for 12 years, but we are still having the same debate and saying the same things, so I want to give voice to a few constituents who have been in touch with me. One wrote that

"my son (6 in April) is diagnosed autistic...I had to fight to get an appointment with a paediatrician...I cannot express to you how stressful this was and for two years we didn't get any support... We did find some support once he started school but...I am now paying for this privately...at £70ph...There is no one place to work out what support is out there. It is all piece meal. I've learnt far more from speaking to other parents of autistic children

about available support than through official channels...if support was given beforehand, so many of these mental health difficulties could be prevented. The majority of parents I know of autistic children are burnt out and stressed—even when they have money to provide private help”.

Another constituent wrote:

“It was apparent at pre-school that he was experiencing difficulties, he was seen briefly by a speech therapist...He transitioned into primary school, where I still remember that fateful day where he just crumbled. Due to a lack of external help we sought the advice of a child psychiatrist...This cost us thousands. Eventually we received, with primary school SENCO help, admittance onto the CAMHS pathway for autism assessment. After many years of waiting we were discharged...We were then dropped from any further care and given a leaflet with web links for information...Any request for help that we have made has been firmly shut down...to navigate the system requires an MSc level of education, legal knowledge, money (we are on benefits!) and time. All at an emotional cost to one's self.”

Another constituent wrote:

“We only get one childhood and it is proven that it has an impact on the rest of a person's life. I hear so many times of people being turned away from CAMHS and struggling to get support, even when their child is suicidal”,

and another said:

“SEN parents are really stretched to the limit. I cannot begin to tell you what a battle it is and how a more global approach would be of benefit...rather than the fragmented system of try the school, try the GP, try CAMHS etc.”

Another constituent wrote:

“Our experience of CAMHS? Well there isn't much as we haven't been able access any treatment for him!...My husband and I referred our son on the CAMHS online referral form in November last year. I wrote on the form that he was using the palm of his hand to slap his forehead out of frustration to get the compulsive thoughts out of his head...We didn't hear anything so I sent an email asking them to confirm that they had received our referral form. The confirming email asks parents not to inquire about waiting list times...A member of the School Welfare Team phoned me to say that there is a waiting list of 18 months...As a family we are frazzled and I feel like I'm hanging by a thread. Where do we go from here?”

Another one wrote that

“the situation is abysmal. My family have been ripped apart by my daughter's mental health and she is just SIX years old.”

Finally, another constituent wrote:

“Last night my nine-year-old son said, ‘I would rather have no life than this life’.”

None of those emails makes for easy reading. I have had so many emails, and the key thread I take from them is that, as many have said, early diagnosis is what is missing. As a result, children fall further down. They are helped later, and the help they need is consequently significantly more acute. Covid has been a disaster for children and young people's mental health, so let us not compound that now by this constant asymptomatic testing.

“Don't ask us how long the wait is.” I would love the Minister to explain how that message fits with the physical waiting list on My Planned Care, which was launched this week. Where is the parity? I have been really moved by what I have received this week. My constituents do not care about six people being shuffled around the same jobs in Government. They care about the services that they are paying a lot of money for and are not getting. One constituent said to me:

“Childhood is short but it also lasts a lifetime.”

We cannot have this debate for the next 12 years.

10.27 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue, and to speak in this debate on behalf of the Scottish National party and also as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, a role that I have been proud to champion in my six or seven years of being in Parliament.

We must thank the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for realising how vital this debate is and for securing it. She spoke eloquently of her concerns, which were reinforced in just about every speech. Her questionnaire asking constituents about services is a fantastic initiative, getting to the frontline and the heart of what is happening.

When I visit local services in my area, they often give me statistics and tell me how things are improving, but it is not until I speak to people and ask about their experiences that I see whether it has translated into changes for the children who need the services. The hon. Lady emphasised that a timely CAMHS diagnosis is absolutely necessary for someone's chances in life. That is the key message from today.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) spoke from her heart about her personal experience. That is a very powerful thing to do in this House. She is a real champion for the screening of neurodivergent conditions. Because of her own struggles, she has been a role model for so many. It is important that she uses her voice, as she has done so powerfully today.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) spoke of the battle faced by parents in his constituency and of the lack of staffing. It is not just about money; it is about training and staffing and making sure that there is an appropriate workforce plan. I hope that the Minister will address that point.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) eloquently said that the system as it stands is stacked against parents. From what we have heard, I think that is so true. There has to be mental health support in every school, and it has to be at a local level. We cannot expect families and children who are already extremely vulnerable to travel a huge distance for the care that they need.

The hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said that 14 times more money is spent on adult services than on children's services. I worked in psychology prior to coming to this House, and children's services were always seen as a Cinderella service—entirely wrongly, in my opinion. Investing in our children is investing in our society for the future, and we really need to understand that.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) described what many of us experience: that people come to us and say that their MP is the last hope for their family. That is how we feel, because that is what people tell us: “You are my last hope; I have tried everything.” It is unacceptable that families have to battle the system to that extent. The Disabled Children's Partnership contacted me prior to the debate and said that 60% of families with disabled children have sought mental health support for themselves, which shows just how desperate the situation is.

The hon. Lady mentioned another really important issue, which the British Psychological Society has also raised with me: the lack of educational psychologists in the UK. There is only one for every 5,000 young people.

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

That is a really crucial issue that the Minister should take forward. To make a difference, we must have the correct professionals in place to undertake the required diagnoses.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) spoke really well about the trauma experienced by children in the pandemic. We must not underestimate that. Their childhood has been different from that of every other generation: the trauma that that cohort has experienced, the loss that many have experienced, the loss of their daily structure and the loss of contact with their loved ones, which was snatched away at a critical time. We need to improve services not just generally but very specifically for the most vulnerable children with special needs.

The hon. Lady also spoke about the impact of social media. I have heard so many negative things about online algorithms and the impact of constant social media use on children and young people's mental health. That has such a negative impact that we should look at taxing social media companies specifically to raise money to increase mental health support. That must be addressed in the Online Safety Bill.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) spoke about her excellent work helping those from diverse backgrounds in her constituency and the important issue of knife crime. She said that, when people are failed in childhood, they can go on to engage in antisocial behaviours; they are steered down that path because the system has failed them. We must ensure that we avoid that at a much earlier stage.

The hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) spoke about the importance of early diagnosis and the battle against bureaucracy, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the impact of the pandemic and the lack of structure on children with special needs, which has been severe. In my own constituency, we are still struggling to get services back up and running at the level that they were before the pandemic. Parents are continually contacting me, worried that the pandemic may be used as a rationale to reduce services. That must never happen; we are here to champion those parents and to make sure that that does not happen. The hon. Member for Strangford also underlined all of the very bleak statistics that show the greater impact of the pandemic on children with special needs.

The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) spoke emotionally and powerfully about his son. The hon. Gentleman came here to listen, but decided to give us the benefit of his own experience. That is one of the bravest and most important things we can do when we come here to raise our voices for others. That personal experience resonates with everybody more than statistics or anything else that the rest of us have to say.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said that he has been a Member of Parliament for almost 12 years and has been talking about these issues for 12 years. Clearly, these issues have to be taken forward. What I will say—this is slightly different from the speech that I prepared—is that having worked in the services, it is very clear to me that CAMHS cannot manage diagnosis and assessment for children with special needs, as well as the overwhelming number of children who are there for mental health issues. There

has to be a streamlined diagnostic service that is available locally, at local authority level, where children can have that intervention, that assessment, because one year in a child's life is a huge amount of time. The six years that we heard about is almost one third of their childhood. The developmental milestones that have gone by can never be caught up on, so early diagnosis is crucial. There has to be the development of a streamlined service with specialist practitioners who can do the diagnosis and also, from the diagnosis, provide intervention. Why wait six years for a diagnosis only to be told, "You've got your diagnosis, but nothing follows it"? That is totally unacceptable.

The all-party parliamentary group for disability would be keen to engage with the Minister, who I know wants to do her very best on these issues, and the Department to look at, where possible, streamlining services for diagnosis and treatment for those children with special needs who deeply require it—we have all said the same thing today—and to learn from best practice right across the UK. There are things that we are doing well in Scotland, and there are things that we can learn from as well. At the heart of this are children, and we must do our best for those children. I want to work collaboratively to try to ensure that we do, together, across this House.

10.36 am

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) on securing this very important debate during Children's Mental Health Week. She has been a powerful advocate for her constituents who are struggling to access the support that they need for their children. I thank all the hon. Members who have spoken this morning. We have heard many powerful and distressing examples of the impact that the combination of the pandemic and the underlying gaps in support for disabled children is having on their mental health and the mental health of their families.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) spoke movingly about her own experience and the impact that a lack of access to diagnosis can have, even into adulthood. The hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore) spoke about the battles that families in their constituencies face and about the need for a "tell it once" approach when dealing with services. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) made a really important point about the lack of co-ordination among health, education and social care services, which leaves so many families being passed from pillar to post and without the support that they need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) paid tribute to the brilliant work of Lansdowne School, which is also attended by many children in my constituency, who progress to Lansdowne from Turney Primary School in my constituency. Both schools provide a brilliant education for their children.

It was very moving to hear the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) speak about his own experience and the battle that his family have faced and continue to face on behalf of his precious son. It is so important that the hon. Member has brought here today the

insights into the system as a whole that that personal experience has provided. I do hope that his son is able to access the support that he needs in order to enable him to continue to flourish in the future.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) made a really important point—there is far too much distraction at the top of Government just now. The disgraceful reality of that is illustrated no more powerfully than by the plight of disabled children, up and down the country, who are struggling to access the support that they need.

From listening to those accounts and looking at the evidence on disabled children's mental health, it is impossible not to draw the conclusion that the most vulnerable children are being profoundly failed by this Government. According to research by the Disabled Children's Partnership, nine out of 10 disabled children have been socially isolated during the pandemic, with 72% of parents and carers reporting that their child was often unhappy, downhearted or tearful. The impact of the withdrawal of vital support services, both in and out of school, has been devastating. The situation is of course complex, because many disabled children have physical health vulnerabilities that increased their risk in relation to covid-19 and it was important that protections were put in place.

I pay tribute to the staff working in SEND education and support, who adapted their services very quickly to provide online learning and undertake home visits. I recently visited Cherry Garden School in Southwark, a brilliant primary school for children with special educational needs. I heard from staff about the rapid action they took to develop an online curriculum and the learning packs that were delivered to children via home visits. I know that those visits were a lifeline for many families.

Despite the undoubted commitment of professionals, there was no systematic approach. The necessary precautions that were taken to reduce the risk of covid infection were, all too often, not supplemented with any additional support. At the start of the pandemic, 76% of families surveyed by the Disabled Children's Partnership said that the vital care and support they relied on had stopped altogether, leaving parents and siblings taking on all care responsibilities around the clock. The support has been very slow to come back. As late as June 2021, more than 70% of disabled children were still unable to access pre-pandemic levels of therapies and health services. The pandemic has been challenging for everyone. It has been particularly gruelling and exhausting for far too many families with disabled children.

However, we know that the challenges facing disabled children and their families are not only a consequence of the pandemic. Some 60% of families with disabled children have sought NHS mental health support due to the stresses of fighting for basic services. That is the story, again and again and again. Every Member of this House will know constituents who are battling with a system that simply does not work as it should, with thresholds for support that are getting higher and higher, and have been doing so for a decade. Parents battle for assessment and diagnosis, they battle for EHCPs, they battle for the right support or the right school place, and in many cases they battle for housing that is suitable for their children's needs.

I have mentioned many times in this House my constituent Matthew Garnett. I am pleased to say that Matthew is now thriving as a young adult in supported

housing, pursuing the things he loves, including his project to visit every football ground in the country. Matthew, who has autism and a learning disability, first came to my attention when he was, like far too many children, in a secure hospital, held under the Mental Health Act 1983.

I supported Matthew's parents in their battle to get him out of hospital. As part of that battle, the then Mental Health Minister commissioned a review of Matthew's care. The review made devastating reading. It documented, year by year, his parents' struggle, over more than a decade, to get their son the support he needed. The consequence of the system failure they encountered was that Matthew, like far too many autistic children and children with learning disabilities, ended up in a secure hospital, far away from his loved ones, with his health deteriorating week by week.

According to the Disabled Children's Partnership, only 4% of parents and carers of disabled children feel they get the right support to care safely for their disabled children; 53% have had to give up work to care for their child; and 40% have experienced relationship breakdown since their child was diagnosed.

The Minister will, I am sure, mention the £30 million of funding for short breaks for families with disabled children. That is very welcome, but short breaks should be genuine respite. They should not be respite from a system of support that breaks people. It is not enough to substitute for a system that is failing in its entirety the promise of access to a short break every now and again.

The SEND review was originally promised in September 2019. It is now shamefully overdue. The pandemic is simply not an adequate excuse for the lack of urgency in that work, given the impact that the pandemic itself has had on disabled children. It sends its own message about the level of priority the Government place on families with disabled children. I hope the Minister will set out today a firm date for its publication. We need the review to set out clearly the gaps in current provision and in resourcing, so that the Government can set out a clear plan for ensuring that every disabled child in the country is able to access the support they need.

The current system is failing far too many families, and the impacts are being felt in devastating consequences for their mental health. This cannot go on, and I hope the Minister will set out a plan for change today.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for securing this important debate on special educational needs and children's mental health services. As we can see by the number of Members who have attended the debate, this is clearly a significant issue across many parts of the country. Unfortunately, the Minister for Care and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), is unable to be here today because she is self-isolating, so I will do my best to answer hon. Members' questions. I am sure we can follow up on anything that I am not able to cover in my remarks.

I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) for sharing her personal experience, which illustrates some of the struggles that people face. She outlined the

[*Maria Caulfield*]

positives and negatives in her remarks. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) for sharing his son's experience, which is unfortunately not uncommon.

My own postbag reflects many of the comments that have been made in the debate. Children are often not getting the help and support they need at the early stages, which often leads to more difficult interventions later that could have been avoided if the support was in place. The collaboration locally between health and education is often not where it should be. I am here not to deny any of the remarks made in debate, but to set out what is being done to address these issues, which have been in place for many years. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North that funding is not necessarily the only factor here; it is also about how services are brought together. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury said, it is about accountability for how those services are delivered.

In March last year, we published the covid mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan, which includes £31 million to improve autism and learning disability services. There is £42 million to continue funding projects to support young people and families with special educational needs. There are funding pots available, but we are hearing that they are not making it to the families who need them or to the services being provided. In the short time that I have, I hope to be able to set out how we aim to resolve some of those issues.

The demand for services has increased. There is no doubt that the demand for CAMHS, ADHD assessments, autism assessments and diagnosis has increased over time, but waiting times are also dismally short of where they should be. According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which provides evidence-based guidance on many of these areas, children and young people who are referred for an autism diagnosis should have a diagnostic assessment within 13 weeks. We have heard from many colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury, that it takes around two years. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) cited three years. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North cited his son's experience, and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) also spoke about this issue. We can see that it is a problem across the country.

For ADHD diagnosis, NICE guidelines do not recommend a specific waiting time, but they set out recommendations for how services should support and manage children who need a diagnosis and their families, for how such children should be supported through education, and for general support as well. We want every area of the country to meet NICE guidelines but, sadly, that is not happening in many places. To make sure that we get on top of the situation and reduce the delays, we want to work towards providing an assessment within the recommended 13 weeks in order to deliver a timely diagnosis—not just so that they get a diagnosis, but so that the interventions are there to help and support young people and their families.

There are three key areas where I think we can improve things. The SEND review, which was touched on a couple of times in the debate, is a joint collaboration between the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. It is in progress, and we

expect its findings to be announced fairly soon—I am talking about weeks, rather than months. Following the recommendations from that, a Green Paper will be published. It will follow a 12-week period in which I encourage all Members to take part in the process and to highlight many of the experiences that we have heard today. We have talked about the funding that is being announced, but often that goes to health and does not get into schools. I met representatives from one of my schools only last week, and the joined-up working locally between education and health just is not happening. That reflects the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury that accountability for who is responsible for doing what, and the joint working, is currently not happening.

Layla Moran: Will the Minister comment on access to funding for third-sector organisations, which are often more expert at offering advice and support that families need?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. Services are commissioned locally. Part of the issue is that there is no accountability for when services are not commissioned. The funding that is put forward needs to look at all service providers, and the third sector is often well placed to provide those services.

To touch on long waits, NHS England is working to ensure that CAMHS have embedded diagnostic pathways for autism and ADHD as a core part of their work. A sum of £13 million is going in to improve those pathways and identify those at risk of crisis; £2.5 million of that funding will test different approaches to diagnostic pathways and ensure that they are backed by research and are evidence-based. In addition, NHS England wants to develop a single point of access to ensure that referrals are triaged, and that individuals do not stay on lengthy waiting lists. We have heard today of the difficulties caused by not having a single point of access. I have met families in my constituency. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, we are the last refuge and point of contact when they cannot get anywhere else.

We know that school settings can provide an invaluable opportunity to identify autistic children early in life. We are investing £600,000 in significantly expanding an autism early diagnosis pilot in Bradford. That will test at least 100 schools over the next three years to assess whether new approaches to achieving a faster diagnosis can be rolled out across the country. The early findings from that pilot are positive. Education staff report that they are better able to identify children and put in place the support they need to thrive in education. Local areas will look to upskill mainstream staff to better identify children's needs. In Manchester, a project to support early identification and diagnosis in young children involves health visitors identifying those who show signs associated with autism and fast-tracking their assessment, with additional post-diagnostic support for families.

The issue for many years has been the lack of a national strategy, but that is changing. What we want, when pilot studies show good initial results, is to roll them out across the country. In the next year, on top of the £1.5 billion spent in the past two years, we are providing an additional £1 billion of high-needs funding for the education of children with more complex needs.

The aim of that funding is to reduce waiting lists and variations in practice, make navigation pathways less complex, and improve the speed and quality of diagnosis.¹

Those points tackle some of the issues around waiting lists, but accountability was the main thread of the introductory remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury. At the moment, no one is held accountable locally if services are not commissioned. The integrated care system will be put on a statutory footing from 1 July, if the Health and Care Bill goes through on time, and ICS boards will be the accountable bodies for commissioning services. Their chief executive officer will be the accountable officer for the NHS locally and will be responsible for bringing those services together and will be accountable if that is not happening.

Since November 2019, NHS Digital has reported on waiting times for autism assessments, trying to ensure transparency in how services are delivered and highlighting areas where improvements are needed. It is incredible that, up until now, we have not had the data to hold people's feet to the fire when services are not provided.

Steve Brine: On accountability, can the Minister shed any light on the issue of CAMHS in Hampshire telling parents not to ask how long, or will she take it away? It means that they cannot plan, for instance, decide to sell the car. Those are the choices that people are facing. They cannot plan for what is next. Does that sound right to her, that people have been told not to ask?

Maria Caulfield: No, that does not sound right. That is exactly why we want to bring some accountability to local services, so that when such statements are made, we can look at what the problems and the blocks in the system are to try to overcome them.

Local authorities also need to be held to account for how they support schools, because schools do a huge amount of work, going above and beyond in most cases to support children with special educational needs. That is why we continue to work with Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission to develop a new area of SEND inspections, which will look at how services and support are delivered in practice on the ground. That will hold local areas to account, so that there is no gap in oversight before full implementation of any new reforms resulting from the SEND review. It also recognises the importance of inspections in SEND services by highlighting areas of good practice and areas to improve on.

I reassure colleagues across the Chamber that that is an area of high priority. The SEND review will be published shortly, and the Green Paper will follow swiftly on from that. I encourage all colleagues to share their powerful experiences in that process, as they have today, so that we can improve services for the children and their families who at the moment are not getting the service that they deserve.

10.56 am

Laura Farris: I thank every Member and colleague who spoke in the debate, from five different political parties, revealing the power and privilege of being a Member of Parliament. We can represent the concerns

of families at their most acute, with all the detail and desperation in the emails and letters that we have all received.

My time is limited—I am not sure how limited—so if I do not mention every single Member who spoke, they must not think that I am not grateful for what they said. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (James Sunderland), for Winchester (Steve Brine) and for Bury North (James Daly), all of whom have children with special educational needs. My hon. Friend for Bury North showed absolutely directly what the emotional effect on the family means and how much that consumes the thoughts and all the deepest concerns of the parents about the outcomes wanted for their child.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake). One of the things that she said, which was reflected in so many of the emails that I got, was that when someone has a child considered to have autism, ADHD or something equivalent, often there is a period in the child's school life when they are being told that they are a failure or disruptive. Headteachers told me that one of the things that happens is that not only is the child sometimes not popular, missing out on sleepovers, play dates out and so on, but the parents are not popular, because the other parents think that they have this difficult child. They cannot do anything about it.

One Member present today shone the light on what I am trying to achieve with the debate, and that was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland). When he was Justice Secretary, he had a direct interest in neurodiversity, and he was appalled by the correlation between neurodiversity and autism, and the prison estate. We can all agree that it is never the responsibility of the Justice Secretary—from whichever party—to deal with that, but as a society we have failed if that is the end destination of people with autism.

We can draw a few strands together. I think that everyone present agrees that the need for intervention is urgent and that most of the problems could be identified at primary school, but there is much greater need for accountability. Where the Government have commendably made money available to commission locally, those services need to set out what is achievable and then to deliver them, with consequences for not doing so.

The Minister talked about integrating services and about improvement, all of which was music to my ears—joined-up working between education and health services. It must be the case that families in all the constituencies that we represent can have reasonable expectations. When their child is considered possibly to have a learning difficulty, the families should expect a diagnosis in a timely way and that some form of educational support will be made available. Almost—not all, but almost—every family who receives adequate educational support has seen a transformational impact on the life of their child.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered special educational needs and children's mental health services.

1. [Official Report, 28 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 5MC.]

Supported Exempt Accommodation

11 am

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members to observe social distancing and to wear masks. I will call Shabana Mahmood to move the motion, and will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. Members who intend to speak should have asked for permission from the Minister and the Member who secured the debate. I call Shabana Mahmood to move the motion.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of supported exempt accommodation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I am pleased to have secured the debate today to discuss something that is a huge problem in my constituency, in my city, and in many other places across the country.

If someone had asked me a few years ago what supported exempt accommodation was, I would not have been able to tell them. I know it confuses people even now. Given my difficulties in dealing with the issue in my own constituency, I have become quite a world expert. I will set out for all exactly what we mean when we talk about supported exempt accommodation.

Supported accommodation is a broad term that describes a range of housing types: group homes, hostels, refuges, sheltered housing, and so on. An offshoot of supported accommodation is referred to as “exempt”. It is basically a resettlement place or accommodation provided by a council, housing association, charity or voluntary organisation, where a person or organisation provides the claimant with—in theory—care, support or supervision. I say “in theory” because too often that is not the case in reality, and that is what I will discuss in detail in my speech.

Exempt accommodation is supported housing that is exempt from housing benefit regulations. If we provide someone with that type of housing, we get access to enhanced housing benefit and can access more money to house this group of mainly vulnerable tenants who are in need of care, support or supervision. We can see why that has happened. The cost of housing vulnerable people—care leavers, women fleeing domestic violence, ex-offenders, people with addiction issues, and so on—is higher. The costs of helping those individuals are higher, so the exemption from housing benefit regulations—the ability to access higher payments to house such people—was designed to allow providers to access adequate sums of money to help individuals as they seek to turn their lives around. Too often, that is very much not what happens in practice.

I stress that there are some good, legitimate providers of this type of housing, who do important work with people in desperate need of housing and help. There are still those who are committed to a social and indeed moral mission to help people to get back on an even keel, recover from addiction, turn their lives around and play a full part in society once again. However, there are too many rogue—I describe them as cowboy—providers who have clocked that this is a lucrative money-spinning

opportunity and who take full advantage. They get access to larger sums of money to house housing benefit claimants who need care, support or supervision, and then they do not provide it.

In law, it is the case that all a provider has to do is provide care, support and supervision that is, in legal terms, “more than minimal”. Those three words have plagued me as I have navigated the complex world of supported housing while trying to help my constituents—those who live in such properties and those in communities where there is a proliferation of those types of properties.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): That is the nub of it, is it not? The hugely greater rents and support that landlords can get means that families are priced out of streets, and the problem spreads rapidly down these streets. The behaviour of many of those who get no support makes those streets places where people no longer wish to live. My hon. Friend talks about shady landlords, but is there not a real danger that there is so much money to be made now that organised crime is moving in, in a big way?

Shabana Mahmood: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. I will come to his point about the connection with organised crime, which is becoming a real problem. He is right that the distortion in the housing market in these communities means that working families are being priced out of good, viable family homes. Other social tenants cannot access them either; when a person cannot get enhanced housing benefits, they are subject to the local housing allowance

In fact, this lucrative loophole is causing huge problems not only for the tenants, who often get trapped in unsuitable properties, but for the communities living in those in those areas and those who might wish to live in them, too. It is exactly those nefarious operators moving into the sector who are causing problems in my constituency and across the country.

In practice, “more than minimal” means hardly anything at all. I have heard providers say that installing CCTV in communal areas or having a manager who might visit the property once in a blue moon counts as adequate supervision of vulnerable people. That sort of so-called supervision would certainly pass the “more the minimal” test, but the idea that that is what was meant by the regulations that determine access to larger pots of housing benefit is utterly outrageous.

Cowboy operators know that they can access more money per tenant, and they do not have to spend very much—or indeed anything at all—to demonstrate that they are providing care, support or supervision. So, what is the upshot? Lots of cash is available for those who know how to game the system.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on this matter a couple of years ago because of concerns about a property in my constituency where it took providers two days to discover someone’s body after he died. That is not supervision or support. Councils just do not have powers to deal with this issue. The Charity Commission got involved. Does my hon. Friend agree that we absolutely need better mechanisms by which to intervene when we are worried about a supported housing project?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and her work in this area. I know of the shocking case in her constituency. It really speaks to the problems caused by providers in this sector not doing what they are supposed or intended to do. I will come on to the regulations that I think need to change later in my speech, and I very much hope the Minister will take those on board.

If someone knows how to game the system, the next stage is obtaining properties, which these providers do by leasing them from owners. With that lease-based model, providers do not have to shell out large sums of money to buy property of their own; they do not have to spend lots of money adapting it, either. They simply lease houses, turn them into houses in multiple occupation—or HMOs—and, frankly, watch the money roll in.

This is the other aspect of the exemption in relation to this type of housing: providers are exempt from not only housing benefit regulations but other regulations, such as planning and licensing laws that enable councils in other areas to limit the types and proliferation of HMOs. Those rules do not apply to supported exempt accommodation. Having a so-called article 4 direction in a city or area—as we do in Birmingham—does not stop the proliferation of this type of housing.

In theory, we can see what was being attempted with those rules: to provide more money to cover the additional cost of housing associated with vulnerable tenants, and to allow enough appropriate units to be set up to ensure that an adequate quantity of housing is available. Again, however, that is not how things have worked in practice. The exemption from licensing rules and regulations that applies to other types of HMO does not apply here. Whole streets and communities are becoming saturated with family homes converted into HMOs providing exempt accommodation, housing vulnerable tenants and creating problems for the whole community, while failing the tenants by placing them at risk of very real further harm. It is a system that is failing everyone.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate and for the fantastic work she has done on this matter. As she said, I was alerted by constituents to the rise in crime because of some of these properties, with drug dealing, begging and sex work taking place. I undertook a spot check and saw first hand vulnerable people who were not getting the support they need and living in really substandard, filthy conditions—somewhere none of us would actually choose to live. It was only with West Midlands police, Birmingham City Council and our local residents that we got that place shut down last year. It is the first in the country that we have been able to shut down. Does my hon. Friend agree that the sector is fundamentally in need of reform and that we cannot put this task off any longer?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend has been doing huge amounts of work on this issue in her constituency. Many of my Birmingham colleagues are in this Chamber today. This is a big problem in our city, and I thank my colleagues for their interest in this debate and for the work they are doing in their own constituencies. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about regulation, and I will come to some of the regulations that will be needed.

Some might be thinking that there is surely someone regulating the system and carrying out the very checks to which my hon. Friend just alluded. There is a regulator for social housing, but it simply does not have the powers to deal with rogue operators, because those people know how to game the system. They have set themselves up as small operators, so they are outside of the direct purview of the regulator. They can make lots of money with little to no scrutiny, which is leaving too many people in my patch in utter despair. More than 150,000 households in the country are living in exempt accommodation—this represents a 62% increase in five years—and there are 1,600 such properties in my constituency alone. There has been a massive increase, and we are seeing these problems all over the country.

As I have said, the tenants are too often being let down. Many of my constituents come to me with their problems, and many of my colleagues have raised in the House, and with the city directly, the issues that their constituents face with their properties. It is not unusual to find properties that are in complete disrepair and that we would not consider fit for human habitation in any way. It is not unusual for vulnerable women to be housed with dangerous men in these properties—for them to be at risk of attack or, in fact, to have been attacked.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am becoming a broken record. I have brought a case to the Department of a 19-year-old rape victim who is waiting for trial and has been housed, without any regulation, with men who have been released from prison for the exact same crimes that she wishes to put people in prison for.

To respond to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), two women in the last three years have been murdered in “exempt, supported” accommodation. In one case, the key worker did not notice that the woman had been murdered. After visiting the property, she said to the woman’s mother, “Oh, she’s absolutely fine”—but the person she had seen was the person who had murdered the woman. That is the level of support that vulnerable women are getting in this accommodation. It is dangerous, and it must stop.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She has raised those horror cases in her constituency at regular intervals, directly with the Department and in this House. Those cases of women left at real risk of harm, having truly suffered at the hands of dangerous men who they should have never been housed alongside, are not unique.

It is not unusual, when I have investigated cases in my constituency, to discover that the housing contract that was approved has forged signatures on it. There are multiple layers of subcontractors that get involved with the providers in this sector, and it is not unusual to see faked documents. I have had constituents come to me and say that they are being held to a contract that they have never seen before. It is also not unusual for people to be left without any hot water or electricity.

It is often the case that the tenants, who are desperately in need of care, support or supervision, are left to rot in disgusting properties and at real risk of physical danger. The residents who live alongside them are also being let

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

down: over-concentration in particular areas just loads more need and deprivation into areas that are already struggling. Crime and antisocial behaviour has massively increased. I have had constituents break down, explaining that they are worried that their children are witnessing public drug taking, people collapsing in the street having drunk too much or urinating in their front gardens, all on what were once modest, quiet residential streets that were home to tight-knit communities. That is why so many people in my patch and my city are in utter despair.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I appreciate the point that my hon. Friend is trying to make. This weekend, a lady came to my constituency surgery to complain of exactly that issue: prisoners on release have been put next door to her and are making her life absolute hell, and she is not able to do anything. Not just that—the environment around the place is becoming filthy. It is creating a huge problem in the environment across the whole of the constituency, and our communities are breaking down because of the under-regulation that is taking place.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The example he describes is something I see too often in my own advice surgeries. People really are in despair. This situation is attacking the heart of the social spirit we need to help vulnerable people turn their lives around. People generally want to do the right thing by people who are in trouble. They want to have mixed communities where everybody can play a part in uplifting and supporting each other, but when there is an over-saturation of need, without the necessary supporting services, that breaks down the social fabric of our communities and the spirit of social solidarity.

So many times I meet people in complete despair at the change they have seen in their local areas as a result of the proliferation of exempt accommodation units. In many cases, they are desperate to move out and leave the places they have always loved, because they can tolerate the degradation of the living conditions of the whole community no longer.

This is all happening in plain sight. Only the Government have the power to act. I implore the Minister today to commit to taking the necessary action. No more pilots or evidence are needed. We have plenty of evidence; we have been shouting about the evidence for years. It is high time that we see some action.

As others have also said, I have been convinced for some time that some rogue operators in this sector have links to organised crime. I know that the police have raised concerns at a national level. The sector has the advantage of having zero chance of a jail term, so we can see why criminals, previously involved in drugs or whatever, are now concluding that this is a better business to get into. What do the Government need to do? They need to destroy the business model of the rogue operators. Good providers spend the additional money they receive in the ways in which it was always intended, so they will have no difficulty meeting higher legal tests or proving themselves, but that is not the case with rogue operators.

The Department for Work and Pensions needs to tighten up the welfare regulations. We need a proper legal test for access to enhanced housing benefit. The regulations have to be toughened up, and a proper test

for what counts as care, support or supervision has to be set out in law. We have to cut off the ease with which this extra cash can be accessed.

From the Minister's Department, we need tougher regulations and a regulator that has the full range of powers needed to deal with the problem. I want to see a tough "fit and proper persons" test that has to be passed before any provider is allowed anywhere near the sector, no matter how big or small the operator or how many units they have at their disposal. It needs to be the law that they should all have to pass such a test.

Local authorities need the power to reject applications for exempt accommodation on grounds of saturation or over-supply in a specific area, and to insist on community impact assessments that have the power to prevent over-saturation. That is the only way we will be able to stop the overloading of high need into already difficult areas.

All tenants in exempt accommodation need to have some sort of local link to the area. Birmingham has become, in the words of some council officials I have spoken to, a dumping ground for people from elsewhere. A local link will not always be appropriate. I fully accept that in cases of domestic violence and occasionally in respect of ex-offenders, a local link needs to be broken to help somebody turn their life around, but we cannot simply allow a system where local authorities or national Government agencies are displacing huge amounts of vulnerability and need into other parts of the country, with no thought whatever for the people left to cope with the changes being made to their communities against their will.

Once a provider has shown that they are fit and proper, and we have prevented over-saturation, we need an inspections regime to keep providers on their toes and a regulator that has full powers of enforcement to clamp down on those who might still flout the system. We need a whole package of regulations to clamp down on the many abuses in the sector.

I know the Minister has been looking into the matter, and the Minister for Welfare Delivery has sent me written assurances that he is considering changes to benefits regulation. They must understand the desperation we are feeling as vast swathes of our communities are changing right before our very eyes, and we have no powers to do anything about it. I hope that in his response today he is able to give us some assurance that this Government will finally take decisive action to turn this absolute horror around.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) for securing this important debate. It is a topic that she and I, and a number of familiar faces across the Chamber today, have spoken about.

It goes without saying that problems with supported exempt accommodation are a serious matter that impacts not just the housing benefit bill but hundreds—possibly thousands—of vulnerable individuals across the country. Having previously worked as the deputy chief executive of YMCA Birmingham, I have seen at first hand the challenges that vulnerable people face and the real

difference that good-quality support can make. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning the fact that there are good-quality providers who make a difference. I have a strong personal interest in improving the quality of exempt accommodation, and more importantly the life chances of those people living in it.

As a Government, we are determined to tackle the problems that have dogged the sector for too long, but we also want to do more to support the high-quality supported housing providers that deliver services to some of the most vulnerable people in society. We really need them to continue to operate successfully, so that people who need supported housing receive support and a roof over their head.

As the Minister responsible for homelessness and rough sleeping, I know the key role that good support and the right accommodation play in helping those who have fallen on hard times to get back on their feet and rebuild their lives. As the hon. Lady said, this kind of support is not always given. Right now, there are too many cases of rogue providers benefiting from taxpayers' money without providing anywhere near the right kind of services for residents. The growth of exempt accommodation concentrated in specific areas of towns or cities is also creating neighbourhood issues, antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour, as a number of hon. Members highlighted.

The Government are doing everything in their power to tackle rogue providers. Officials in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities have engaged with Birmingham City Council and local charities to build a better understanding of the issues, including the scale of the problem, the drivers of its growth, and its impact on residents and local communities.

Birmingham is obviously not the only city to experience such problems—the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) raised concerns about her area. At a national level, the Government have raised the bar on the standard of exempt accommodation across the board. In 2020, the Department published “Supported housing: national statement of expectations”, setting out the Government’s vision for better ways of working in supported housing and a much higher minimum standard of accommodation. The guidance was critical in showing what good looks like, and highlighted where providers and councils are working in joined-up and innovative ways to drive up quality. Ministers and officials have engaged with councils, housing providers, the regulator of social housing and other regulatory bodies to improve standards and our understanding of the issues.

That effort has been matched with proper Government funding. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood will, of course, be aware of the pilots. We have provided £5.4 million for a year-long pilot in five local authority areas in England. The pilots have been critical in helping us to understand the issues and the differences that we can make. The participants, including Birmingham, bring together teams from across different services, such as housing, revenue and benefits, environmental health, social care and, in some cases, the police and probation services, to address the different issues that residents face. Although I have not yet received the final report from the independent evaluation team, I know that the pilots are delivering real results and acting as models of good practice for councils to adopt.

Birmingham has developed a new charter of rights for residents of supported housing, along with a programme of support reviews and scrutiny of housing benefit claims. In Blackpool, the council has carried out a review of the support provided in accommodation for victims of domestic abuse to ensure that there is sufficient and tailored support.

John Spellar: The problems with exempt accommodation are spreading rapidly because all sorts of crooks are getting in on it. Neighbourhoods are being ruined. Quite frankly, they want action now. When will the Minister bring forward regulations to enable councils to do something about this?

Eddie Hughes: I fully accept the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but part of the purpose of the pilots is to understand not just the scale of the problem, but, more importantly, what type of interventions work most effectively. It is all very well saying, “We know what the problem is. Therefore, we know how to address it.” I am not sure that is completely the case, given that different interventions have had different successes in different pilot areas. It is important, having spent £5.5 million, that we get the full value from the pilots and understand the best-quality interventions to make.

Shabana Mahmood: Would the Minister agree that one of the fastest ways to get action in this area is to destroy the business model of the rogue operators? That will not impact on good operators doing the right thing, because they are using the extra cash to do the right thing. It is the rogue operators that need the scrutiny and the blunt instrument of tougher regulations and a proper test in law.

Eddie Hughes: I understand the hon. Lady’s frustration and the case she is making. Having worked for a good-quality provider, I understand the marginal prices that they work on. It is possible to put good-quality providers out of business through unintended consequences of applying tougher restrictions right across the sector. We need to be careful that we do not throw out the good with the bad when making the suggested changes.

Jess Phillips: I also used to run one of those accommodations, and we had an inspection regime before we were ever entitled to advance with the Department for Work and Pensions. That is not happening today. Every single year that we were given enhanced benefits at Women’s Aid in the Black Country, which serves the Minister’s constituents, there was an inspection. Cuts to councils have ended those inspections. I had to prove what we were doing. I had to show CCTV. That does not happen now. In Birmingham, £100 million a year is being given to rogue providers with no inspection, yet my individual constituents trying to get welfare and disability benefits from the DWP have a greater inspection regime than the people making £100 million.

Eddie Hughes: I understand the hon. Lady’s experience, which we share, but to a degree she proves the point of the pilots; some councils have invested in staff to carry out inspections—as I mentioned when referring to Blackpool—and as a result of carrying out the inspections to which she refers, they have been able to cut their benefit bills. Councils are making the choice as to whether to invest in those staff. I remember such inspections myself. There must be an element of choice, because some councils are making choices.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Eddie Hughes: Time is rapidly running out, but I will give way. Before I do, I just want to say that I completely understand the case that is being made by Opposition Members. I share their frustration and have a genuine, dedicated intention to tackle the issue. This will not be the last opportunity to discuss the matter. I look forward to discussing it outside of this Chamber.

Tahir Ali: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that councils across the country need regulations so that they can take action against rogue operators? My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) mentioned that she was successful in closing down a rogue operator in her constituency, but that it then opened up in a neighbouring constituency. Councils need the powers and regulations to shut them down permanently.

Eddie Hughes: The best way to conclude would be to say that we certainly will not rule out the use of legislation if that proves to be the most important tool that we could deploy. Hopefully we will learn from the pilots when we have the final report, so that we understand which interventions work best and can develop future models that include them.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Endometriosis Workplace Support

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members to observe social distancing and wear masks.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of supporting people with endometriosis in the workplace.

What a pleasure it is to have you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Davies.

It would take 20 days, at 24 hours a day, to name every woman in this country who suffers from endometriosis. That is the scale of the problem that we are dealing with. It is bad enough that it takes eight years on average to get a diagnosis, and that there is a lack of settled opinion on the surgery required. It is also bad enough that the blunt truth is that, even in today's age, the main coverage given to this debilitating disease seems to be when a man stands up and talks about it. I have fantastic support from people such as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and other hon. Members, who have supported at every step of the way the debates that I have brought to the House; there is absolute cross-party support for tackling women's health issues.

Unfortunately, I am often asked, "Why are you doing this, as a man?" I remind people that as Members, we represent everybody in our constituencies, and for most of us, probably over 50% of our constituents are women. It seems bizarre to question why a Member of Parliament would raise issues about the opposite sex; to me, a constituent is a constituent. Endometriosis is such a wide-ranging affliction that affects so many women, and it is so unrecognised.

Today I seek to talk about women's suffering in the workplace, which mainly comes about through a complete lack of knowledge about this disease. I will start by describing endometriosis. I am grateful to Heather Guidone, board certified patient advocate and surgical programme director at the Centre for Endometriosis Care, for sending me the text entitled "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma", which states:

"Endometriosis is a systemic, inflammatory disease characterized by the presence of endometrial-like tissue found outside the uterus. Endometriosis has significantly negative impact on the physical, emotional, reproductive, and sexual health, financial security, relationships, careers and schooling of those affected. Commonly located in the abdominopelvic region, the disease has also been found in virtually every organ system including the lungs. Mistakenly referred to by some as simply 'painful periods,' symptoms are not limited to menstruation and often become chronic over time. It is also entirely possible for those who do not menstruate e.g., adolescents, post-hysterectomy, post-menopause to struggle with endometriosis. This extraordinarily complex illness has body-wide impact, with sustained inflammation, angiogenesis, adhesions, fibrosis, scarring, and local and neuronal infiltration leading to a multitude of systemic issues. Chronic pain, anatomic distortion, adhesions, organ dysfunction, non-menstrual abdominal and pelvic pain, infertility and pregnancy loss, painful sex, bowel and bladder pain and dysfunction, lower back and leg pain, severe bloating, crippling fatigue, debilitating period pain among those who menstruate, even lung collapse and much more are hallmark of endometriosis.

Despite the preponderance of systemic symptoms and effects, however, many patient complaints are unfortunately trivialized or outright dismissed at the healthcare level. The disease is also rarely present alone and is commonly associated with multiple comorbidities and secondary pain drivers including various gynecopathologies; chronic fatigue; coronary heart disease; rheumatoid arthritis; adverse obstetrical outcomes like loss, preterm birth, spontaneous hemoperitoneum in pregnancy, obstetric bleeding, pregnancy-induced hypertension, preeclampsia and more; painful bladder syndrome; and even an increased risk of certain cancers. Often called a ‘disease of theories,’ definitive causes have been under debate for over a century, yet no single theory yet explains endometriosis in all affected. Most likely, a composite of several mechanisms is involved.”

With millions of sufferers and long-standing recognition of the disease, it is shocking that women suffer such enormous discrimination in the workplace for a common disease. To summarise, I will quote from a paper I was sent by Victoria Williams, a researcher at the Open University, from her PhD thesis, “The experience of endometriosis in the workplace and the influence of menstrual policy: leaning to precarious work to manage a ‘precarious condition’”. She says:

“Endometriosis often hinders the ability to work to the same capacity every hour on every day of a traditional working calendar, and as such participants talked of not being able to hold down full time work, leading to multiple part time roles or precarious work situations, drawn by the flexibility they offered. However, the supposed flexibility is often a double bind with lack of stable contracts, loss of state provisioning and the financial impact of having to take time off for surgery (often multiple surgeries). As such, precarious work may be appealing to people with endometriosis because of the promise of flexibility but they may equally feel and be even less protected.”

I want to expand on that by talking about the sufferers of this terrible disease and the effects it has in the workplace.

We have all been ill. Unfortunately, we have all had a rather nasty stomach upset at some point. We may have been at work when we were suddenly taken short and had to nip out to the bathroom. I do not want to get too graphic—we all know what that feels like. I am sure we have all had a very embarrassing incident at some point in our life. Mr Davies, can you imagine experiencing that fear—and, indeed, that incident—every single day in the workplace?

I have been given examples of that particular situation by women who have been at work, in a meeting, when a sudden bowel movement has given them seconds to get out and get to the right place. Yet one person who gave me such an example told me that her employers tutted and said she was unreliable: “She’s always nipping off to the bathroom.” I do not believe that people are mean or bad. I fundamentally believe that most human beings in society want to do the right thing by people, but if people do not know about the situation, ignorance can have some very nasty consequences. We have to start raising a higher level of awareness of this issue.

National Endometriosis Survivors Support has sent me a catalogue of quotations, with more than 60 patients outlining their experiences. I am going to share about 20 of them with hon. Members.

No.1:

“Having endometriosis has made my career a mine field. I cannot progress how I wish to due to time taken off sick. I have been undermined and people have compared my condition to other conditions with complete ignorance:—suggesting that I was exaggerating my symptoms. Working life is not compatible with suffering from endometriosis—it’s too much and no one understands!”

No. 2:

“I was asked what I was going to do to make things better and stop myself being sick. It’s an incurable disease.”

No. 3:

“I’ve almost lost my job due to discrimination because I couldn’t work as fast when I was in crippling pain.”

No. 4:

“Almost lost my job in a major company despite them saying they’d treat endometriosis occasions of absence separately that wasn’t the case. Also wouldn’t let me home when I was covered in blood to change my clothes and made me go purchase new clothes and told me to use work showers.”

No. 5:

“I was in hospital due to my endo a little over a month ago, I couldn’t walk. Had to call in for work, which I rarely do unless I genuinely can’t help it, they asked if I was being admitted because if I wasn’t they wanted me to ‘make up for it’ by working the next day.”

These are real experiences from real people in the workplace. There is lots of evidence out there.

No. 6:

“Due to the fact that I had two laparoscopies, I had a large gap in my employment record. Despite a very good CV, my applications were rejected because employers saw only the employment gap.”

No. 7:

“I haven’t been able to work for 7 years now and it depressing.”

No. 8:

“Was misdiagnosed as IBS for 4 yrs, my boss said I was exaggerating it, refused to let me do flexi time to help. After surgery, I was signed off for an additional week, and when I called to tell her, she swore and slammed the phone down. Ended up severely depressed. I was suicidal. She brushed it off, and kept calling me Menopausal Mandy.”

I have said it before on the Floor of the House and I will say it again: women are dying. They are killing themselves. They are spending day after day in chronic, crippling pain and do not even have the support of a workplace. That level of destruction of women’s lives is killing women, and it has got to stop. We have to get a better understanding of what millions of women are going through in this country.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful speech. The issue is absolutely about conditions like endometriosis, but does he agree that it is also about a basic lack of compassion for women who have periods every month? In January, Dr Rosie Baruah backed the British Medical Association’s call for period products to be provided in all NHS staff toilets. She said the products should be viewed as a basic necessity, not a luxury. The outcry from some men was utterly appalling. The lack of understanding of how challenging it can be for someone when they bleed through their clothes and do not have access to products or toilets was shocking. We need to do much more to get a basic understanding across society and to put policies in place—for endometriosis, but also just for periods.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am so grateful to the hon. Lady, who raises a point that comes up time and again. I do not believe that the majority of people are that unkind, but they just do not know what they are talking about. Her point speaks to a wider issue. People think it is acceptable for there to be an outcry about supporting women in the workplace. That is the problem we face. We have to change societal thinking on these issues.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

I will continue sharing the experiences of patients. No. 9:

“I have to use my annual leave after operations in case I get ill during the year and need time off.”

No. 10:

“The problem, they find another way to get you out. They go for competency & make your life hell, picking up on every little point & you don't have a leg to stand on. I'm so miserable at the moment.”

No. 11:

“This debate couldn't come at a better time my boss is starting to give me a rough time because I was really rough last week and I even collapsed in work and ended up in hospital and he still expected me to be back in work the following day and this week he gave me a warning letter about my days off and now it's really worrying me.”

No. 12:

“I was off sick and recently dismissed whilst off sick.”

No. 13:

“I lost my job years ago due to having a few periods off sick for surgeries and some emergency surgeries. All of these were for endometriosis. I worked for the NHS!!! They don't care whether you have genuine reasons or not, other people take time off for a common cold etc whereas I went to work in severe pain most days; but the hard work I put in was not appreciated.”

What we are dealing with here is constructive dismissal, which is illegal in this country, but is just being swept under the carpet.

No. 14:

“I've unfortunately been put on redundancy notice. My Endometriosis sickness has been scored against me as well as my productivity not being the same as everyone else. I have an occupational health report stating to reconsider my targets due to me taking codeine to manage the pain. My question is, is Endometriosis classed as a disability? Is this discrimination?”

No. 15:

“At 18 I was sacked from a nursing home due to having too many days off related to endometriosis flare ups.”

No. 16:

“I was recently dismissed from work whilst off sick because I was off so long so now jobless. I'm 35.”

No. 17:

“I'm 28 currently in full time work but due to the lack of knowledge of this awful disease I'm currently under investigation for fitness to do my job. I work in a nursery. This is all due to having sick days (which I don't get paid for). With more knowledge and research more women wouldn't have to try and fight with their management to prove they are sick and can still do their job.”

No. 18:

“At age 21 I was dismissed for having too many sick days due to endo. At age 25 my contract was terminated while I was laid in a hospital bed, after emergency surgery due to endo. At age 28 my job was suspended and then terminated due to them not believing the reasons for absence, i.e. Endometriosis, and I was laid in a hospital bed the day I had my hysterectomy when they emailed me to tell me. I'm 29 now.”

No. 19:

“I was forced to resign from my permanent teaching position while I waited for surgery. The new head didn't believe how ill I was. I'm much better off mentally being self employed, but not financially.”

I emphasise the examples about teaching and the NHS. When we raise such issues, people sometimes think that we are talking about private employers. We may have a vision of the bad boss who says, “Silly woman!” and that sort of thing, but I am actually giving examples from the public sector. I will be bringing forward debates later this year for the Department of Health and Social

Care and the Department for Education to respond to, but does not the fact that a teacher was dismissed because the headteacher did not understand endometriosis paint an even more worrying picture—that girls are not being told what a healthy period is, and none of them knows what this disease is? How can someone possibly know that they have a disease if they do not know that that disease exists?

The examples are piling up. I had over 60 examples, which I have whittled down to this list. Here is the final quotation on this point:

“Benefits—DWP are not recognising endo as a disease/pushing you to work. When I have completed a work capability assessment they found me suitable for work, have had to push again for a mandatory reconsideration. This goes for UC & PIP as I am currently going through the process of both.”

However, there were some positives. One person said:

“From age 11 I spent the week off school each time my period arrived. I couldn't move as the pain was too much and so heavy I was changing pads far too often than would be allowed to leave a class to go to the toilet. The school called me and my mum in for a meeting and I was made to go in or face a disciplinary. Quite a few times I bled through which meant taking spare clothes. As a teenager this was mortifying. Now as an adult (32) I have made my employers and colleagues aware and I'm in a job where I can just nip to the toilet. I am also very lucky to have supportive colleagues that help when I am doubled over.”

Here is another one:

“When I was 14 I was sent home from school for being violently sick. Kept being sick continuously until later that day my time of the month started. I work in a pub and over the last 5 years have collapsed in the bathroom, in the back room. I have to have moments in the back room because I'm in so much pain I can't stand up. Let alone smile at customers. I've been sent home a few times when it becomes clear there is no way it is possible for me to stay there. I have to have extra time to sit down and my boss and I have had to put lifting bans in place or by the end of the night, when I start off OK, I can't walk and I'm in agony from lifting too much and pulling all the organs around. I often have to sleep for hours the day after to try and recover from my shift as it physically takes it out of me and I find it increasingly hard to push through. Thankfully I have a really supportive team or I wouldn't be able to support myself to live. But I think back to previous bosses and all I can think is how I wouldn't be there anymore if I still had any of them. Because they wouldn't have tolerated and accommodated my health.”

In 2020, the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis published an inquiry, some of which I will read out. This is about the impact of a supportive employer:

“For the last 9 months I have missed almost a week per month, but my work have been very supportive of this as they know I have been undergoing tests. I am very lucky to have an employer who is so understanding”

Another woman said:

“Only one workplace classified me as having a disability which was extremely helpful on days where I was in pain, my boss was fully informed and would have no issue with me saying to her, I have to head home straight away, and I will be back in 2 days.”

Here is another one:

“I have been very lucky that my work have been wonderful. They make adjustments for me working from home when needed and it's no problem if I can't work because I'm in too much pain.”

The report also talked about employee rights and employer obligations. The Equality Act 2010 states that a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that

“has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on...ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

When endometriosis is debilitating, due to the symptoms experienced and/or the long-term impact of surgery, it meets the Act's definition of disability, as with other chronic conditions.

Employees with endometriosis who experience debilitating symptoms have the right to ask their employer for reasonable adjustments at work that would enable the individual to continue working or would reduce the disadvantage suffered due to having a disability, in this case a chronic condition. Reasonable adjustments include, though are not limited to, flexible or reduced working hours; reassigning work or duties; time off for medical appointments; and working from home. Employers must consider requests for reasonable adjustments and cover the cost of adjustments agreed. However, we know of cases where women with endometriosis have requested reasonable adjustments, for example, to work a particular shift pattern or reduce working hours, and have had those requests refused.

The pandemic has had a significant impact. The report on endometriosis and working from home says:

“Both the 2020 APPG inquiry and our 2021 Covid Impact Survey found that those with endometriosis who were able to work from home reported it as a positive development, in particular in relation to better managing symptoms, including...Being able to undertake physical pain management techniques more easily...Being able to take breaks/lie down when needed...Not having to commute to work when experiencing painful symptoms.

Some reported a positive impact on mental health due to enabling better symptom management.

Our 2021 Covid Impact Survey found that 69% of those working entirely from home found it positive, as did 51% of those working partly from home.”

Respondents to the 2020 APPG inquiry made comments about the positive impact of working from home:

“Now have option of working from home, so this helps with not having time sick and then missing pay.”

“I am lucky with my work now I am able to work from home if too unwell to travel.”

“I work from home so I got my hours around the times I feel okay. When my symptoms are bad I am often so tired I just have to sleep for most of the day.”

It is not a completely negative story that I am painting today. There are good employers out there and good examples of where employers have been able to work around it. That brings me on to endometriosis-friendly employers. Endometriosis UK has an endometriosis-friendly employer scheme, which supports organisations to make simple adjustments for those with endometriosis to work effectively while managing a chronic condition. Employers sign up to the endometriosis-friendly employer principles and commit to working to implement them. The principles are: leadership and management support; tackling stigma and cultural change; communications to increase awareness of endometriosis; and promoting the support available for employees with the condition.

We can draw quite a lot of comfort from that, but I put to the Minister that we have got to push that out to employers. I am not going to ask the Minister for new legislation, for new Bills to come forward to the House. I believe that there is plenty of law in place, but it is not being properly used. That is more than likely because employers do not know about this terrible, debilitating disease.

As I draw to a conclusion, I would like to highlight the opportunity to link the issue with the menopause taskforce. The Government press release on Friday stated:

“Minister for Women's Health and co-chair of the UK Menopause Taskforce Maria Caulfield, said: ‘For too long women have gone unsupported and unheard when it comes to specific women's health issues. This is especially true when it comes to the understanding of and treatment for the menopause’ It was agreed the taskforce will meet every 2 months, and future meetings will be scheduled by theme which will include...healthcare provision...education and awareness...research evidence and data”,

and “menopause in the workplace”. So we are recognising one condition of women in the workplace—the menopause—but not recognising endometriosis. There is no taskforce out there to do that. I know this matter is not the responsibility of the Minister's Department. It will have to be something that works across Departments in many different ways.

There are still women at a huge disadvantage in the workplace when they try to start a family, especially those with fertility problems. I am grateful to Dr Larisa Corda for passing me information from an organisation called Fertility Matters at Work, who sent me the following statistics: 72% said that their workplace did not have a fertility policy in place; 83% said that covid-19 had made managing fertility treatment while at work easier; 68% said the treatment had a significant impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing; only 1.7% had a fertility policy that met their needs; and 69.5% took sick leave during the treatment.

Although this debate is primarily focused on supporting sufferers of endometriosis, I urge the Minister to look at the range of women's barriers in the workplace that still exist today—in the 21st century! Our society should surely have moved beyond the glass ceiling. In fact, it is not so much a glass ceiling as bulletproof glass. There are probably weaker windows in President Biden's Beast. The glass ceiling is almost impenetrable.

Perhaps today's debate will start to move the issue forward, because we are going to keep the pressure up. I started this debate in October 2019. Then we had a general election and a pandemic, and we have had to start again. Can it be that nothing happened in two years because we were not raising it here, when we had already raised it in a debate in October 2019? It is important that we do not let this issue go.

I have five asks of the Minister today. First, promote the endometriosis-friendly employer scheme. Secondly, work with other Departments to interact with the menopause taskforce and the shocking lack of support for women with fertility problems. Thirdly, get the Department for Work and Pensions to recognise that endometriosis can be a disability. Fourthly, ensure employers fully understand the Equality Act to protect endometriosis sufferers in the workplace. Fifthly, create a scheme to promote endometriosis-friendly employers.

We are only halfway through this Parliament—I know it seems a lot longer. We have plenty of time to do plenty about the issue in this Parliament, and we have to. The time has come to settle this terrible, debilitating strain on women who are owed so much more. This society—never mind what the Government and Parliament do—is letting them down.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): We have five speakers and half an hour before the wind-up speeches, so that is about six minutes each. I call Alex Davies-Jones.

2.58 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Diolch. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I offer hearty congratulations to the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing this debate today and on making a fantastic speech, which I agree with wholeheartedly. I commend him on his vociferous campaigning and support for women experiencing and suffering from endometriosis. It is so important that we have male allies speaking up and talking about the issue. Let us be honest: if the condition affected men, we would not need this debate in the first place. I have spoken passionately about this topic on numerous occasions, so I will try my best to keep my comments brief.

Endometriosis really is an issue that cuts across the political divide, as we have seen today, and I am pleased to see it increasingly receive the attention it deserves, both in this place and on the national and international stages, too. Only a few months ago I spoke, along with colleagues here, in a petitions debate relating to research into endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, and I am sorry to say that, despite the success of both the petition and the debate that followed, little has changed in terms of Government action.

We all know that the number of women living with endometriosis is colossal. Some 1.5 million women are dealing with symptoms ranging from chronic pain and fatigue to infertility, and the research, awareness and support for those suffering from what—as we have heard—can be an extremely debilitating condition is still lagging far behind, and is lacklustre at best. It is clear from speaking to constituents and personal friends of mine who live with endometriosis that there is a lot of work to be done to educate people about the symptoms that can be involved for those suffering.

That is why I am so pleased that today's debate is focusing on the issues faced in the workplace when living with endometriosis. I genuinely believe that we are making progress in terms of the conversation around gynaecological conditions such as endometriosis. We are seeing a more open approach to topics such as the menopause, period poverty, polycystic ovary syndrome, infertility and many more, and while of course there is always more to be done, I welcome the slow steps that we are taking towards making these perfectly normal conditions part of mainstream dialogue. Sadly, the impact that endometriosis can have on working women is an area that requires more positive change. Coronavirus has shown how quickly working environments can adapt when necessary. From increased working-from-home guidance to flexible hours, small logistical changes can have a huge impact on the quality of life of those suffering with the debilitating pain that endometriosis can often bring.

Part of the issue is the stigma that still remains, which means that in some circumstances, women cannot feel comfortable taking time off or requesting flexible working conditions in order to work around their symptoms. The right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell mentioned fertility; I have spoken openly about my experiences with in vitro fertilisation, and I took sick leave from my

employment because I was scared to speak to my employer about what that meant. We were going through a restructure, and I wondered whether if he knew that I was potentially going to have a baby through IVF or would need to take time off, that would jeopardise my chances in the workplace, so I completely understand what so many people are going through. Even more worryingly, I have heard from constituents who have spoken out about the lack of understanding they have received from their employer, from outright dismissal of their condition as simply a woman's problem to genuine fears over losing their job due to unavoidable absences.

It is not good enough, and I am frustrated because it is clear that education matters. That is the key to supporting people with endometriosis in the workplace, and I am pleased that under a Labour Government in Wales, women's health, including endometriosis, is taken seriously. Colleagues from across the border may be interested to know that five years ago under a Labour Government, a task and finish group was established to review endometriosis services in Wales, with the aim of improving access to support for women who are affected. When it was published in 2018, that report recommended research in several areas, including the development of an effective symptom awareness tool; evaluation of the follow-up process after surgery; a multidisciplinary approach to symptom management; development of educational resources; and ongoing monitoring of patient outcomes. I am pleased that all of those matters are being taken forward by the Women's Health Implementation Group and Health and Care Research Wales.

However, we must acknowledge that while progress has been made, we still have room for improvement when it comes to supporting people with endometriosis in the workplace. That is why schemes such as Endometriosis UK's endometriosis-friendly employer scheme, which encourages organisations to show a commitment to employees who are living with endometriosis, are so important and need Government support. For the 1.5 million people living with endometriosis, workplaces need to be making fair adjustments wherever possible. Given the very valuable contributions that women make to the workplace across so many different sectors, I sincerely hope that the Minister will support this, and outline exactly what the Government are doing to ensure that all those living with endometriosis are able to fulfil their full potential.

3.3 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I once again congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on having raised this issue, and thank him for doing so. Less than a week ago, we were in this Chamber together debating the Cumberlege report and the terrible treatment of women who have suffered from the hormone pregnancy drug Primodos. It feels very much like we are here time and time again discussing how women are being systematically discriminated against in our society, in 2022 and 21 years since endometriosis was first debated in the House of Commons—Members may not know that. I read recently that the people who will lose out most when covid is over are women, who are less likely than men to return to work because of the challenges of childcare. It is always women who seem to lose out: as the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) said, if this were a

man's issue, I suspect we would not even be having this debate. However, we need men in the debate and in the round, discussing with us and pushing ahead, because this issue will affect them, their families, their partners, their children and the people around them.

We all have local endometriosis groups in our constituency, and I pay tribute to those local groups, particularly to Candice and Claire from Endo Warriors West Lothian. They are both sufferers of endometriosis and they fight relentlessly for sufferers in their area. Endo Bonds is another Scottish group I have met with recently, and Endometriosis UK does fantastic work. As the new co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group, along with the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), we pay tribute to Sir David Amess and his work on the issue. He was an important and doughty champion for those who suffer from endometriosis.

It feels like endometriosis is to do with policies and legislation, which are dry, dull and boring, but it is the reality for women and endo-sufferers every single day of their lives that they are being discriminated against. That might not be the intention of the employer. I think it sometimes might be accidental, because the legislation and policies in place across the UK do not support, understand or recognise endometriosis as a chronic and debilitating condition that one in 10 women suffer from—so many women. It is a hidden condition and there is little or no awareness of it—although I think the hon. Member for Pontypridd is right that things are changing.

Sceptical and unaccommodating employers in the workplace can have a devastating impact on sufferers. In our APPG inquiry in 2020, we found that 55% of sufferers had taken time off work as a result of their endometriosis; 38% were afraid of losing their jobs due to the condition; and 35% reported reduced income as a result. One sufferer said,

“I left my teaching career due to the exhaustion of endometriosis. I loved education so took a position as a teaching assistant which saw a drop in finance of £18,000/year... I feel pressured not to take any other time off and work through pain frequently.”

The right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell spoke passionately and graphically about the reality of endometriosis. As a woman who has had such bad periods that I have bled through at school, university and work, I know how embarrassing and devastating it can be, and I have what would be classed as relatively normal periods. Endometriosis sufferers are passing out in their workplaces or in the street. They are not able to get to the toilet or be given basic dignity. We are not in a third-world country, but it feels like that. The treatment of those who suffer from endometriosis feels like they are existing in a third-world country. Endometriosis is on the NHS's list of the top 20 chronic pain conditions, but we would not know it. The right hon. Gentleman spoke about chronic pain and the support for it, and that is incredibly important.

We are robbing women and those who suffer from endometriosis of the ability to maintain and progress in their careers and to provide for their families, and of financial stability and independence. So often, they experience devastating mental health problems. It should not have taken a global pandemic for us to review how we support flexibility in the workplace, but it has. The irony of the situation is that the waiting times for

endometriosis are even worse than before the pandemic, but the pandemic has, in some ways, facilitated a rethink and a reimagining of what flexibility people need and should have at the very basic level, because trying to work or just live with endometriosis is debilitating. The Department for Work and Pensions and the Government of the day must recognise that, and employers and educational institutions need to be supportive and be given the information.

Endo Warriors West Lothian has developed the most incredible educational video for young people in schools, and the group worked with Professor Andrew Horne at the University of Edinburgh to develop and fund it. We want to roll it out across Scotland, the UK and the world, and we want to get content, policies and laws that support endometriosis sufferers to make sure they do not have to live in pain and suffer in the way that many of those who we are speaking up for do. I hope the Minister will listen and not just give lip service today but real tangible action.

3.9 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on his fantastic opening speech and continued advocacy on this issue. It is so important.

As a member of the APPG on endometriosis and as someone who lives with endometriosis, I am always pleased when it makes it on to the parliamentary agenda. It gives Members an opportunity to discuss the policy changes that need to be introduced. We have heard that the first time it was discussed was 21 years ago, and not enough progress has been made.

During the last debate on endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, I took the time to share my own experience and the difficulties that I and others have daily. I spoke of the general process of going through diagnosis and treatment, because it is not in any way easy. The symptoms go from physical to mental, and it can ruin every single day. Members have been reminded today, and may recall from the last debate, that it takes up to eight years for the average woman to be diagnosed in the UK.

I would like Members to consider what that actually means for people who live with endometriosis every single day. It is eight years, potentially, of living in excruciating pain, waiting for a GP to diagnose the cause of the pain and being gaslighted by the GP and other health professionals while continuously asking about the pain. The pain is so severe that it can prevent someone from carrying out everyday activities, and it can be incredibly disruptive to working.

When I shared my experiences, I did not have the time to talk about how I dealt with my pain at work. When my endometriosis became bad and I was starting to look for a diagnosis, I actually worked here as a parliamentary assistant. Without a diagnosis, people are finding that they have nothing to show their employer to explain why they need time off. When their symptoms are really bad, they have nothing to point to as a legitimate request, in an employer's eyes, for flexible working.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and I congratulate her on the comments she is making. I also

[*Dr Dan Poulter*]

congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing today's debate and for speaking in such a powerful manner.

The hon. Lady speaks from personal experience, and she talks about working in this place and working with an employer who is undoubtedly sympathetic and supportive. To help the Minister address the problems raised in this debate, could she explain what her employer did that made a difference, and what can the Department do to address the problem?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I thank the hon. Member for his very well-timed intervention; I was just about to get to that. I was very fortunate in that my employer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), did not even wait for me to request flexible working measures. She thrust them upon me.

I had to go to hospital at one point, and when I explained to my right hon. Friend that they were looking towards an endometriosis diagnosis, she began reading up on it. She sent me links almost every day. She understood, and she allowed me to come into work later, because I was having quite bad evenings. She would shout at me if I was doing too much—the only time she would shout at me, just to let Members know. She gave me an entire month off after my botched laparoscopy, after which she threatened to go to the hospital and tell the doctors about themselves. We are not necessarily asking for people to be that extreme in making flexible working arrangements and allowances for their employees, but there are instances where people can be very good.

After becoming a Member of Parliament, I spoke to our accommodation Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). At first, I was told that the way to get a better, more suitable office was to be very nice to him. I spent my time complimenting his ties, and I eventually explained to him what my issue was—not in much detail, but he understood immediately. He did not ask too many questions. He gave me the type of office I needed—one that made it easier for me to get around Parliament. Those are examples of things that employers can do to support women with endometriosis.

We need to urgently bring down waiting times, because going through this can be very difficult. It is not just about waiting times for a diagnosis. It is about follow-up. It is all well and good to diagnose a woman with endometriosis, but if it is not followed up with further treatment after a laparoscopy, it continues. Endometriosis does grow back. Those living with endometriosis need, once they are diagnosed, to be able to understand what they are experiencing and to be able to talk to their employers about their condition, and employers need to take the time to be informed about the condition. But it does not end there. We know that there is no cure for endometriosis, and that treatment at the moment may only be able to ease the pain.

We know just how much endometriosis impacts on people at work. It is worth mentioning again the report of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis: 55% of people with the condition having to take time off work is not a small thing, and 27% missing out on

promotions because of the condition is not a small thing. Those are issues that women in general already face in the workplace. The report also found that 40% of those with the condition worry that they will lose out in their jobs and further studies, and one in six actually have to give up their work—all because we are not taking care when we need to. We need to support those with endometriosis in the workplace, so that it does not affect their career advancement.

When I was thinking about becoming a Member of Parliament, I had to consider whether I actually could, because I was in so much pain. I had to consider whether I would be able to campaign in the way that we are meant to, and do all the things that we are meant to do. That is not fair for any woman. It is hard enough for women in the House in the first place, and for women in many other workplaces right across the country. For someone to have to think about whether they should continue in a job, or go for a job that they would love, simply because of their condition—simply because that condition does not have the level of importance in policy that it deserves—is not fair at all.

There are several steps that the Government could take. They have to start by clarifying whether endometriosis is covered by the Equality Act 2010. We have to be very clear here. The Equality Act states that a person has a disability if they have a “physical or mental impairment” that

“has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on”
their

“ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

If endometriosis prevents an individual from carrying out their day-to-day tasks—and I promise hon. Members that it absolutely does—they should be entitled to the same protection under the Equality Act that those with diabetes currently have. We know that endometriosis affects as many women as diabetes does. Further clarity on that would go a long way to ensuring that those with endometriosis are not discriminated against in the workplace.

I also join campaigners in calling on this Government to adopt an open culture when discussing menstrual health. For far too long, women have been made to feel ashamed or embarrassed when discussing their bodies. For example, when I was at school we had various names for it—people would say their “cousin had come to stay” or that “the red river was flowing,” and people would pass each other sanitary towels under the table. When it comes to our periods, it is all meant to be shame and embarrassment. Further, the Government have to work with the NHS to ensure that people with endometriosis have the right access and support when it comes to time off work.

I know that I am going on longer than I should, but now is a good time to pay tribute to all of the endometriosis warriors: the many different endometriosis organisations and blogs. There are women like me who would not have coped if they had not had all of that information from other women. It should not have to be like that—we are not always medical professionals—but I would not have been able to physically campaign and put myself forward to stand in this House if I had not read all of those things online, most of which were provided by other women. I am so very grateful to them, but the Government really have to step up to the plate.

3.18 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this important debate, and for his work as an advocate on this important issue.

I have previously spoken about the importance of better supporting everyone living with endometriosis. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I was proud to speak up last year when more than 100,000 people signed a petition calling for endometriosis to be prioritised after years of being overlooked. I have said it before, and I must say it again: endometriosis is a mainstream healthcare issue that we cannot afford to sideline. That, of course, means that it is a workplace issue as well. More than 3 million people live with either endometriosis or PCOS in the UK, and we cannot afford to neglect or ignore them.

Before being elected to Parliament, I worked in the NHS as a pharmacist. I met patients living with endometriosis and saw the pain and difficulty that they face in their day-to-day lives—we have heard many examples of that today. They face chronic pain, difficulties with breathing and, in the worst cases, hospitalisation. As we have heard, endometriosis is a disease that we cannot afford to take lightly, which is why it is so important that everyone living with endometriosis is supported in the workplace with the job security, adjustments, flexibility and protection that they rightly deserve. I know that my party has been very clear about how we would help to achieve that.

A Labour Government would proudly stand alongside our trade unions as they push for better workplace practices and take on rogue employers. A Labour Government would fight for flexible working, with the option for workers to work remotely from home. A Labour Government would end the fire-and-rehire con so that insecure and low-paid work is a thing of the past, and they would campaign to ensure that all workers have full employment protection from day one. That would go some way towards giving everyone with endometriosis the workplace security that they rightly deserve.

I would like to touch on the subject of diagnosing endometriosis and treatment, which many Members have spoken about today. Depressingly, it currently takes an average of eight years for somebody to be diagnosed with endometriosis in England. Although the treatment available for endometriosis is incredibly limited, many women battle with the disease for years without a proper diagnosis, often with very limited information provided by their GPs. Therefore, it is essential that, in the meantime, employers better understand the potential impact of endometriosis, even before diagnosis is eventually made. Employees living with endometriosis may need to take sick leave, work remotely or have adjustments made in the workplace before waiting for a diagnosis, and employers have to be able to accommodate that. The situation at present is not sustainable, and more must be done to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of diagnosis and treatment.

We have heard from many hon. Members that the lack of resources dedicated to diagnosis and treatment means that too many people are working with endometriosis in silence, which is completely unacceptable. Only by

cutting the waiting time for diagnosis, and by investing in potential future treatments for endometriosis, can we truly change this for so many patients living with the disease. The Government's overdue women's health strategy is a perfect opportunity to set out that change, but their vision for the strategy, which was recently published, made no clear promises to alleviate any of the concerns. This is something that I will be watching closely to see how the Government choose to tackle endometriosis. I urge them to take the issue seriously.

Endometriosis in the workplace needs to be at the front and centre of women's health. It is currently just a footnote, which means that the Government are failing more than 3 million people living with endometriosis. The Government have the opportunity to make a positive change, and I really hope that they do not waste it, because the women's health strategy will go a very long way in improving the lives of the more than 3 million women who are currently living with endometriosis.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Last but not least, I call Jim Shannon. Please try to end at 3.28 pm.

3.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for bringing this issue to the House. I can recall speaking, as did others present, in his October 2019 debate on endometriosis and workplace support, so it is great to be back. He highlighted that two years have passed and little or nothing has improved, so the purpose of this debate is to raise the issue again and to seek what we hope will be a positive response from the Minister.

Like the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), I wish to put on the record that I remember Sir David Amess, who was the chair of the APPG on endometriosis and whom we greatly miss. Like others, I remember his family dearly in my prayers, given the gaping loss in their lives.

I am honoured to work in an office with six girls, so I am outnumbered by six to one. I have a male employee who works in another office, but they are all girls in my office. Two of them suffer from endometriosis. My mother had it; my sister had it. When I married my wife, she also suffered with endometriosis. I remember it well: the doctor at the time probably did not mean to sound the way he did, but he said, "You know, Sandra, if you have a baby, it will sort itself out." Well, it did not. Three babies later—three young boys later—it still was not sorted. She suffered with that all her life, until a short time ago, so I am well aware of the impact that endometriosis has—although I am not as knowledgeable as the women who have spoken today. They have spoken really well.

Some 1.5 million women and girls in the UK suffer from endometriosis. It often takes eight years for the condition to be diagnosed, as the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell said. One of my staff members has been waiting for more than two years for a consultation for surgery, with no sight of surgery to date. That worries me as well. Endometriosis often leaves women in debilitating pain that paracetamol cannot fix; often, much stronger pain relief is needed.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Some 23,500 women and girls in Northern Ireland are awaiting a consultancy appointment with a gynaecologist. As of April 2021, the number of those awaiting treatment for endometriosis has doubled to 1,236. It is definitely higher than that now. Although this debate is about employers, I need to make the case for a UK-wide provision for those who suffer from endometriosis.

Employers must have the correct guidelines in place to ensure that women feel supported. It is really important for that to be in place. Endometriosis UK has released an employer's guide to managing endometriosis at work, which provides an in-depth discussion of how to manage sickness pay, flexible working and understanding the impacts of the condition.

When my staff member was going through treatment, it required a high number of doctor's appointments. It was essential that she had flexibility at work to attend those appointments without worrying about the reaction to asking for time off. I like to think of myself as a fair and honest employer, and I believe I am. Whenever someone presents me with a problem like that, I want to make sure that they have a flexible working situation and the time off and that they feel understood. It probably helps to have ladies in the office—especially if they have had it as well—who can discuss these matters and then they can be dealt with in a constructive and positive way. At the time, it was very difficult for my staff member.

Endometriosis affects women's health and quality of life. Sufferers should be encouraged to open up to their colleagues and bosses about it. The pain has been described as unbearable, which I honestly believe, based on the experiences of my wife and those in my office.

The condition also impacts on mental health. I want to comment on that in the time I have. It is not just a physical disability—it has a mental impact. It has an impact on families and everyone around, who are often touched by what is happening as well, ever mindful that we are trying to be helpful to the person who is in the centre of it.

I am grateful to all the women across this House who have raised their experiences of endometriosis. We all have a platform to normalise this condition. Employers must provide structured support when required. Endometriosis has been neglected, misunderstood and ignored by employers for too long. That is little wonder, given that even some in the medical profession unfortunately say that they do not get enough specialist support, either. We simply need to do better for the 1.5 million women across the UK.

I conclude by saying that I hope this debate will be recognised by many Departments, but I specifically look to the Minister, who is always responsive on the issues we bring to the attention of the Department for Work and Pensions, to do a full assessment on what further action can be taken to give full support to women who suffer with endometriosis in the workplace, as well as recognition in schools of the difficulties faced by our young ladies who struggle with the early symptoms of endometriosis. As a man, I am happy to add my support; although not in the way the women present do, I understand, in a small way, what happens to them and the support they need.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Now, for the wind-up speeches, I call Marion Fellows. Can hon. Members try to keep it to 10 minutes?

3.28 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. We always thank hon. Members for bringing debates to the Floor—it is a format we use all the time—but I really want to thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for bringing this debate and for his knowledgeable, emotional and compelling speech on endometriosis. I want to say that I am even happier because he is a man: it is still true that the fact that a man brought this important debate makes it even more powerful and will probably get it noticed even more. For that, I think we are all grateful.

It has been referred to already, but the 2020 inquiry by the APPG on endometriosis found that those in work had terrible experiences. I will not go over them, because all the hon. Members who have spoken in this debate have already referred to them. They have also referred to their own personal experience—the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) was one of those who did so—and I think it is always more powerful if we hear about lived experience in any debate and in anything that this House does.

One issue that I want to raise is statutory sick pay. This UK Government must reform statutory sick pay. It disproportionately harms people with disabilities. There has been an argument here today for endometriosis to come under the Equality Act 2010. When people have chronic conditions and have to take time off work, they have to be able to support themselves during that time. The SNP has called continually for statutory sick pay as a minimum to be increased in line with the real living wage, for extending it to 52 weeks instead of 28 and for people to get it from the first day they are sick. This was able to be done during the pandemic; it should be able to be done as we go forward.

We must all continue to raise awareness and fight stigma when discussing menstrual and reproductive conditions, such as endometriosis, in the workplace and in the health sector. I know the difficulties of raising issues in relation to specific illnesses, conditions and diseases—for example, sarcoma, which my husband died of. The issue is getting the medical profession to understand. That is not something that the Government can do directly, but we all can and should raise conditions such as endometriosis frequently, so that information about it gets out there among the general public.

The Scottish Government have a women's health plan. That aims to take an intersectional approach, recognising that many women and girls in Scotland will face multiple and often overlapping disadvantages and barriers to accessing good healthcare. This UK Government should do something as well. It absolutely is important. I am heartened as an old woman—I am a lot older than I look—when I hear people in the Chamber or here in Westminster Hall discussing the menopause, periods and all these things that were taboo. My late husband was mortified when I was ill and sent him to the chemist to buy me some sanitary towels. This taboo is going, and the further and faster we lose these taboos, the better—especially for women who are suffering.

In Scotland, menstrual health, including endometriosis, is included in the Scottish curriculum, and the Scottish Government have made resources available online for young people, teachers, parents and carers; they are tailored to different age groups. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) referred to a video. I sincerely hope that that is one of the things being used, because it is education that will help to end taboos and ignorance.

The Scottish Government are also exploring opportunities to partner with Endometriosis UK and sponsor projects that will raise awareness and support the diverse needs of people living with this condition. They have recently funded an Endometriosis UK project, which will help to increase awareness and support for those awaiting diagnosis. Can I ask the UK Government to do something similar? I pay tribute to Endometriosis UK for all its work, for producing its employer's guide and for its stalwart work in pushing this agenda forward.

Employment law is reserved to the UK Government, but the Scottish Government will continue to use their fair work policy to promote fairer working practices and to press for the full devolution of employment powers, because we want to do more and we are stymied by the fact that an awful lot of this work is reserved. The SNP's ambition, shared by the Fair Work Convention, is for Scotland to be a leading fair work nation in 2025. That sits at the heart of the Scottish Government's ambition to move towards a wellbeing economy and it is central to supporting economic recovery and renewal. As the SNP spokesperson on disabilities, I stand up in many of these debates, and we have to take forward the talents and abilities of people with chronic conditions and disabilities, and use them to the benefit of the entire UK. That is vital.

The Scottish Government have also taken steps to close the gender pay gap through the gender pay gap action plan. That is important, because the condition affects women, and we need to ensure that women are not double, triple or quadruple handicapped by having a chronic condition such as this.

I wish to leave lots of time for the Opposition spokesperson and for the Minister, so I will just say that this UK Government must introduce their much-awaited employment Bill and take forward a progressive agenda for workers' rights, including a day one right to request flexible working, guidance to employers on reasonable adjustments—which we have heard about—and a statutory timescale for those adjustments to be implemented. Such debates as this are important, consensual though they are. We must all push forward and press for better rights for women who have endometriosis and other chronic conditions.

3.36 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Davies.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate and on the comprehensive and excellent way in which he introduced the subject. He has done much to highlight the condition, raising awareness in this place and across the country. I echo the tribute paid to the late Member for Southend West, who was a tireless campaigner on endometriosis, having chaired the APPG in 2018.

Every hon. Member who spoke today made an excellent speech, all making similar points and stressing the importance of the issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) spoke with great sincerity and passion. She hit the nail on the head about the importance of education on not just this issue, but other women's health issues. She gave a good example from Wales of how the Welsh Assembly has been working on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) spoke about her own experiences, as she has on previous occasions. Members who speak from their own experience send an important signal to those suffering out there that they are not alone and that there is help. It was good to hear about the positive experience that she had had with her employer. We should recognise and celebrate it when an employer does the right thing. As Members of Parliament, we should lead the way in ensuring that workplace rights are respected and upheld.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) was absolutely right: I agree that endometriosis is not only a mainstream health issue, but a workplace issue. I was pleased that she quoted extensively from the Labour party green paper on employment rights, which the Minister may have a copy of any time he wants, should he seek inspiration for the employment Bill, which—as has been mentioned—we are still waiting for.

As Members may know, I have spoken in the past about the challenges that my wife has as a fibromyalgia sufferer, with debilitating physical symptoms, unpredictability and delays in getting diagnosis, and the lack of understanding among the public and employers. For me, there are a great many parallels between the two conditions. However, today we are talking about endometriosis.

We know from BBC research in 2019 that many sufferers reported a negative impact on their work, in particular when their symptoms were debilitating, to the extent that some were unable to work on a regular basis, and had no choice but to give up their job and seek benefits such as the employment and support allowance or personal independence payments, which I will come back to later.

As we have heard, the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis conducted a much-needed inquiry, which found that more than half of women affected had taken time off work as a direct result of their condition, and more than a third were afraid of losing their job due to their condition or reported reduced income as a result. Those are significant numbers, but of course, we are not just talking about numbers: we are talking about real people's lives and the concerns and anxieties they face on a daily basis.

One respondent to the inquiry said:

"It's been terrifying worrying about losing my only income. I've barely managed to keep my job, but I've lost opportunities as a consequence and it's held my career back. I've been too unwell to do any training. Being so unwell has cost me lots financially."

Another said:

"I feel pressured not to take any other time off and work through pain frequently. It has a negative impact on my mental health and general well-being."

I am sure Members will agree that those examples, and the many others we have heard about today, are simply unacceptable. People should not be put in the invidious

[Justin Madders]

position of having to decide between their work and their health. Much more needs to be done to ensure that workplace support is available for all.

Hannah Bardell: Just on the point about workplace support, one of the things that I did not get a chance to mention is that there are some great examples out there. BBC Scotland has become an endo-friendly workplace, and Fiona Stalker, the journalist and presenter, has done a huge amount of work on this. She is herself a supporter, and she gave evidence to our Scottish evidence session and spoke passionately about the work she was doing. It is important that we recognise that there are some good examples out there, and that those employers can share their experience and what they are doing with others across the UK.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention: she did very well to get in that important reference to the good work that is happening up in Scotland. The relevant Government Departments can take a lead from examples such as those.

People have told us that employers lack understanding about this condition. They sometimes do not realise that it is an ongoing condition that requires ongoing treatment and multiple surgeries and, of course, involves debilitating pain. We really should not have to highlight those facts when we are talking about a recognised medical condition that affects 1.5 million people and certainly meets the definition of a disability under the Equality Act 2010. We need to make it easier for employers to feel comfortable talking about this condition with their staff, who will then in turn hopefully feel more supported in opening dialogue. Endometriosis UK provides much-needed support for employers in the form of information and guidance, but it is frustrating that workplace guidance from the Government themselves is still lacking. Given that we have an average diagnosis time of eight years, we could be doing so much more to tackle this problem.

Endometriosis meets the Equality Act's definition of a disability and, therefore, the reasonable adjustments requirement. There are many ways that that requirement can be met, including through flexible working, reduced hours, reassigned work or duties, and time off for medical appointments. All those things can be done by most employers, but as we have heard, that does not always happen. That is why there is a call for endometriosis to be specifically referred to in the Equality Act as an example of a fluctuating and recurring condition that falls under the definition of a disability. When the Minister responds, I would be grateful if he could indicate whether that is something the Government intend to pursue.

As was mentioned earlier, there are areas in which statutory sick pay can be improved for sufferers of this condition. Outside the pandemic, SSP only applies after four days of sick leave, so somebody needing only two or three days of sick leave would not qualify. Of course, it is also the case that periods of the same cause of sick leave must be eight weeks apart or fewer to count as linked, which can exclude those with fluctuating endometriosis symptoms. It has also been noted that SSP is only available to an employee for a period of sickness for a maximum of three years, which, again,

penalises people with chronic long-term conditions such as this. As we have said many times over the past few years, there are millions of people—in particular, many women in low-paid work—who do not qualify for SSP at all. More than two years ago, in the last debate, there was a commitment to engage fully with the APPG's review, and a promise to improve how we handle benefits. Can the Minister update us on whether there has been any movement in that area, and what plans there are to review SSP for fluctuating conditions such as this?

On access to benefits, which I touched on earlier, respondents to the APPG inquiry reported being assessed by someone who did not understand the condition. Several respondents reported being told by DWP staff or contractors that endometriosis was not even considered a disability, which demonstrates a complete lack of understanding, as well as showing that endometriosis needs some strengthening of protection under the Equality Act 2010.

Those with endometriosis should not be told that they do not qualify for any support and have to appeal many times to get the support they are eligible for. One respondent, who had to go to tribunal to claim PIP, described the situation as “stressful and upsetting”. I am sure we all have constituents who have had to go through that rigmarole many times. Although I know it is not his Department, I wonder whether the Minister can tell us anything about how disability employment advisers are being supported to ensure that the right recognition is given.

As we have touched on already, some employers have not waited for the Government to bring forward guidance and have shown leadership and support by bringing in their own endometriosis-friendly employer schemes, which aim to provide support to organisations to make simple adjustments to help those with endometriosis to work effectively. It is very encouraging to hear that more than 80 employers have joined the scheme so far. They represent a wide range of organisations from financial services companies to medical technology companies, to police forces and NHS organisations.

We want all employers to provide their employees with the right support. There should be no excuse for any Department, or Parliament, not to be part of that scheme. I hope the Minister can tell us whether there have been any attempts to get a standard across the entire public sector. We have had a good debate today, but it is clear that we need to do more to encourage women to feel supported and to deal with this condition in the workplace.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) not only on securing this debate, but on his bravura performance in setting out the case. He gave examples that were difficult to listen to, to help us to understand what women are going through on a day-to-day basis.

I thank hon. Members who have taken part in the debate for their thoughtful and insightful comments. I would just pick out two contributions: the personal experience of the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy)

and the example of his wife that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) shared. I thank them both for sharing those examples and what we can learn from them.

A number of Government Departments could have led the response to the debate, because endometriosis sits within a range of wider Government initiatives and strategies. The Department of Health and Social Care is developing the women's health strategy. The Department for Work and Pensions and DHSC are following through on the "Health is everyone's business" consultation response. The Government Equalities Office carries out wider work on equalities, and there is of course my Department's work on labour market questions, such as how to make flexible working the default.

We each talk to businesses and employers on a range of issues. I am pleased to reflect the words of the "Women's Health—Let's talk about it" call for evidence. The more we talk about women's health, the more we tackle the stigma and the taboos. Before I became a Minister, I was a vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on women's health. I am really pleased that this issue is being debated today and that we keep on addressing it and tackling the stigma.

In the interests of time, I will not describe the condition of endometriosis again, but we know that it is a condition that can be especially debilitating for many people. There are some factors, such as time to diagnose, which can exacerbate the situation. Endometriosis has a debilitating impact on a significant number of women across the UK. A respondent to the call for evidence said:

"I have had my endometriosis overlooked and just told it was period pain and to deal with it. 'It's part of being a woman.'... 'my period is normal and I am exaggerating my pain, it's all in my head'."

That is just plain wrong. No one's pain and discomfort should be dismissed out of hand and nobody should be told: "It's just part of being a woman". We have got to do better.

To understand how best to support people with endometriosis in the workplace, we need to look across the whole system—at educating society at large, at the health sector and at the role of employers, as well as individuals. Only in that way can we start doing the right things for women's health.

We know that damaging taboos and stigmas remain around many areas of women's health. They can prevent women from starting conversations in the first place about their health or seeking support for a health issue. When women do speak about their health, too often they are not listened to.

The Government are determined to tackle these issues, which is why we are embarking on the first women's health strategy. Last year, on 23 December, the Government published "Our Vision for the Women's Health Strategy for England", alongside the results of the "Women's Health—Let's talk about it" survey. A number of priority areas for action came through that. On women's voices, more than four out of five women feel, or are perceived to feel, comfortable talking to healthcare professionals about general physical health concerns. That falls to less than three in five women when discussing mental health conditions.

On information and education, as we have heard, my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell talked about teachers in schools. If we cannot get it

right there, how will we get it right further down the line? Our ambition is for women to have access to high-quality information and education, starting from childhood and continuing right the way through to adulthood, to empower women to make informed decisions.

On access to services, just two in five respondents said that they, or the woman that they had in mind, can conveniently access the services they need in terms of location, and around one in four said the same in terms of timing. On health in the workplace, around one in three respondents said women feel comfortable talking about health issues in their workplace, and one in two said that their current or previous workplace had been supportive with regard to health issues. That clearly leaves a massive gap, which is why we need to go further.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give us an indication of when that women's health strategy will be implemented, because I know there has been a delay? Will he also make sure that it addresses the profound issues in terms of employment and the DWP? Those matters are not devolved to Scotland, but are still reserved to Westminster, and we will look closely and will want to work with him on those issues.

Paul Scully: I appreciate that, and I will discuss the strategy going forward. Health in the workplace will be a priority area for that strategy. We want to support women and ensure that they feel supported in the workplace, that taboos are broken down through open conversation, and that employers feel well equipped to support women in managing their health in the workplace.

In addition, "Menstrual health and gynaecological conditions" will also be a chapter in the final strategy. It will explore ways to improve awareness and the care and treatment of those suffering with severe symptoms from conditions such as heavy menstrual bleeding, endometriosis, and PCOS. The strategy will set an ambitious and positive new agenda to improve the health and wellbeing of women across England, and it will be published later this year.

We are working to put flesh on the bones of the six priority areas. That will need to be marked by effective co-operation and collaboration across Whitehall. As an illustration of that collaboration and co-operation, the Government also have an active agenda on work and health more widely. We want employers and employees in the round, male and female, to have better interactions on work and health to improve employee retention. It is so important to address these issues from both sides of the lens.

I heard what Members said about the gender pay gap, and we could easily make a business case. Employers invest time and resource in training and developing people's experiences, so why on earth would they then want to lose someone with a long-term debilitating disease and have to start the entire process again? They should do the right thing.

The Government's response to the "Health is everyone's business" consultation was published in July last year. It sets out some of the measures that we will take to protect and maintain the progress made to reduce ill-health-related job losses, and will see 1 million more disabled people in work from 2017 to 2027. The consultation was not specifically on endometriosis, because it did not specify any health conditions. It looked at system-level

[Paul Scully]

measures to support employers and employees to manage any health condition or disability in the workplace. We are looking at providing greater clarity around employer and employee rights and responsibilities, with a national digital information and advice service.

We are working with HSE to develop a set of clear and simple principles that employers would be expected to apply. We are increasing access to occupational health, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises that we know are currently underserved. Although the measures are not endometriosis-specific, they are key steps in our effort to change the workplace culture around health and sickness. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy looks at labour market regulation. We are responsible for a policy that has been mentioned and which we know can be helpful for those who suffer from endometriosis: flexible working. I must correct the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). Flexible working did come out of the pandemic; it started under the previous Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). We have been able to reset our understanding of flexible working in the light of the pandemic.

A respondent to the women's health strategy call for evidence said:

"Working from home has helped me hugely, as it gives me flexibility to work in ways that are more comfortable for my body. I can work from my bed on a bad day, or have a hot water bottle on my stomach when I have cramps."

We are taking forward the manifesto commitment to consult on making flexible working the default, unless employers have good reasons not to do so. That consultation contained measures that would increase the availability and the support of the uptake of flexible working arrangements, including whether to extend the right to request flexible working from the first day of employment. By making it easier for everybody to access flexible working, we hope to help those who may need it most, including women suffering from endometriosis.

That consultation closed on 1 December, having received more than 1,600 responses. We are going through those now and will come back in due course. That consultation also introduced plans for a future call for evidence on the subject of ad hoc flexible working, where we want to explore how non-contractual flexibility works in practice. I discussed that with the flexible working taskforce on Monday. We will ensure that the role of ad hoc flexible working, in supporting women with health conditions, is part of its considerations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell had five questions. We absolutely welcome the work of Endometriosis UK, in particular the employers'

scheme, which we are pleased to see has a high number of participants. Debates such as this will help to fuel more businesses, of all sizes, to join that scheme and share those practices. All that work clearly needs to come under the remit of the women's health ambassador. I am looking forward to working with that person once appointed.

My right hon. Friend asked about the definition of disability and whether it is included. We have heard the definition: a person is considered disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that

"has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities."

We have heard examples where that is absolutely the case.

On benefits and how the definition is approached in practice, the work capability assessment determines eligibility for employment and support allowance, and the additional health-related amounts of universal credit. That will indeed be taken into account. It is difficult to have a number of discrete schemes for employers from Government. None the less, big HR departments can take on these things. What we must do is explain to smaller businesses the benefits of tackling these areas.

To conclude, I want to ensure that, through the women's health strategy, we can get the culture on work and health right. To ensure that the package is as effective as it can be, we need to continue to collaborate. I am looking forward to working with the women's health ambassador, and I am determined that BEIS should play a full role in driving this agenda forward. I close by thanking everybody for their excellent contributions in this helpful and informative debate.

3.58 pm

Alec Shelbrooke: I thank you, Mr Davies, and all hon. Members who have taken part in today's debate. I thank the Minister for the many positive comments he has made. There is much legislation and work coming forward that we will need to assess.

I will take this opportunity to correct the record. My figures at the start were out of date for some reason. I said that it would 20 days at 24 hours a day to count the number of sufferers with endometriosis. That was based on 1.5 million women; it is actually 3 million women, so that is 40 days. As we go into the season of Lent, perhaps people could reflect, on every day in Lent, on just how many names they might be able to list in the time they are awake during those 24 hours each day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of supporting people with endometriosis in the workplace.

2002 Gujarat Riots

4 pm

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members to observe social distancing and wear masks. I will call Kim Leadbeater to move the motion. I would normally then call the Minister to respond, but I think Theresa Villiers wants to make a brief contribution. Any time that is taken will limit the amount of time the Minister has to respond. This is only a 30-minute debate, and there will not be time for the lead Member to respond at the end.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 20th anniversary of the 2002 Gujarat riots.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate, which is my very first Westminster Hall debate.

The riots took place in the days following 27 February 2002 in the Indian state of Gujarat. The precise death toll remains a matter of dispute, even as we approach the 20th anniversary of the events. There is no agreement on the facts of what happened, never mind who was or was not complicit in instigating the violence or allowing it to continue. All we can say with certainty is that, at the very least, 1,000 people lost their lives and that the majority of them were Muslim.

There have been numerous investigations and inquiries, including by the Indian Supreme Court and highly respected organisations, such as the international Human Rights Watch. However, as far as I am aware, none of these has reached conclusions acceptable to all parties, communities and faiths. It is not my role here in the British Parliament—very distant in both time and location from those horrific occurrences—to pass judgment. I would not be able to do so even if I wanted to. What I can do, and what I very much want to do, is consider the legacy of what happened from the point of view of the families of those who lost their lives or were seriously injured. Today is about acknowledging the loss and hopefully providing some comfort, and maybe even some closure, for those families.

Every act of violence has repercussions well beyond those caught up directly in it. Some survivors and relatives will never fully get over the trauma of what happened. For others, while the pain may lessen over time, it will never disappear completely. As hon. Members will know, I have personal experience of this—not just of the loss and the hurt but, crucially, of the desire to never forget our loved ones and to try and learn something from the most horrific of events and so that we do all we can to ensure they are not repeated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward her first Westminster Hall debate. I have no doubt that it will be the first of many. Does she not agree that these devastating riots, which led to thousands of deaths, as she mentioned, hold lessons for us, and that we must continue to remember the 2002 Gujarat riots to teach our children the result of intolerance and anger?

Kim Leadbeater: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree 100% with what he has said. We have to learn from the past, and far too often events are not acknowledged and the past is rewritten. We have to find a way to make sure that these things are never forgotten, for the future of our children.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for having secured this important, sensitive and timely debate to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 2002 Gujarat riots on behalf of bereaved constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that the death and destruction of those riots displayed the very worst of humanity? It is crucial that we acknowledge the importance of respect for all religions and the importance of living peacefully side by side. Does she also agree that it is imperative that the victims finally receive justice from the authorities?

Kim Leadbeater: I thank my hon. Friend, and I agree absolutely with him. We have to ensure that we find a way, wherever possible, to live peacefully. I will talk about that in more detail shortly.

As I said, many people lost their lives in the riots. I cannot speak for the families of all of them, other than to say that, whatever a person's background, whatever their faith or religion, and whatever their politics, if they have any, the suffering they feel is no different to anybody else's. Every family's story will be different, but I want to talk about one family in particular, as they are constituents of mine in Batley and Spen, and are with us here today in the public gallery, along with relatives and supporters. It is on their behalf that I ask that the anniversary of the Gujarat riots is marked with respect in this parliamentary debate, and that I ask that their belief that justice is yet to be done for what happened is acknowledged.

On 28 February 2002, four tourists were on their way back from visiting the Taj Mahal. It should have been the trip of a lifetime. Their names were Sakil and Saeed Dawood, their 18-year-old nephew Imran, and their childhood friend Mohammed Aswat. Not long after they crossed the state border into Gujarat, their Jeep was stopped at a roadblock. A mob encircled the vehicle, demanding to know their religion. They replied that they were Muslim and that they were British citizens on holiday. In the violence that followed, Sakil, Saeed, Mohammed and their driver were all killed. Miraculously, although Imran Dawood was left for dead, he survived, and is with us today. It is only through his testimony that we know the circumstances of what happened. He remembers Saeed and Sakil pleading for their lives to be spared. It is his fight for justice that brought the international campaign for proper recognition of what happened to my constituency of Batley and Spen.

Nothing that is said or done today can bring Sakil, Saeed or Mohammed back, but that does not mean that nothing can be done to provide some comfort to the Dawood family and, after 20 years, possibly even some sense of being able to move forward with their lives. It causes them enormous hurt that the remains of their three young men have never been returned to them. I ask the Minister to investigate with the Indian authorities whether the repatriation of the remains is possible, and if so, I ask that it should happen as soon as practicable.

The family have also asked about the possibility of an inquest being conducted in this country, a request that I have passed on to the coroner. I have given the Minister

[*Kim Leadbeater*]

notice of my own request that any so-far unpublished report into the rioting carried out on behalf of the British high commission or the Government at the time be made public.

I know how sensitive and emotive this subject is, but at the heart of the debate is a family who are grieving. I know that it means a huge amount to them that we are able to be here today—not just to mark the occasion of the anniversary but to reflect on the issues surrounding it more generally. The Dawood family tell me that recent reports of renewed anti-Muslim violence only make it harder for them to move on with confidence that the terrible events of 2002 could never happen again.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I sincerely congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate on this issue, which so tragically impacted the Dawood family, some of whom live in my constituency. This is a terrible story of bigotry-motivated violence. I shall continue to work with her to help my constituents to seek the justice that they have long deserved.

Kim Leadbeater: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for meeting me earlier to discuss these events.

Once again, let me make it clear that I am not seeking to make a judgment from afar. Undoubtedly, inter-communal violence is, sadly, not unique to India; tragically, we see it in many parts of the world. I am sure that there is agreement across all parties at Westminster that anything and everything that can be done to prevent such violence should be done.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the sensitive way in which she has chosen to speak about truly unspeakable events. The burning of the train at Godhra and the chain of violence that erupted saw terrible acts committed and licence given to hatred on both sides of the religious divide. She has focused not on hatred but on healing, not on blame but on balm. I think that the whole House will support her request that everything possible should be done to help her constituents identify the remains of their loved ones, and if possible to return them safely to her constituents here in the UK.

Kim Leadbeater: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention, and appreciate his support on this matter.

I have spent recent years since the murder of my own sister making the case for stronger, more united communities where we focus on what we have in common as human beings, not the things that might divide us. I believe that if we work together in that spirit, we all benefit; if we allow our differences to define us, we all pay the price. Even before I became a Member of Parliament, I made the case that political leaders have their part to play too, by doing what they can to heal divisions and not make them deeper. In the words of Barack Obama on a visit to India in 2015,

“every person has the right to practice their faith...free of persecution and fear and discrimination.”

Those powerful words and important principles should guide all nations. They cannot be repeated too often. The deeper they percolate down into the heart of

communities, the better chance we have of reducing those tensions that all too easily lead to unspeakable violence.

I will close with a few words to the families of all those who died in the riots. If the best wishes of a humble Back Bencher in a faraway Parliament can bring any comfort, I send you mine. When you are grieving a lost one, all the political arguments, accusations and counter-accusations rarely count for much. Every victim is somebody's son or daughter, somebody's brother or sister, somebody's father or mother, somebody's friend or neighbour. They are never just a statistic; they are human beings whose lives were brutally cut short when they should not have been, so it is right that we remember them here today. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for joining me in doing just that.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I give my condolences to the family as well. I would normally call the Minister straight away and I will give her about 15 minutes, but Theresa Villiers has indicated that, with the permission of Kim, she will speak. Over to you briefly, Theresa.

4.11 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am deeply grateful to the hon. Member for Batley and Spenningsdale (Kim Leadbeater) and to you, Mr Davies, for allowing me to speak briefly. As the hon. Member has said, this is an important opportunity to remember all the innocent victims of those terrible events in Gujarat 20 years ago, which of course includes the 59 people who died on the Sabarmati express train. Like the hon. Member, I express my condolences to the families of those people, to the hon. Member's constituents, and to everyone who lost loved ones in that shocking outbreak of violent rioting.

It is important to acknowledge that there have been extensive investigations into the events of 2002, including a special investigation team appointed in 2009 by the Supreme Court of India. A number of people have been convicted and given long prison sentences, and these matters have, of course, also been the subject of extensive scrutiny and debate in the Indian Parliament. The values of respect for the rule of law, parliamentary democracy and constitutional protection of the rights of religious minorities are at the heart of the Indian political system, and those values have shaped the response to the tragic events in Gujarat. There has been a clear determination to learn from what happened, to do everything possible to stop such riots ever occurring again, and to bring to justice the perpetrators of this completely unacceptable violence and rioting.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Asia (Amanda Milling): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spenningsdale (Kim Leadbeater) on having secured today's debate, which provides us with an opportunity to pause and remember these tragic events and all those affected by them, including the innocent victims from her constituency: Sakil and Saeed Dawood and Mohammed Aswat. My thoughts go out to their families, some of whom are in the Gallery today. There is a deep connection between the UK and India—one of the world's oldest democracies, and the world's largest. I recognise the contributions that all Members have made, both through interventions and through speeches, and will try to respond to the points that have been raised.

The intercommunal violence in Gujarat in 2002 was serious and tragic. It is a sobering reminder of the need to continually work for respect and harmony between religious communities—an issue shared by both our democracies. As we have heard, a nephew of two of the British victims, Imran, was injured, but thankfully survived the horrific attack and was rescued by police. As the hon. Member mentioned, he is in the Gallery today.

We have provided consular support to the families of the British victims since 2002, and we will continue to provide assistance as needed. I acknowledge the hurt the families must feel that the remains of their loved ones have not been returned to them. We have been advised by the family's legal representatives that an application has to be made to the court in India for the remains to be returned, and we stand ready to support that application once it has been made.

Regarding the coroner's inquest, we stand ready to engage and provide further consular assistance to the Dawood family if requested. We are not aware of any unpublished reports into the riots carried out by the UK Government at the time. During the riots, many women were raped, and Muslim homes and businesses were destroyed. According to official figures, the violence claimed more than 1,000 lives, although many reports suggest that the true figure is higher. The then Prime Minister, Prime Minister Vajpayee, and the Government of India strongly condemned the violence in the months that followed.

The rights and protections of religious communities around the globe is a priority for this Government. We will continue to condemn any incidents of discrimination because of religion or belief regardless of the country or faith involved. India has a strong tradition of diversity, and we look to it to uphold all freedoms and rights guaranteed in its strong constitution. We have a strong relationship with India. We raise the importance of freedom of religion and belief in India, including the impact of legislative and judicial measures, directly with the Indian authorities at appropriate times.

UK Ministers and diplomats also maintain a dialogue with a range of Indian faith leaders and communities across India. Through our high commission in New Delhi, we support a UK-India interfaith leadership programme, which brings together emerging Indian faith leaders to foster understanding and respect. It is

because of our close relationship with the Government of India that we are able to raise important issues where appropriate, including on the rights of minorities.

India is central to the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt, and both Governments are committed to taking the relationship from strength to strength. Our 2030 road map, which was launched by the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Modi last year, will further advance our comprehensive strategic partnership. It benefits people across both countries, and supports regional and global security and prosperity. The UK's 1.6 million-strong diaspora community provides a unique living bridge of people, commerce, ideas, institutions and culture. More than one in five of all student visas are issued to Indian nationals.

Indian healthcare professionals are the largest non-British group of staff in our NHS. We recently launched negotiations for a comprehensive UK-India free trade agreement, which would particularly benefit the north of England, Wales, the west midlands and Northern Ireland. India, as the pharmacy of the world, plays a vital role in supporting global equitable access to vaccines. Oxford University, AstraZeneca and the Serum Institute of India are collaborating to develop vaccines at scale. We will work together to uphold democratic standards. We are committed to India becoming a permanent member of a reformed UN Security Council, and will work with India as a strong partner to support its COP26 commitments, including through a \$1 billion green guarantee and the British International Investment partnership.

Twenty years after those dark days in Gujarat, it is right that we remember the victims of that violence, their families and all those who died in those tragic events, including those from Batley. It is also right that we reaffirm our commitment to do all we can to foster intercommunal understanding and respect around the world and to prevent such events from happening anywhere. That is why the rights of those from minority groups are an essential part of our dialogue and partnership with India—a country whose constitution protects the rights of citizens of all faiths. It is a partnership and friendship that is very important to us, and which brings immense benefits to a diverse range of people in both our countries.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Edmonton EcoPark: Proposed Expansion

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I remind Members to observe social distancing and to wear masks when they are not speaking.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential environmental and health impacts of the proposed expansion at Edmonton EcoPark.

It is a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hosie. This debate does not directly have an effect on you, but I hope that you will find something interesting in it that may be applicable elsewhere.

This debate on the proposed expansion at Edmonton EcoPark, with its health and environmental impacts, is critical to those in my area and in my constituency, and I have an apology from the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), who is unable to attend. I want to read out a list of those who have signed letters and been involved in campaigning to stop the proposed incinerator, who include myself and the hon. Member for Edmonton; my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell); my right hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing), who has expressed her views on this; the hon. Members for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) and for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer); the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who is here; and Assembly Members Emma Best, Joanne McCartney, Siân Berry, Andrew Boff, Caroline Pidgeon, Zack Polanski and Caroline Russell. The AMs obviously could not be here. Some of the Members of Parliament could not be here either, but I thought it would be useful for that list to be read into the record. Those people are all in support of what I am about to say.

The problem is that, for some years, I have been deeply concerned about the way in which the process has been going. The incinerator that was built originally is about to be significantly increased in size. This is a cross-party issue, not one that divides along normal party lines, because it affects ordinary people in the constituencies and areas to which I have referred. They are affected regardless of their political views. I have pretty much never come across a constituent who actually wants this project.

The incinerator sits like an eyesore just below my constituency but, because of the prevailing winds from the south-west, the whole constituency is hit by what comes out of the chimneys. The other day, I happened to visit a shopping centre nearby. It was a cold day and the plume engulfed us as it travelled across my constituency. However, it goes to others as well.

I pay tribute in all of this to the active local campaign group, Stop the Edmonton Incinerator Now, which represents the feelings of many of our constituents. Carina Millstone in particular, and others, have been active on this issue. That is a good sign of how local politics is alive and well and talking about real issues, rather than some of the stuff we sometimes get bound up in in this building.

The project does not represent good value for money, which is the key element of the argument that I am making. In almost everything else we do in the Government or Opposition, we ask whether what we are about to do is good value for money and, further down the road, if costs increase, whether it still represents good value for money. I do not think that the incinerator expansion is a good return for taxpayers in our constituencies. The costs have spiralled, almost doubling from the original £650 million to £1.2 billion now, and nothing has yet been built. The North London Waste Authority has already spent £4.3 million developing plans for the new incinerator. Everywhere, I and other Members have asked for a value for money review of the project, from the Public Accounts Committee right the way through to every single Department and pretty much every single Secretary of State—I do not think I have asked the Defence Secretary, but who knows. The fact is, I have tried to ask everyone.

In normal circumstances, with a budget of £1.2 billion, might someone not want to ask whether a project still represents good value for money? However, nobody seems to say that they will take responsibility for it in Government or local government. It appears that the only body that is capable of reviewing or changing the project is the North London Waste Authority itself. In a way, it sets the exam question and answers it for itself every time. That cannot be right. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will give us some inkling as to whether the Government think that the project carrying on is right.

The high cost is a key reason why we should pause, review and ask fundamental questions about whether this is still the best course of action for our constituents. Let us look at overcapacity. The incinerator is already burning over 320,000 tonnes of waste that could be recycled and composted—just imagine that we are pressing ahead on that basis. Since the plans to expand were originally drawn up, waste generation has actually fallen, because most members of the public are reacting to the drive for recycling and taking greater care in what they do.

The NLWA had a long-standing goal of reaching a 50% recycling and composting rate by 2020, but it is currently still below 30%. If it had got to the 50% marker, there would be even less reason for the incinerator to be there for the local area, and the plan was that it was for the local area—north-west London. I am therefore concerned about the plans because they are no longer about north-west London. To make the project viable, we will now have to drag stuff all the way across London to keep this thing burning. Now we are going to have more traffic on the road, extra fumes and extra environmental damage—just to keep an incinerator going. Why are we so fixed on having this huge thing near my constituency—so much so that we have to drag waste from all over London and clog up the roads just to keep it going? If it does not have enough from the local area as it stands at the moment, what is its purpose?

There are serious health implications for our constituents if the expansion goes ahead. Some 700,000 tonnes of waste will be incinerated every year, releasing what we call ultrafine particulate matter over residential areas. The levels of air pollution over parts of my constituency are already dangerously high. I am informed by Plume Plotter, an independent organisation that plots the plumes

of incinerators across the country, that today the plume from the incinerator is blowing right across the whole of my constituency, but particularly the north part, and across the other constituencies I have already named.

We already have many hotspots in my constituency where air pollution is above the World Health Organisation's air quality guideline levels. Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation have calculated that 100% of schools, GP surgeries and care homes in my constituency are in areas that are already above the recommended guidelines. Even before any attempts to expand the Edmonton EcoPark, air pollution is having a significant impact on the health of residents across the constituency.

Public Health England has shown that short and long-term exposure to air pollution has significant health risks, including reducing life expectancy and having an impact on lung function, which increases asthma cases and cardiovascular admissions—all extra costs in pure value for money terms, even if we do not think too hard about the terrible health implications.

Seventy NHS GPs from across north London wrote to the Prime Minister last year and said that the plans to expand the incinerator should be pulled. In their letter, they claim that the Prime Minister could save more lives by pulling the expansion than they will save in their entire careers. So here is a big dilemma: the Government tell me that they do not have the power to intervene, but it seems that the waste authority has an unlimited demand for money. Something has gone badly wrong in all this.

The environmental impacts are huge. The issue is that incineration captures only a small amount of carbon from the material it burns. We know that alternative waste disposal methods exist, such as mechanical biological treatment, steam autoclaving and anaerobic digestion. All those things are now being used elsewhere, but not here. Over all the years, we have remained wedded to the idea that we have to burn waste. The methods I have mentioned have all lowered carbon emissions, yet the waste authority continues to push for incineration. Most notable scientific advisers have said exactly the same and questioned the suitability of incineration as a method of waste disposal.

I remind right hon. and hon. Members that the Edmonton EcoPark is right in the middle of a residential area. It is not as though this is some industrial park; it is right in the middle of a very densely occupied residential area, which covers all the constituencies that I named. The chief scientific adviser to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that the UK should move away from incineration and find better ways to use the value of materials, rather than turning them into carbon dioxide.

This is meant to be a competitive bid, but it is not. It is now down to one bidder. In other words, it is a slam dunk—name your own price. Acciona, the company involved, won the contract with no competitors. The chief executive officer of Acciona acknowledged the other day that the proposed plant is significantly larger than it should be. The man who is building it now does not actually think it should be built. It is bizarre. Every day I look at this project and wonder whether this is a parallel universe. The CEO said at a panel event at COP26:

“The massive oversizing of the [Edmonton] plant is something that is beyond our control. It's a specific issue of the plant.”

I have raised this issue with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with Housing, with the Chancellor and even with the Prime Minister. Civil servants have said constantly that it is not feasible to intervene, but the North London Waste Authority, surely, somewhere along the line, needs to be held to account on all the points I have made, which I am sure hon. Members will add to. What more evidence do we need?

Here we have the intransigent, inflexible, arrogant North London Waste Authority—and I mean arrogant, because at hearings it has just swept evidence from doctors and scientists to one side—refusing to budge on a policy that is clearly wrong and that is failing. It is a shameful state of affairs when a public body can no longer be held to account, because it no longer represents what the public want.

When something goes so badly wrong, the Government have to look at it again and ask how it can be that, amidst spiralling costs, health damage and pollution issues, we still plough ahead with a technology that is no longer needed and that will damage people's lives in my constituency and others. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to answer those questions.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I would just say that if the Back-Bench Members could contain their remarks to around eight minutes we will have plenty time for the Front-Bench speeches. I call Jeremy Corbyn.

4.42 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to be in this debate with you chairing it, Mr Hosie. I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for the energy he has put into obtaining this debate. I also thank the cross-party group that has supported him.

It is essential that we think seriously about where we are going with our environment and our natural world. They are subject to debate all the time, and we have just had COP26. We have to challenge the conventional orthodoxy about waste disposal—that, somehow or other, incineration is a good thing. If we do not, we will continue to damage the lungs of our children and our communities with not just particles but nanoparticles that are very invasive of the human body. The excellent “Pollution from waste incineration” report from the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), describes that issue very well.

I want to say a big thank you to all the local campaigners—those around the incinerator in Edmonton, who my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) represents so well, as well as the people from all over the seven boroughs that make up the North London Waste Authority.

Before I became an MP, I was a councillor in Haringey. I remember well the discussions about developing the incinerator and cross-borough co-operation to get rid of rubbish. Back in the day—we are talking 40-plus years ago—it was seen as an environmental step forward to burn waste in order to generate electricity, rather than to put it into landfill. It was seen as a good thing to do. I do not think many of us on the council in those

[Jeremy Corbyn]

days thought very much about what would happen beyond that. Incineration saved landfill and was a way of getting rid of waste. It was lamentable. We should not have done it; I know that. Lots of things should not have been done. But now we have a great opportunity to change the dial on whether we go for further incineration or really put pressure on all of us, local authorities included, to develop a much more effective and comprehensive system for recycling our waste. The technology of the 1970s is not appropriate for the 21st century, and we need to move on from it.

The health effects I have mentioned. The emission effects I have mentioned. But as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, who actually suffers as a result of the pollution that comes from incineration? I get that the plant now being considered for development at the Edmonton site is a lot better than the one there now. I get that there are filters and all that. I fully understand all of that. The fundamental problem is that we are piling a lot of waste, including plastic, into an incinerator; it burns and gives off emissions that are gas, which clearly cannot be picked up by a filter, and the nanoparticles, which I mentioned a couple of minutes ago, are very invasive of the human body and particularly damaging to children in schools, out in the streets or playing. We are polluting the next generation.

The opposition around the country to incineration is enormous. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West will be speaking in a few moments. People defeated the idea of an incinerator in Swansea. There is a huge campaign going on now against a proposed incinerator in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, and there are many other such campaigns around the country. Why? Because people do not want to be polluted, but also because they recognise that it is simply the wrong direction to take and is outwith everything that was agreed at COP26.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The truth is also that there are now so many new technologies, which others are using, that mean that incineration is no longer necessary. There are other, cleaner ways to get rid of waste.

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely concur. If we look at the processes of waste disposal—perhaps we not talk about waste disposal but about recycling as the priority—that are happening in Germany and Scandinavia, we see that they are far in advance of so much of what we are doing in this country. We could do so much more and do it so much better.

The North London Waste Authority area—the seven boroughs—produces about 820,000 tonnes of waste per annum. Much of that goes into the incinerator. Across the whole area, only 30% is recycled. The recycling rates are abysmal, quite frankly. They are abysmal in many other parts of the country as well. Germany recycles 65%. Other countries achieve that. We are nowhere near.

I remember being appointed as chair of Agenda 21 by Islington Council—this was as the local MP—to try to increase recycling rates. We managed to double the rate, up to 30%, after about 10 years of very hard work, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) when she was leader of the council. I just felt so disappointed that we could not get so much further. I get it: this is complicated; it is difficult. The collection systems are complicated. But if

we want to give our children clean air, if we want to fulfil the obligations that we have signed up to at COP26, we should not be investing more than £1 billion in an incinerator that the CEO of the company says is over capacity anyway. We should instead be looking to a reduction in incineration over 10 years; we should go from where we are now down to somewhere nearer to zero in 10 years' time. That would certainly concentrate the mind and help us to bring about much higher rates of recycling.

On the decision that has been taken by the North London Waste Authority, I have heard the financial arguments that it has put. I have been asked, "Well, what's your alternative if you're opposed to this?" It has been quite a robust debate. I am not accusing the North London Waste Authority members of being anti-environment. They are not. In their individual boroughs, they have done a fantastic job in improving the environment and recycling rates. But we have to go a lot further and a lot faster, and that is why I want to make the case, and support the case that has been made today by others, for some kind of intervention by the Government to prevent this thing from going ahead and to prevent the expenditure of this huge amount of money through "green" bonds—yes, "green" bonds to pay for an incinerator that is, I think, not needed and not necessary.

I will finish with this point. I have had a long discussion with a number of people, who have spent an awful lot of time and are much more knowledgeable on all of this than probably any of us in this Chamber today, about how we can reduce incineration. They point out all the technology that is now available that was not in the past: the separation of metals, paper and glass, and the reduction in plastics. That has to be accompanied by a much tougher campaign on packaging, waste and plastic production. What we will end up with is a massive incinerator without enough rubbish to fill it from the neighbourhood area. We will import rubbish from other parts of London, or from abroad, to burn in that incinerator, because we are locked into a £1 billion contract to build it. Can we pause for a moment, think of what we are doing and the opportunity we now have to turn the corner from incineration to reuse and recycling? That is surely the legacy we want to leave to all our children.

4.50 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to follow the former leaders of the Conservative and Labour parties in talking about incineration and looking to the future. I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution. Like previous speakers, my focus is on air quality and climate change. We wish to pause the forward direction of incineration, while the Government's current plan is to double incineration by 2030. The APPG has published research on the impact of ultrafine particulates, which get through filters and are much smaller than the PM2.5 particulates that we normally talk about.

The World Health Organisation has reduced PM2.5 advisory levels from 10 to 5 micrograms per cubic metre, but latest evidence suggests that if 5 micrograms of PM2.5 are broken up into much smaller particulates of less weight, they actually do more damage to the body, because they penetrate immediately into the bloodstream and vital organs, causing permanent chronic damage.

We are concerned about a new incinerator in Edmonton generating carbon, burning 700,000 tonnes of waste. That quantum in an urban environment, where there are often poorer households, will have significant impact on public health at a time when we have not cracked the air quality problem in Britain. We have wood-burning stoves in urban environments, giving rise to 38% of PM2.5, for example, and we still have a problem with diesel cars. If we add this on, it is a real problem.

There are opportunities, as has been pointed out in the case of Edmonton, where the recycling rate is in the region of 30%. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said it would be difficult to get to that, but in Swansea the recycling rate is 62%. If we can double the rate, we can halve the amount we are burning. That is simple mathematics. The Government must ask themselves how to provide the incentive structure to do that. My right hon. Friend said that when he was a councillor, there was an incentive to avoid landfill tax, and therefore the council moved towards burning.

I appreciate that Treasury representatives are not here, but if we had an incineration tax, there would be more focus on recycling. As has been mentioned, new technologies for chemical and mechanical recycling are available. The risk of this venture is that we will end up with excess capacity, and instead of an incentive for more recycling, there will be one for more burning. It could import burning and produce more waste, which is clearly not what we want.

Some environmental impacts can be far-reaching. Studies in Holland showed that eggshells had dioxins in them from incinerator waste 10 kilometres away. There are issues with heavy metals in children's toenails, which can give rise to leukaemia. A lot of this science is emerging and not known. The science that predicates this particular planning agreement is basically older technology. Technology is moving quickly, as are medical knowledge and science. There is a case for a moratorium to pause and think. Indeed, there is a moratorium on incineration in Wales.

A pre-action letter for judicial review was written on 28 January. It points out that some of the claims that have been made do not stand up to scrutiny. In particular, it is claimed that the incinerator would produce only 28,000 tonnes of carbon; however, according to the North London Waste Authority's own figures, it will produce 683,000 tonnes of carbon for something like 700,000 tonnes of waste. It is claimed that the incinerator will be developed to be carbon capture ready, but it will not. Again, that is in breach of the Government advice on energy national policy statement, EN-3.

What has been happening is clearly not in compliance with what the Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are saying. The Mayor of London predicts that there will be 950,000 tonnes of excess burning capacity in London if this goes ahead alongside other plans. We need a holistic plan. We may want to substitute some of the dirty incinerators for a cleaner incinerator. However, we need to see that in the round with the best technology available.

On that point, this plan does not include a dedicated pre-sorting device for the extraction of plastics and recyclables that should be used again. Those are resources. We need a broader plan of taxing plastic and having fewer types of plastic, so that it is more cost-effective

and profitable to extract, reuse and recycle. We need to use less and we should have a fiscal strategy. We hope that that is the benign future. In this case, however, we are simply locking ourselves into old technologies and old science, even though we know that the precautionary principle would make us think, "Actually, let's step back and not do this."

The North London Waste Authority is in breach of the advice from the Climate Change Committee on using the expression "low carbon"; energy from waste is not counted as low carbon. There are questions as to whether changes to the national grid and other changes will be compliant with that.

It has been mentioned that the project will be funded by a new type of green bond. However, when speaking about the future for green bonds, the Chancellor has said that the UK would not embark on a generation of tax, as it was called for many years, for sustainable finances that was not up to at least the standards of the EU. Of course, the EU standards for green bonds exclude energy from waste, and the EU taxes plastic at £650 per tonne as opposed to £200 per tonne.

I think this is a moment to pause. If these green bonds go ahead, they might be the source of the next 50 applications. There will end up being financial risks for the bondholders because, as has been said, there will be excess capacity. We will be in the farcical situation of providing incentives to grow incineration, which, ultimately, will mean more pollution in highly urban areas and will affect all our constituents. I very much welcome this debate and it is a great privilege to be part of it.

4.58 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate and on his outspokenness on this matter, as well as the work he has done on trying to achieve a solution with the Treasury. It is a pleasure to hear from my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who has a record going back to the 1970s as a local councillor in Haringey; he is known for his work in the areas of recycling, cycling and generally standing up for a more sustainable planet.

It is also a pleasure to hear from the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), who has talked about his outstanding work in Swansea West and beyond, responding to the challenges presented by COP26 and calling for us to be a bit more ambitious and a bit braver on incinerators. This feels like old technology, and that is why I am pleased that Haringey was the only borough that voted to pause and review when it came to the vote on the bid for the scheme.

I want to put on the record our memory of seven-year-old Ella Kissi-Debrah, who tragically died from air pollution poisoning, as was found subsequently. Her mother, Rosamund, who spoke in this House on health and safety day, has spoken powerfully about how she took Ella's case to the coroner to have the way that she passed away looked at. Ella was the first person to be formally found to have passed away from air pollution in the UK, and that was put on her death certificate posthumously.

[*Catherine West*]

I also want to put on the record that we in this House are all aware that air pollution does not affect us all equally. Pregnant women, babies and children, older people, people with lung conditions and those living in the poorest areas and in ethnically diverse communities are particularly at risk. I want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), who worked as a health professional before coming into this House, and also my Haringey colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who has led on a number of issues to do with ethnically diverse communities and their exposure to pollution, as well as the high numbers of our constituents who suffer from lung conditions. We know that 88% of people with a lung condition are affected by air pollution, and 58% of people with asthma have their condition triggered by air pollution. That is the context of today's debate.

When the plans were first signed off, when the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was the Mayor of London, the solution might have been okay, but that was a long time ago and things have moved on. It feels as though the project has not had the COP26 test applied to it, and now would be a good time for the Government to look again and challenge whether there is more that can be done. In particular, with the introduction of the green bonds, this might be a good time to explain exactly how they work—there does not seem to be a proper explanation of that—and to see how the project could introduce some best practice around the green agenda.

We are in a climate emergency, and our constituents want change. They want to recycle more and they want our polluted air to be cleaner. They are anxious that the size of the incinerator will mean there is an incentive to produce more waste in order to feed the associated district energy network. They are concerned about the environmental impact of incineration and the emissions that that process creates. They want 21st-century solutions to the management of waste that do not harm the health of residents or our environment.

Our constituents know that it is the poorest areas that pay the heaviest price, and there is real disappointment about the fact that the request for a pause and review was unsuccessful and the contract has now been awarded. It is vital that the design properly recognises the advances that we all expect to see in carbon capture and storage so that it is ready and equipped to take full advantage of them. Haringey's council leader has urged the North London Waste Authority to bring forward the carbon capture and storage element of the plant so that it is operational as soon as possible to reduce CO₂ emissions, and I fully support her in that goal.

It is important to say that it is very difficult for local authorities to be innovative when they have had cuts of up to 50% to their budgets. Collectively, the eight local authorities' budgets have been cut back enormously since 2010. The Government have failed to fund local authorities properly for the past 11 years and failed to be ambitious in their approach to waste. I urge the Government to work with the North London Waste Authority and our communities to radically increase recycling levels and to meet and beat the Mayor of London's target of 50% by 2030.

The other measures that the Mayor of London has introduced around expanding the congestion charge and the ULEZ are painful for many of London's motorists. It seems that the project that we are debating could make a very big difference with one installation, so it is a pity that we have not looked at its impact on making our air cleaner, as we desire to do.

It is vital to recognise the environmental and health impacts of incineration, but also to make sure that we do not simply push the problem out of London by transporting the capital's waste to other parts of the UK or overseas. As other Members have mentioned, it would be unenviable to see waste from other parts of London coming back to London because there is capacity in this incinerator. Not only would that be bad for the environment, but it would be socially unjust.

I will conclude with this: all of us in this House care deeply about cleaner air, and about the new information we have regarding the impact of air pollution on asthma sufferers and others with lung conditions. I hope that the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and the Minister will work to ensure that we belatedly get the best possible outcome for our north London constituents.

5.5 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Wood Green—

Catherine West: Woodford Green.

Dr Whitehead: Sorry, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). My office companion is my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), so that is on my mind all the time, as it should be. I need to get my nomenclature absolutely straight.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green on having secured today's debate. The debate appears to be about a specific incinerator in a specific place with specific proposals for its extension, but it encapsulates much wider questions: how do we deal with our waste in modern times, and what are the best ways of dealing with it and, indeed, the energy that might come from it? By examining those wider questions, we loop back to the best thing to do with the North London Waste Authority, and the Edmonton incinerator in particular.

The first thing that is important in addressing this modern debate is to recognise—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has correctly pointed out—that although we have been talking about waste this afternoon, we should not be talking about it in this way, because the vast majority of waste is actually a resource. In the context of the modern circular economy, the idea that we place a material that we have used into a stream, and then it is gone out of the system one way or another—it used to be buried; now it is incinerated—is clearly not appropriate if we regard that waste primarily as a resource. The duty of authorities dealing with waste should be to make sure that as much of that resource as possible can be recovered for use elsewhere, one way or another.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for what he is saying. Does he not think we should be recording the level of composting, as well as recycling? Sadly, a huge amount of food waste and green waste probably ends up in incineration or landfill when it could be efficiently composted and provide compost for local people.

Dr Whitehead: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: that is one of the elements of regarding waste as a resource, because waste—particularly municipal waste—will have a number of elements in it. It will have putrescibles in it, it will have waste from household activities, it may well have wood waste and metal waste and it will certainly have plastic waste. All those types of waste can be reused, recovered and dealt with in different ways. The very last thing that we should do with such products—what we should do only when nothing else can be done with them—is to burn them, even if we think we are recovering energy.

In 1971, when the Edmonton incinerator first came into production, the convention was that we took the rubbish from the bins, put it in a truck, took it smartly down to the local tip and buried it in landfill. That was it. For a long time, we were the worst country in Europe for landfilling our waste. In recent years, that has turned around but, unfortunately, only into the next stage up on the waste hierarchy, which is to incinerate, rather than to bury in the ground. Both the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North mentioned in their excellent contributions that we have come a long way since that sort of analysis—not just whether we should move waste up the hierarchy more efficiently than we used to, but what is available to work with once we decide what we want to do.

I appreciate that the task for a waste authority, such as the North London Waste Authority, is difficult. It has huge amounts of waste coming in every day, it has to do something with it, the task never ends and, in recent years, the Government have not helped, providing little support for innovative and novel ways of dealing with waste, separating resources out and so on. A little while ago, for example, the Government pulled a number of PFI—private finance initiative—plants that local authorities had in the pipeline for waste. Authorities are pretty much left to their own devices to bring forward innovation.

A waste authority under such pressure might well think, “This is a real problem. Here’s the easiest way to solve it without putting it into landfill.” That seems to be what has happened with the Edmonton incinerator. Not only have we had a large incinerator there for a number of years, but plans are now in place to extend it, which would make the past even more nailed down in the future, with that future being incineration. Believe me—this has happened across the country, including in my own county—once a contract for a large-scale incineration facility such as that is entered into, it is with us for a long time. It freezes the technology in time, at that particular point.

As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned, however, that means that, as we begin to go up through the waste hierarchy, we start by taking further fractions out of the waste. It becomes a beast that is more and more hungry to be fed, because of the contracts for the incineration plants. So, waste is

pulled in from a wider and wider area and, in the end, it can start to impede efforts to move up the waste hierarchy with all that waste.

Those concerns are over and above the one expressed by hon. Members this afternoon about what comes out of the chimney stack from incineration. We have learnt a lot more these days, than we had in the early ’70s when the arrangements first came into place. Although techniques for dampening emissions such as nitrous oxide, particulates and various other things that come out of the chimney stack have improved, that is still a very real issue, as hon. Members have mentioned, for the health of the neighbourhoods around incineration plants and, indeed, a wider area, as we have seen from studies that have taken place on the subject.

We have a proposal, which I have described on other occasions as a throwback. It tries to take technology from two decades ago into the next decade and land us with it for a long time to come. It should not happen.

There are several other ways, both emerging and in quite widespread practice, of dealing with those waste streams, particularly through fractionalising them out. Another small matter to put at the Government’s door: we still do not have sufficient plastics recycling and reprocessing facilities in this country. We are still in the business, possibly for a long time to come, of exporting plastics waste. We need Government action to make sure that those plastics recycling plants are available so that waste authorities can ensure that their plastics collection is properly dealt with afterwards.

We also know that there are techniques available to gasify waste in general and produce syngas and dimethyl ether for use in vehicles and various other plants. It is a renewable form of gas that could be useful for the future of heating, which is very topical. Those techniques do not produce the sort of emissions that arise from incineration plants. They can deal with massive amounts of waste. Indeed, anaerobic digestion, which is a rather grand way of talking about composting—

Jeremy Corbyn: It is more or less the same thing.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed. It is more or less the same thing.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is coming close to the end of his remarks. I want to leave time for the Minister.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed, Mr Hosie, I am approaching the end of my remarks and I am guided by your instruction.

There are modern techniques that can deal with waste. My first plea to the North London Waste Authority is to think about those new techniques in a positive way and not simply decide to take the same old tried and tested routes. There are so much better ways of doing it. My second plea is that, if the North London Waste Authority decides to have a review of the matter, the Government will support that. I know that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has written on several occasions to request the Government’s support for some of the new measures that can deal with waste and resource in a different way.

[*Dr Whitehead*]

We have the low carbon future to think about. We have got to get waste and resource management techniques in place that address that, either through carbon capture and storage or new methods of collection and dealing with waste. I am certain that the current proposal, should it go ahead, will not stand the test of the future. We should have our eyes on that future and together make sure that the waste arrangements for north-west London are fit for it rather than harking back to the past.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this important debate.

The Edmonton incinerator was given development consent in February 2017 after the consideration of relevant issues, including potential environmental and health impacts. The Government have no statutory or financial basis for undertaking a cost review of the Edmonton project. That would be a matter for the local auditors, but I have listened carefully to my right hon. Friend and, having heard what he said today, if I were a council tax payer in his constituency, I would be concerned about whether there is value for money in the project. He reports costs increasing from £650 million to £1.2 billion, which is a huge increase. I am not surprised to learn from him that local people are testing whether the North London Waste Authority has the necessary robust practices in place.

Let me lay out the process. All large energy-from-waste plants in England must comply with strict emission limits and cannot operate without a permit issued by the Environment Agency—in this case, the one granted in 2017. The Environment Agency assesses the emissions from new plants as part of its permitting process and consults the UK Health Security Agency on every application it receives. UKHSA's position relating to incineration is that modern, well run and regulated municipal waste incinerators are not a significant risk to public health. I will come back in a moment to the arguments about weighing them up versus other means of waste disposal and waste avoidance. The concerns raised by my right hon. Friend's GPs could usefully be directed towards the UK Health Security Agency, if he thinks that there is evidence that their conclusion does not abide with what is going on locally.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I want to make some more progress. I am going to describe the policy, and then I will respond to the points raised in the debate and, if I have time, I will take some interventions.

In relation to the Edmonton energy-from-waste plant, the Environment Agency issued a permit for the new plant in 2017. Once the plant becomes operational, the Environment Agency has pledged to perform regular inspections and audits to ensure that the plant is complying with the requirements of its permit.

I will now turn to the debate itself. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green is coming up to 30 years in this House. He has had a wide variety of roles, including six years as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and has always been an extraordinary champion for his part of London. He is a fellow London MP and has been a brilliant representative on a huge number of fronts, not least this issue, working with local campaign groups. He has raised the issue with the Prime Minister, various Secretaries of State and me. He made some very strong points on value for money and the process.

A number of Members made the point about recycling falling short, and I agree with them. I represent two local authorities, and Hammersmith and Fulham has one of the worst recycling rates in the country, so I have every sympathy with my right hon. Friend and every other Member, including the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (*Dr Whitehead*), when it comes to recycling.

My right hon. Friend said that there was only one bidder. It is not right for me to comment on the operation of the process, but I think he reported that the winner of the bid said that there was “massive oversizing”. I am not at all surprised that local taxpayers would be concerned to discover those reported comments from the chief executive of the bidding company.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (*Jeremy Corbyn*) also spoke. Waste incineration with energy recovery should not compete with waste prevention, re-use or recycling. We do not see them as being competing technologies. Notwithstanding new technologies, which he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green raised, the evidence available shows that it remains the case that the carbon impact of most mixed waste streams is lower if sent to energy-from-waste plants than if sent to landfill. Obviously, that is not a comparison with recycling or waste reduction, but in terms of the strict comparison with landfill—I think that the right hon. Gentleman and I agree on this—energy from waste is better than from landfill. I am not suggesting that he was making an alternative point. I think that his point was that recycling is better. We do not disagree with that at all.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (*Geraint Davies*) talked about the doubling of incineration. I am afraid that I do not recognise that figure. That is not our understating of what is in the planning pipeline. In line with the commitment in DEFRA's resources and waste strategy to monitor residual waste capacity, officials are currently assessing planned incinerator capacity against expected future residual waste arisings, so that we can understand what future incineration capacity may be required following the implementation of key commitments in the RWS. There is, therefore, an assessment of our overall waste capacity vis-à-vis the incinerator capacity. That is being carried out by DEFRA, which is the policy lead on the waste element, while I am the policy lead on the energy element.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (*Catherine West*) rightly drew attention to the tragic case of *Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah* and her mother *Rosamund*. We London politicians are all keenly aware of the findings in that case and the reverberations that it has had across London and the country for public policy on air quality and air pollution, which has been

improving significantly in London since 2010. However, it is still not satisfactory for any of us as Londoners or London MPs. We still have a way to go, and the tragic case of Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah is a stark reminder of the important work that has to be done.

Carbon capture, utilisation and storage at the incinerator is a matter for local decision making, but the Government have very ambitious targets on CCUS, including 6 megatonnes of CO₂ equivalent by 2030, rising to 9 megatonnes by 2035. We have an industrial decarbonisation and hydrogen revenue support scheme to fund our new hydrogen and industrial CCUS business models. The Government take our air quality obligations extremely seriously, and we are already taking significant action to improve air quality. The Government absolutely recognise that there is more to do to protect people and the environment from the effects of air pollution, and that is why we are taking the action set out in our world-leading clean air strategy, which includes proposals to reduce emissions from domestic burning.

Geraint Davies: Does the Minister accept that the doubling of incineration that I mentioned is predicated on the 50 consent orders that have been given by BEIS—his Department—for new incinerators? The 2022 standards of technology and health, rather than those of 2017, should surely be applied to the Edmonton EcoPark incinerator, but the main point is that his Department is giving out development consent orders.

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, and I will go back and check that. My understanding is that that is not consistent with the consent orders that have been granted, but I will write to him on the detail as to whether we have the same set of figures and whether we are arguing at cross-purposes. I am very happy to write to him and give him some more detail.

Our clean air strategy includes proposals to reduce emissions from domestic burning, industry and farming, alongside stronger powers and an improved framework for local government to tackle more localised issues. The legacy of our reliance on landfill is responsible for around 75% of the carbon emissions from the waste sector, so it is not simply a matter of switching back to landfilling any non-recyclable waste. That is why we have been clear in the resources and waste strategy that we wish to reduce the level of municipal waste sent to

landfill to 10% or less by 2035, and why we are actively exploring policy options to work towards eliminating all biodegradable waste to landfill by 2030.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has raised some serious concerns about the North London Waste Authority, the finances of the incinerator at Edmonton EcoPark, and whether it represents value for money. I have listened very carefully, and I am sure local taxpayers will be very concerned at what he reports to the House. I hope the waste authority responds in full, as I have done, to the points that he has raised today. In the meantime, I commend him for securing this important debate, and I hope I have laid out the Government's views on the overall national policy behind waste and energy.

5.28 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It has been a very good debate in the short amount of time available, and the cross-party nature of it is important. Nobody has stood to defend the nature of what is going on with the North London Waste Authority. I take the comments from my right hon. Friend the Minister to suggest that, should things be otherwise and should the Government have the capacity as they see it, they would be concerned about the nature of what is going on at the North London Waste Authority. I therefore say that this has been a very important debate. We have flushed out the idea that an organisation is riding roughshod over the views and concerns of local people, and that there are serious health concerns, economic concerns and environmental concerns raised by the massive increase in the size of the incinerator at Edmonton EcoPark. I call on the North London Waste Authority, which will have heard the debate, to act reasonably, to pause the expansion, to review it, and to try to figure out whether there is a better way to achieve the requirements made by both the Government and the local authorities, in order to achieve a better environment for all of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential environmental and health impacts of the proposed expansion at Edmonton EcoPark.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 9 February 2022

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office and the Unaoil Case: Independent Review

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I wish to provide details of an independent review I have commissioned into the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) failings identified by the Court of Appeal in the case of *R. v. Akle and Anor* [2021].

This case, investigated and prosecuted by the SFO between 2016 and 2021, resulted in criticism by the Court of the way in which the SFO engaged with third parties and handled disclosure. On receiving the judgment, it was clear to me that swift action was needed to identify how these issues arose and what changes are needed to ensure they are not repeated.

I have appointed Sir David Calvert-Smith to lead this review. Sir David is a former Director of Public Prosecutions and High Court judge who has led several independent reviews and has significant experience relevant to the issues raised.

Sir David will consider and provide recommendations in relation to the following matters:

What happened in this case and why. In particular, the review should assess the two key failings identified in the judgment:

what occurred as regards SFO contact with third-parties and why; and

why did the SFO disclosure failures identified in the Court of Appeal judgment occur?

What implications, if any, do the failings highlighted by this case have for the policies, practices, procedures and related culture of the SFO?

What changes are necessary to address the failings highlighted by the judgment and any wider issues of SFO policies, practices, procedures or related culture identified by the reviewer?

Sir David will have the support of a small team including the Deputy Chief Inspector of Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, Anthony Rogers. Sir David will aim to report to me by the end of May 2022 and I will then provide a further update to Parliament on his findings and my response to them.

The Government are determined to make the UK a hostile environment for all forms of economic crime. It is a priority for me to ensure effective sponsorship of the SFO, which includes supporting and holding the Director to account, as well as safeguarding the SFO's independence to investigate and prosecute crime.

[HCWS602]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contracts for Difference: Frequency of Allocation Rounds

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): Since 2014 the contracts for difference scheme has been at the heart of our efforts to diversify and decarbonise our power system. Since 2010 we have increased the percentage of power generated

from renewables from 7% to 43%, creating thousands of high-skilled jobs and bringing new industries to our former industrial heartlands.

To date contracts for difference has awarded contracts totalling almost 16GW of new renewable electricity capacity across multiple technologies. Since the first competitive allocation round (AR1), it has contributed to a more than 60% reduction in the per unit price of offshore wind, with substantial benefits for consumers. We opened our latest allocation round (AR4) on 13 December 2021. It is our largest yet, with an ambition to procure more new generating capacity than the last three rounds combined.

We want to further accelerate our low carbon power generation, making the UK less reliant on volatile fossil fuels and creating more home-grown power. This will help us to deliver a fully decarbonised electricity system by 2035.

To do this we set out an ambition to accelerate the deployment of low-cost renewable generation by undertaking a review of the frequency of the contracts for difference allocation rounds. The review of allocation round frequency has now concluded.

I have decided to increase the frequency of the allocation rounds to every year, from around every two years as it is currently. The next allocation round, AR5, will be brought forward to March 2023 and it is our intention that the subsequent allocation rounds will be held every 12 months in the following years.

In parallel, we have recently opened a consultation on changes to make AR5 more effective and forward-looking, particularly on the application process for supply chain plans.

Our review suggests that the move to more frequent contracts for difference allocation rounds is overwhelmingly supported by industry. Increasing the frequency of allocation rounds will help to encourage low carbon electricity generation, which may also encourage investment in supply chains, and benefit the UK in the longer term not least by protecting consumers from potentially volatile global markets.

These more frequent rounds will also support the delivery of those renewable technologies, such as onshore wind, offshore wind, and solar PV, which are key to decarbonising the power sector, creating jobs and bringing even more investment to our former industrial heartlands. This will sit alongside the Government's commitment to bring forward another large-scale nuclear power plant this Parliament.

The contracts for difference scheme has been successful in deploying low-carbon generation and reducing the cost of capital for renewable technologies. As more renewables are added to the system, we will continue to consider how the scheme could evolve over the longer term to ensure it reflects the impact of renewables on the wider system, including total system costs.

[HCWS600]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Project Gigabit Winter Update

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): Today we have published the fourth Project Gigabit quarterly update. Thanks to the work of industry

and our record investment, we are making phenomenal progress delivering the biggest broadband rollout in UK history.

In this Project Gigabit delivery plan winter update, we share the news that over 65% of UK premises now have a gigabit-capable connection—a huge leap forwards from just over one in twenty in January 2019.

This delivery plan update also reports on:

newly launched regional supplier procurements in Cambridgeshire and the north-east of England, as well as local supplier procurements in rural Dorset, north Northumberland and Teesdale;

16 local and devolved authorities which currently have live schemes to top up our voucher projects worth £10.5 million;

details of upcoming procurements in Cornwall, Norfolk, Suffolk, Hampshire and Shropshire; and updates on how we are working closely with the devolved Governments to develop and deliver Project Gigabit plans in some of the hardest-to-reach areas in the UK.

Since the launch of Project Gigabit in April 2021, we have connected over 3,500 public sector building hubs: places like Borrowdale Primary School in Cumbria, which is now able to take full advantage of online learning while also speeding up connections to surrounding homes and businesses. We expect to connect a further 100 hubs over the next quarter.

To support this phenomenal progress, Building Digital UK (BDUK) will become an Executive agency of DCMS. BDUK will be based at a new head office in central Manchester, boosting the city's credentials as a fast-growing digital tech hub.

This Government are supporting access to the internet of the future—building broadband that is fast, reliable and future-proof, that supports 5G, and that paves the way for new and unexpected developments in commerce, trade and technology.

I will place a copy of the Project Gigabit delivery plan winter update in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS601]

HOME DEPARTMENT

UK Terrorism Threat Level

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) has reduced the UK national terrorism threat level from severe to substantial. This means that a terrorist attack in the UK is likely.

JTAC previously raised the UK national threat level from substantial to severe following two terrorist attacks in the UK in quick succession, in October and November 2021. When the threat level is at severe it means an attack is highly likely.

JTAC judges that, despite these two attacks, the current nature and scale of the UK terrorist threat is consistent with the level of threat seen prior to the attacks. The attacks in October and November 2021 reflect the complex, volatile, and unpredictable nature of the terrorist threat in the UK.

The decision to change the UK terrorism threat level is taken by JTAC independently of Ministers. JTAC keep the threat level under constant review based on the very latest intelligence and analysis of internal and external factors which drive the threat.

Any reduction in the threat level is positive but it must never make us complacent. Terrorism remains one of the most direct and immediate risks to our national security. The public should remain alert, but not alarmed, and report any concerns they may have to the police.

[HCWS603]

Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 9 February 2022

WORK AND PENSIONS

Cost of Living Increases

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on 24 January 2022.

David Rutley: The latest job figures tell a very positive story. There is now a record number of people in payroll employment in the UK, with 23,000 people added to payrolls in Scotland in December alone. With around 1.25 million vacancies across the UK, up 33,000, or 2.7% in a month, and by 467,000, or 58.9% since the start of the pandemic, there are many further opportunities for people to move into and, importantly, progress in work and increase their earnings.

[Official Report, 24 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 790.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley).

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

David Rutley: With around 1.25 million vacancies across the UK, up 33,000, or 2.7% in a month, and by **462,000**, or 58.9% since the start of the pandemic, there are many further opportunities for people to move into and, importantly, progress in work and increase their earnings.

Cost of Living

The following are extracts from the Westminster Hall debate on 25 January 2022.

David Rutley: We are also investing in our young people through the kickstart scheme: 112,000 young people have started a life-changing six-month work placement, and 10,000 of those starts were in Scotland.

[Official Report, Westminster Hall, 25 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 279WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley).

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

David Rutley: We are also investing in our young people through the kickstart scheme: **122,000** young people have started a life-changing six-month work placement, and 10,000 of those starts were in Scotland.

David Rutley: Secondly, winter fuel payments will be made to over 11 million pensioners this winter, ensuring that older people have the security and dignity they deserve. Households with someone of state pension age will receive £200, and households with someone over 80 will receive £300. Thirdly, cold weather payments help vulnerable people in receipt of certain income-related benefits to meet the additional costs of heating during periods of unseasonably severe cold weather. That includes older people receiving pension credit and those receiving an income-based benefit with a disability component or where the household includes a child under five. In 2020-21, just over 4 million payments were made, at a cost of **just over £100 million**.

[Official Report, Westminster Hall, 25 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 281WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley).

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

David Rutley: In 2020-21, just over 4 million payments were made, at a cost of **around £98.9million**.

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**not later than
Wednesday 16 February 2022**

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