

**Thursday
24 November 2022**

**Volume 723
No. 78**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 24 November 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

A52 Footbridge

1. **Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): If he will meet representatives of the George Spencer Academy and National Highways to discuss the safety of the footbridge crossing the A52. [902376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): National Highways has been in contact with representatives of Spencer Academies Trust, the multi-academy trust responsible for George Spencer Academy, and has met in recent days with representatives on site to discuss their concerns about the A52 footbridge.

Darren Henry: On Monday, I met National Highways at George Spencer Academy in my constituency of Broxtowe. As the Minister knows, the academy is separated by the A52 and is therefore connected by a footbridge. The footbridge has tragically been the site of several suicide attempts over the years, and it is essential that we look at new safety measures for the bridge. Although that was discussed with National Highways on site, my view is that the various solutions proposed were inadequate. A cage could be a safer solution. Will the Minister meet me to discuss a way to ensure we can have a future where tragedies do not occur?

Mr Holden: National Highways' suicide prevention strategy sets out a vision that no one should attempt to take their own life on our roads, and everyone who does is a tragedy. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to see whether there are further things we could do to prevent such events occurring in the future.

Mr Speaker: Although Elliot Colburn is not here, will the Minister answer question 2 to allow us to bring in the shadow Minister?

Ultra Low Emission Zones

2. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of public support for ultra low emission zone schemes. [902377]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor of London and Transport for London, which includes decisions about the London ultra low emission zone. It is the Mayor of London and TfL's responsibility to consult and ensure that residents and businesses are fully engaged with the ULEZ and that their feedback is properly considered and responded to.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Gill Furniss.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): One way to build local support for promoting electric vehicles is by incentivising the switch to electric vehicles, but at the pace the Government are going, the UK is set to miss the target for 300,000 charge points not by one year or two years but by 17 years. This risks stalling the switch, and this week we learned that, far from charging ahead, this Government are slipping back, with rapid charging fund trials delayed.

Mr Holden: The Government are committed to decarbonising transport across the piece, whether it is in rail, road or my own section of buses. We have already seen hundreds of zero-emission buses delivered in London and thousands across the country.

HS2: Compensation

3. **Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure those people adversely affected by HS2 are compensated fairly. [902379]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Compensation is available to property owners affected by HS2, in accordance with the compensation code. We aim to be fair, while protecting the public purse.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new responsibilities and offer him my sympathy that one of them is HS2. He will know that for those who find themselves in the path of this project, obtaining compensation is a painful and long drawn-out experience. That is particularly true for those subject to compulsory purchase, where payments are delayed. Where they are delayed, there are very low rates of interest, and valuations are heavily contested. That is not meeting the promise that he referred to, that the Government would be fair and that people would not be worse off as a result of this project. May I ask him to look urgently at this problem? In particular, will he look at those low rates of interest that are paid on delayed payments? The Government legislated to increase those rates but never brought the measure into effect.

Huw Merriman: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his warm welcome of my entire portfolio; I am very proud to be covering HS2 and rail. Some £3.2 billion has already been paid out in land acquisitions, and more is to be paid out. The Government did recognise that there were problems with acquisitions, and a report was commissioned by a predecessor of mine. We will ensure that we can learn lessons. With regard to the payment of interest, HS2 Ltd pays interest at 0.5% below the Bank of England base rate, and there

was a period of two years between 2020 and 2022 when no interest was paid because the base rate was below 0.5%, but I am willing to meet my right hon. and learned Friend to discuss these matters further.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his position. I remind him that Mark Thurston told the Transport Committee that the anticipated spend for the current year was within the envelope of £5.7 billion. My question relates to how that £5.7 billion is being used in terms of procurement. What can the Minister and the Department do to encourage or specify the use of British steel for rails and structures within the terms of the contract?

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Member, or should I say my hon. Friend, as he is indeed that. I recognise all the work that he has done and continues to do on the Transport Committee. I thought he might ask that question. Some £122 million of British steel has been purchased by HS2. I am keen that we talk to HS2 more about how it can further invest in British steel. I will supply him with figures on how much steel has been produced from outside the UK, because that is how we will end up holding to account. Some 60% of the HS2 procurement contracts will go to small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as large entities such as British Steel.

Dartford Crossing Closures

4. **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with National Highways on closures of the Dartford crossing due to protests. [902380]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): The protesters' actions at Dartford in October put drivers, police and highways agency staff in danger and caused misery to thousands of ordinary people. National Highways works closely with the police to respond robustly to these incidents and to prosecute those responsible. In my first few days in this job, I instructed National Highways to seek a further injunction to cover the M25, to deal with those protesters, and I am pleased that the Court has granted it, to defend ordinary people going about their daily business.

Gareth Johnson: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer, and I welcome him to his position. He will know that the lack of crossings east of the Thames makes the Dartford crossing particularly vulnerable to not just protesters but all other kinds of incident. Does he agree that this makes it all the more imperative that we have the lower Thames crossing built as soon as possible, to provide some resilience to the existing system?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for the lower Thames crossing. He will know that National Highways has submitted a new application for a development consent order for that crossing to the Planning Inspectorate. A decision on whether to accept the application for examination is due next Monday. As it is a live planning application, I hope he will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the substance of it at this time.

Highways Maintenance in England: Local Spending

5. **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): If the Government will take steps to prevent local authorities in England from spending money allocated for local highways maintenance on other purposes. [902382]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The Department for Transport allocates capital funding to local highways authorities so that they can most effectively spend it on maintaining and improving their respective local networks, based on local knowledge, circumstances and priorities. It is up to the highways authorities how they spend that funding to fulfil their duty under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980.

Sir Christopher Chope: Is that not a rather complacent response? A lot of the £500 million allocated last year to local authorities in England for highway maintenance was not spent on highway maintenance, so it was effectively a fraud on taxpayers. Will my hon. Friend please ensure that next year, the allocations of money to highway authorities are made contingent upon them showing that last year's allocation was spent on highways?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Local highways maintenance is a critical service provided by local authorities. In recognition of that, a central highways maintenance fund has an incentive element built in to drive best practice. However, it would be counterproductive for central Government to go beyond that and override local leaders, who have the best understanding of the needs of their local areas. This approach is in line with the wider Government funding framework led by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister not agree that flexibility in budgets is important? At the moment, many of us in the road safety campaigning area are very worried about the lack of representation in this House on road safety and transport safety issues. Could local authorities with some of this extra cash not be encouraged to take road safety more seriously?

Mr Holden: I thank the hon. Member for his question. Flexibility is important for local need, which is why local authorities are the decision makers in this area. If local people do not like what local authorities are doing, they can make a change to local priorities at the ballot box.

Local Transport: Levelling Up

6. **James Grundy** (Leigh) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to help level up communities through the transport network. [902383]

12. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to help provide support for local transport routes. [902390]

16. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help provide support for local transport routes. [902396]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper):

Local transport services are crucial to the growth and levelling-up agendas, which is why the Government are investing in our local transport services by providing more than £2 billion to support bus and light rail services throughout England, as well as investing unprecedented sums to enable cycling and walking. We continue to work with local transport authorities and public transport providers to ensure that these vital services reflect the needs of those who rely on them every day.

James Grundy: Can my right hon. Friend update me on the progress towards reopening Golborne and Kenyon Junction stations to reconnect the great constituency of Leigh with the national rail network?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents. My officials continue to work closely with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority on the proposal to open a new rail station at Golborne as part of the £1 billion city region sustainable transport settlement announced earlier this year. Local partners are currently producing an outline business case to support the proposal, which we expect to receive and consider in due course. Bids to open Kenyon Junction station were submitted in the second and third rounds of the ideas fund, but were sadly unsuccessful.

Mr Mohindra: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. Unfortunately, I have had countless pieces of correspondence from my constituents about buses in my local area of South West Hertfordshire. Services are typically infrequent and consistently late. Can he update the House as to what he is doing to ensure that those services are more reliable so that we can continue to encourage people to use public transport?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue and I am sorry to hear about the difficulties that his constituents are facing in accessing bus services. I know from my constituency how vital bus services are for individuals to get to work and to access education and healthcare. We are engaging with bus operators and local authorities to help to resolve the challenges that they face. The national bus strategy sets out our vision for bus services across England to deliver better bus services. To that end, we are investing more than £1 billion to support local authorities to deliver their bus service improvement plans, including £30 million for Hertfordshire County Council, which will support improvements to bus services in his constituency.

Antony Higginbotham: Bus routes across Burnley and Padiham are vital to local connectivity and give residents a link to jobs, leisure and essential public services. Too often, however, they are late or cancelled, which has a particular impact on those in rural parts of Burnley, such as Worsthorne and Cliviger. Does the Secretary of State agree that buses are not nice-to-haves but an essential service for local residents? Will he ensure that they are given the priority that they need to continue to improve that service?

Mr Harper: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of local bus services. We know that the bus sector continues to face a number of challenges, including

driver shortages, which are resulting in some services being reduced or cancelled. We are working with the industry to resolve that. As I said in my previous answer, we are investing substantially to improve bus services; he will be pleased to know that £30 million of the funding that we have supplied has been allocated to support improvements to bus services in Lancashire, including in his Burnley constituency.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The taxi and private hire sector provides vital services in many parts of the country, but it now faces the prospect of VAT on fares, which could have a damaging effect. I raised the issue at the last Transport questions and sought a meeting with a Minister, but the industry was offered a 10-minute surgery appointment. Can the Secretary of State ask his diary secretary to look at that again? This is an important issue that deserves proper investigation.

Mr Harper: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of taxi services for constituents. I will speak to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), to secure the hon. Gentleman a longer meeting so that he can discuss it in more detail.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State talked about £2 billion of investment in buses, and we know that 4,000 new buses have been promised, but will those new buses all have mandatory provision of audiovisual information? I have long supported the Guide Dogs' "Talking Buses" campaign to help the blind to navigate their way on public transport. The Government have still not introduced secondary regulations for mandatory provision of audiovisual information on new buses. When will that happen and would he be willing to meet?

Mr Harper: I am very familiar with the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises, having served for a period in this House as the Minister for disabled people. I do not have the specific information to hand, so I will write to him and then, if appropriate, a meeting can be secured with the relevant Minister.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The last Prime Minister but two—I think I have got the number right—promised we would have London-style bus services in constituencies such as mine. He said people would be able to go to the bus stop and they would not need a timetable as the buses would be that frequent. We do not need a timetable on many routes in Sheffield now because the buses have been scrapped altogether and routes cut, so instead of a bus improvement plan, we now have a disintegration of bus services. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the covid grant, which has been extended to early next year, will be extended for the whole of the next financial year, because that is the only thing now keeping some bus services running in my constituency? Will he also arrange the meeting I asked for during the last Transport questions with Ministers for myself, local MPs and the Mayor?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Gentleman mentioned the covid pandemic, because that has caused a number of issues for a range of transport providers. We are still seeing that bus users have not returned to using buses

since the covid pandemic, and that puts those bus services under tremendous financial pressure, which is exactly why we put the support in place to deal with the pandemic. We have extended it through to the end of March, as he knows, and we will keep that under review, depending on what the situation requires. I know how important buses are, but the impact of the pandemic on buses and rail services is a challenge, and the important thing is to encourage people back to using buses to grow revenue and make sure the sector is financially sustainable.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): There is no point in making promises to level up communities through transport if Ministers announce yet another punishing rail fare rise next month. A 3.8% rise, like this year, would mean £129 more for an annual season ticket between Chester and Manchester, and 8% would mean Swindon to Bristol commuters paying £312 extra. The retail price index figure—the usual figure used for rail fare rises—of 12.3% would burden Dover to London passengers by an additional £909 every year. Given that the rail recovery is fragile and given the Conservative cost of living crisis, does the Secretary of State agree with me that now would be the worst possible time for yet another brutal rail fare rise?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Gentleman raises that question because he flags up a very important issue. There are only two places that revenue can come from in the rail sector—the passenger, through the fare box, or the taxpayer. I am very well aware of the challenges facing people with the cost of living and inflation, but we also have to make sure that the cost does not fall on taxpayers, many of whom never use rail services. One of the things we will do as we are making this decision is to weigh up exactly those two things—the pressure on the passenger through the fare box but also the burden that falls on the taxpayer. We will balance those, and when we have made a decision, we will announce it in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State and, indeed, his whole team to their places, particularly the new Rail Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—who has gone from a colleague and a friend to an adversary in just a few weeks.

Last week's Budget slashed funding for the Department for Transport by 30% in cash terms over the next three years. At a time when investment in net zero transport and boosting regional connectivity is more important than ever, to abandon a key part of national investment is reckless and irresponsible, and it will cause further damage to the economy. What representations will he make to his Cabinet colleagues in the Treasury about reversing these cuts and putting transport funding on a proper footing?

Mr Harper: I simply do not recognise what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. I thank him for welcoming me to my position, but I was actually very pleased with

the settlement in the autumn statement. The Chancellor confirmed that our capital spending remains as it was in the spending review. Yes, I do have to manage inflation pressures, but the Chancellor did not do what Chancellors sometimes in the past have been tempted to do, which is to cut capital funding in the short term. We have sustained that capital funding, and we are going to be spending £600 billion over the next five years on infrastructure spending to make sure we have long-term economic growth. I am very pleased that the Chancellor demonstrated that transport is part of our growth agenda in driving the economy forward.

Gavin Newlands: There was certainly a massive slash in resource funding for the Department for Transport.

Many fear that HS2 is in the firing line for departmental savings. We have already seen the Golborne link ditched, with no replacement in sight, hitting journey times from Scotland and the north-west of England. Rowing back on HS2 again would be another hammer blow for regional connectivity, so what assurances can the Secretary of State give that HS2 will go ahead in its current form and that those of us outside the M25 may see some benefit?

Mr Harper: Again, I do not recognise what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Our resource funding was confirmed in cash terms as well, so I do not know what autumn statement he was listening to, but it was not the one that the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out at the Dispatch Box. On his general point, as the Chancellor said, we are committed to the HS2 plans set out in the £96 billion integrated rail plan. We will set out our response to the autumn statement to manage inflation pressure in due course.

Northern Powerhouse Rail and Leamside Line

7. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail and the Leamside line. [902384]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): As set out in the autumn statement, the Government are committed to delivering the Northern Powerhouse Rail core network outlined in the integrated rail plan. Reopening of the Leamside line would be best considered by north-east partners as part of a future city region settlement.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Yesterday, at the Great Northern conference, the Transport Secretary promised that Northern Powerhouse Rail will indeed go ahead. Since the Government know that it is going ahead, they should also know what that entails. Does it, or does it not, include the Leamside line?

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am aware that the Leamside line closed in 1964, that she and others across the Chamber have been campaigning for its reopening and that Transport North East is currently conducting a series of studies into the costs and potential benefits. I will restate that the integrated rail plan stated that it would be best dealt with as part of a future city region settlement. Of course, we will await further details from Transport North East as they come out.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. When it comes to Northern Powerhouse Rail, can we remember that it is not Manchester Powerhouse Rail or Leeds Powerhouse Rail? It is Northern Powerhouse Rail and that includes the north-east. The Leamside line is a critical part of the infrastructure, which gets us resilience locally, resilience in connections to the Union and local transport initiatives. Could I encourage the Minister to meet me, Transport North East and other interested Members to appreciate its importance to the north-east fully and to ensure that it is considered properly?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is a true champion for rail in the north-east, and I know that he has been campaigning for the reopening of the line. I agree that the northern powerhouse means the entire north and not just parts of the north; that is the culture that I see. I commit to meeting him, Transport North East and other bodies that he wishes to invite for further discussion. However, I remind the House that funding budgets are tight for the Department for Transport and that not every single project that Members will want to see can be brought forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I warmly welcome the new Secretary of State and the entire ministerial team—and in particular the former Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who I am sure will bring his expertise and experience to the team. Of course, the problem for him and the benefit for the Opposition is that we know what he really thinks. *[Laughter.]* Has he managed to persuade the Secretary of State that the integrated rail plan under-serves the needs of the north and lets down those who require change the most?

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Lady for her very warm welcome and her pledge to hold me to account on things that may have been written before. I am passionate about seeing the entire levelling up of the United Kingdom when it comes to rail. On the integrated rail plan, I gently remind her, using words from a Transport Committee report, that we welcomed

“the scale of the Government’s promised spending on improving rail in the North and the Midlands. £96 billion is a very substantial sum; it has the potential to transform rail travel for future generations”

and level up the country. Wise words; I still believe in them now.

Louise Haigh: I thank the Minister for that gentle reminder. He knows full well that that was not what was promised to the north and the Midlands no fewer than 60 times and in successive Conservative manifestos. Not only are the north and the Midlands not getting the infrastructure that they require, but rail services across the country are in freefall, experiencing record cancellations on top of fewer services than at any time since records began. One couple wrote to me this week and said they felt in danger from overcrowding and began to understand how real tragedies could occur. Will the rail Minister apologise for his predecessor’s signing off the decision to slash tens of thousands of services every month and confirm when those services will be restored?

Huw Merriman: It is of course the case, post the pandemic, that travel habits have changed. Rail is at only 80% of its pre-pandemic patronage but services have been reduced by only 10%, so we continue to subsidise on that basis to the tune of £16 billion. There is a great commitment to rail on behalf of the Government across the country, but we have to look at the entire taxpayer burden that is paying for that and difficult decisions will have to be made. I very much hope I can work with the hon. Lady in a constructive manner to ensure we talk up rail and try to get more people on the rail network, and that it continues to grow as it had before the pandemic.

Practical Driving Tests

8. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of people waiting for a practical driving test. [902385]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): There are 95,000 available car test slots at the moment, an increase of over 80,000 in the past six months thanks to the hard work of the Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency and our brilliant driving examiners.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Minister for his response. Data from the DVSA shows that ethnic minorities are far less likely to pass their tests than white candidates. What steps will his Department take to ensure that discrimination has no place in driving test centres?

Mr Holden: Discrimination has absolutely no place in driving test centres. I advise the hon. Gentleman to get in touch with me about any such incidents and I will take them up directly with the DVSA.

20 mph Speed Limits

9. **Sir James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the study in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, published in November 2022, on the impact of 20 mph speed limits on road traffic incidents. [902386]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): We are reading the report with interest and looking into the details as we speak. Local authorities are best placed to decide where 20 mph limits will be most effective on their local roads.

Sir James Duddridge: I thank the Minister for that answer, but local community campaigner Nadia Fabri has organised opposition to an expensive 20 mph limit in Thorpe Bay in Southend. Will the Government consider suspending funding to projects that are not wanted, expensive and now proven to be ineffective?

Mr Holden: Decisions on setting local speed limits on roads are a matter for local authorities and they are democratically accountable for them. They also have the power to decide and implement traffic-calming measures if they are more appropriate. Most central Government funding for local government is not ringfenced, so local authorities can make the best decisions relating to local priorities. My Department is providing £170 million this financial year to local highways authorities in England outside London and city region areas through the integrated transport block for small-scale transport schemes, but

we will continue to look at all evidence provided to the Department on all sorts of road safety and transport schemes.

Ferry Services: Rosyth to Mainland Europe

10. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on the re-establishment of direct ferry services between Rosyth and mainland Europe. [902387]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The operation of international ferry routes is primarily a commercial matter and as a result I have not discussed it with either Cabinet colleagues or the Scottish Government to date.

Neale Hanvey: The ancient nation of Scotland, independent for centuries before its coercive incorporation in 1707, was taken out of Europe against its democratic wishes. Yesterday, the UK state apparatus told Scotland it is not a colony and does not lack meaningful political process. So, will the Minister tell me what funding is to be made available to Scotland for direct ferry links from Rosyth to Europe, now that the EU motorways of the sea funding has been cut off? Can the Minister tell his Government colleagues that the British state may say no at every time, but the sovereign people of Scotland say yes, yes, yes?

Mr Holden: The priority of the UK Government is to work closely with the Scottish Government wherever possible. The UK Government provide substantial support to Scotland through the Barnett formula, including to support local ferry services. However, this international route is a commercial matter. If the hon. Gentleman would like to discuss it with me further, I would be delighted to do so.

Spaceflight Sector

11. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to support the spaceflight sector. [902388]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking this question. I have granted consent to the Civil Aviation Authority to issue a licence to Britain's first ever spaceport, paving the way for the first ever orbital space launch from the UK, or indeed from anywhere in Europe. The launch from Spaceport Cornwall remains on track for later this year. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who is in his place, for his tireless campaigning on this issue.

David Duguid: I welcome all the new Ministers to their place and join the Secretary of State in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on the work being done in Cornwall. That is another example, along with the SaxaVord spaceport in Shetland, of the UK Government covering the whole country in glory. SaxaVord spaceport has just completed the construction of the first launchpad to be built in Europe to support the orbital launch of four small satellites for a major European client. Does my right hon. Friend or any of his Ministers have plans to visit the site where construction is going on of the other two pads?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us of the work that the UK Government do across the whole United Kingdom. The work at SaxaVord is very exciting and I hope to have the opportunity to visit it in due course. UK spaceports will launch highly skilled jobs across the United Kingdom while providing greater resilience for our critical national infrastructure capabilities.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The news that the Secretary of State will visit Shetland, I think for a second time, will be welcomed by all in the county and particularly in Unst. SaxaVord has three European companies testing their facilities for a launch, and it is an exciting development. When he visits, however, he will see the difficulties in developing something such as that on an island that requires the service of two ferries. When he leaves, he might therefore be prepared to support our campaign to have fixed links to replace the ferries in the future.

Mr Harper: I would be very pleased to visit Shetland again, which my right hon. Friend—I will call him that, as we worked together in government a number of years ago—represents so ably. On his specific point, those issues are devolved to the Scottish Government. However, as has been said from this Dispatch Box, I look forward to working in partnership with colleagues in the Scottish Government to focus on the priorities of people across the United Kingdom, including his constituents in Shetland.

Rail Funding in Wales

13. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he has plans to increase rail funding in Wales. [902391]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): This Government are investing through Network Rail up to £2 billion in the rail network in Wales over the current five-year control period to March 2024. That is twice the level of investment carried out in the previous five years.

Geraint Davies: The Minister will know that HS2 will reduce travel times from London to Manchester from two hours 10 minutes to one hour 10 minutes and by even more to Scotland, yet the travel time by train to Swansea, which I represent, will remain at about three hours. How is it that Scotland will get an additional £8 billion in Barnett consequentials but Wales will not get the £5 billion that it should get, given that in the past 12 years we have seen only 1.5% of the rail enhancements go to Wales? Will he look at that again and meet me to discuss it, so that we can have our fair share to deliver net zero, improve productivity and deliver levelling up?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Member is right that there are no direct Barnett consequentials from HS2 to Wales, but there are indirect benefits that I can explain when I meet him—to take up his invitation to meet. I welcome the fact that the Office of Rail and Road reports that Government funding for the operational railway was £1.27 per passenger kilometre in England and £2.39 per passenger kilometre in Wales and Scotland, which I am keen to support.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. The Government are committed to levelling up, and that means improving transport and connectivity for my Ynys Môn constituents. How is the

Minister using RNEP—the rail network enhancements pipeline—to improve north Wales journey times; will the scope be extended to include rail links to HS2 and the northern powerhouse; and when the Minister visits Ynys Môn, will he come by train?

Huw Merriman: I will certainly come by train to meet my hon. Friend, who is a true champion for transport in Ynys Môn and the wider north Wales region. She has secured a Backbench Business debate on the west coast main line in the Chamber on 15 December, and that demonstrates what a champion she is. I expect to have the business case for the project that she mentions on my desk in the new year, when I can talk to her further about it.

Spending Priorities: Autumn Statement

14. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What assessment he has made of his Department's spending priorities in the context of the autumn statement 2022. [902393]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): The Chancellor announced a plan in last week's autumn statement to tackle the cost of living crisis and rebuild our economy. As I said earlier, the Government will invest more than £600 billion in infrastructure over the next five years to connect our country and grow the economy. Transport investment will play a huge part in delivering that, and I will work to deliver a stable, long-term plan to run, maintain and expand our transport network across the United Kingdom.

Peter Grant: The Republic of Ireland is facing exactly the same global economic impacts as the United Kingdom, but the recent Irish Budget was able to increase support for transport across the southern part of that island. In contrast, the real-terms cuts we will see in the coming years will have a direct impact on transport spending in England and, significantly, in the devolved nations through the Barnett formula. Will the Secretary of State undertake to ensure that the transport needs of other parts of the United Kingdom are not sacrificed for those in London? Does he agree that all public transport infrastructure spending in Scotland should be according to the priorities of the Scottish Government, who were elected for that purpose?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is right that we will have to deal with the pressures of inflation, and the Government's No. 1 economic priority is to reduce inflation as quickly as possible. Inflation is a global phenomenon, driven by the recovery from the covid pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, but it is important that we deal with it.

The hon. Gentleman will know that I represent a constituency quite some distance from London. I am well aware that we need to spread transport investment across the United Kingdom, and I will make sure that I work closely with the Scottish Government on shared priorities, as set out in Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome my very good friend, the Secretary of State, to his place. Will he make spending in rural areas a priority? If we are to level up transport, we must not forget rural areas.

On that point, will he look at the urgent need for Leicestershire County Council to build the Melton bypass, which is crucial to levelling up our transport? In addition, will he recognise that rurality matters when reviewing accident hotspots, because rurality can hide just how dangerous an accident hotspot is?

Mr Harper: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for her kind words. On the priority for spending on transport in rural areas, I represent a rural constituency myself, of course, and am well aware of the extra challenges in rural areas. We will take those matters into account as we develop our plans, following our settlement in the autumn statement.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): As we have heard in concerns raised by Members on both sides of the House, a crisis facing millions of people across the country right now is the total absence of reliable and affordable bus services. How much of the promised bus service improvement funding has actually been handed to local authorities? When will the Secretary of State reopen applications to cover the 60% of the country that did not get a single penny in the initial round?

Mr Harper: Local authorities put in bids for significantly more than the £1 billion that was allocated. We selected a total of 34 counties, city regions and unitary authorities to benefit from that funding. We wrote to offer further practical support to all areas to which we cannot offer new funding. We will look at a further round of funding in due course.

Strategic Importance of the A5

15. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the strategic importance of the A5 in the midlands to the national economy and transport network. [902395]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The Department and I recognise the significant strategic importance of the A5 to both the regional and national economy, which is why we continue to work with regional partners such as Midlands Connect to consider options to improve the route as part of our third road investment strategy—RIS3—investment plans.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to the Minister for his encouragement on the strategic importance of the A5, because its improvement has political support from the parishes all the way to MPs of all colours. Economically, improving the A5 will drive our growth and, strategically, will deliver houses and prosperity in my area. Is he aware of Midlands Connect's most recent report, which shows that, on average, there are 36 accidents on the road every year, and that one in five is serious? Will he meet me to discuss that as another reason why the A5 must be improved?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the report to me. I have seen it, and I will ensure that my officials consider it as part of the body of evidence to

support the case for improvements to the A5. I would also be delighted to meet him and other colleagues to discuss this matter further.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): On all A roads, as with the A5, there is a need for rapid charge points, but more widely we need more public charging points, as only 800 are currently being delivered per month. Will the Secretary of State update this House on his meetings with the Business Secretary on delivering this priority?

Mr Holden: Meetings are in progress, and we will look further at this strategy and how we can more rapidly roll out electric vehicle charging points across the country, including rapid charge points, which are being rolled out to our motorway service station network as well.

Topical Questions

T1. [902401] **Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Last week, the Chancellor delivered his autumn statement, which confirmed that the Department for Transport's budget for the next two financial years remains unchanged. That means we will invest about £20 billion in transport infrastructure in each of the next two years and spend about £6 billion a year to maintain existing infrastructure and operate vital transport services. In the coming weeks, I will work with my ministerial team and officials to assess our portfolio of projects.

Let me say a word or two on rail strikes, which I know are of interest to many Members. I want a sustainable, thriving rail network, but with 20% of passengers not having returned following the covid pandemic, reform is vital. I urge all trade union leaders to get back around the table with employers to hammer out the detail of that reform. The Government will work to facilitate this, and to that end I will be meeting trade union leaders in the coming days.

Peter Dowd: I welcome the team to their places.

National Highways is planning to plough a road through the much-loved and used Rimrose valley, the only substantial green space in my very urbanised constituency, at a cost of up to £365 million—and that was before the current inflationary crisis kicked in. Perhaps the money could be better used to level up my constituency more constructively, rather than being allocated to a project that is at least 25 years out of date. So will the Department ask Highways England to scrap these plans, which are unwanted and unnecessary, and which will simply exacerbate—

Mr Speaker: Order. You all want to get in. This is topical questions and you have to be sharp and punchy. Come on, Secretary of State, you will give an example.

Mr Harper: Let me try to give a short, punchy reply. National Highways is well aware that there are a range of opinions and views about its proposals for the A5036, and it is committed to working with all stakeholders to try to achieve the right result for all. I am sure that it will have heard the hon. Gentleman's clear opinions expressed in this House.

T2. [902403] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the Roads Minister confirm that a new junction 10a on the A14 at Kettering remains in the pipeline for road investment strategy 3 for the period 2025 to 2030 and that the proposals are being actively developed by National Highways?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I can confirm that the Government's proposed junction 10a of the A14 to the east of Kettering continues to be developed by National Highways as part of the pipeline of schemes being considered for development as part of RIS3.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Mike Kane.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Earlier this year, the then Transport Secretary said of the P&O scandal:

"we will never support those who treat workers with such callousness"—[*Official Report*, 30 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 842.]

I now have evidence that its competitor, Irish Ferries, pays its seafarers just £5.50 an hour, yet in September Ministers awarded it a contract worth tens of thousands of pounds. How can the Government condemn the scandal of seafarers' pay and then hand over taxpayers' money without conditions to a company whose business model is based on poverty pay?

Mr Holden: We are looking speedily at this important matter at the moment. The Seafarers' Wages Bill is coming to this House within the next few weeks to address many of these issues that the Opposition spokesman raises.

T5. [902407] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): During my recent visit to West Lodge Primary School in my constituency, I saw the excellent work the children were doing to deal with bad parking and, in particular, engine idling outside the school. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me, my many constituents, my local councils and even Hillingdon Council Labour group that we need effective measures to tackle air quality hotspots in the suburbs, rather than Mayor Khan's one-size-fits-all ultra low emission zone scheme, which does nothing to address issues such as engine idling outside schools?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend raises some important issues. The important thing from the Government's point of view is that we tackle air quality. He will know better than me that how we do that and which schemes are run is devolved to local government, so it is devolved to the Mayor of London. I know that the Mayor has recently consulted on proposals to extend the ULEZ and is expected to announce the outcome, but those are matters for him. I know my hon. Friend will continue to campaign vigorously on them.

T3. [902404] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Decisions on Northern Powerhouse Rail will shape the railways in the north of England for generations to come, so we need to be ambitious and we need to get it right. Does the Rail Minister in particular understand the concerns of so many of us in the north about the downgraded rail option for Bradford as part of the core plan? Will he look at that again, please?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): As well as committing to the core integrated rail plan, over the summer the Prime Minister set this Department the challenge of assessing options for Bradford with regard to a new station and better connecting Bradford. That is work that I am doing. It is an incredibly high priority for me, and I will come back to the hon. Gentleman with detail once that is ready.

T8. [902410] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): The campaign to reopen the Ivanhoe line, joining Burton to Leicester and coming through my constituency, has the support of four MPs. It has been gaining traction, support and funding from the Department for Transport. We are now into the millions and the project is getting closer to coming to fruition. Will the Minister comment on where this programme is and how likely it is to come forward?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that he does with regard to the campaign to reopen the Ivanhoe line and for the success in securing more funding for the Ivanhoe line project in June this year. Network Rail is undertaking development work to test different service and scope options and progress the business case. Decisions on this scheme and others in the restoring your railway programme are expected in the next year, but I just remind him of the financial envelope within which we are all working.

T4. [902405] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Unite the union, which represents tens of thousands of lorry drivers, has discovered by a freedom of information request that the UK Government's scheme of £32 million to improve toilet facilities for lorry drivers is entirely unspent a year after the then Chancellor announced it. Why is that the case?

Mr Holden: The hon. Member may have missed the announcement this morning that the scheme has just been opened. I shall be visiting a road haulage site this afternoon to launch the scheme for match funding across the country to improve lorry facilities for our truckers, who worked hard throughout the entire pandemic.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Highways England is now looking at much-needed safety improvements along the A38 between Carkeel and Trerulefoot in my constituency. I welcome that, but what this road really needs is major improvements to help our economy and the economy of Cornwall to level up. Will the Minister commit to start looking at the options to make this a reality?

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend is a real champion for South East Cornwall and has been hammering away on this scheme for years. Highways England is developing a package of targeted safety measures for the A38, which will be considered for possible delivery within the third road investment strategy, RIS3. Although we are not considering further massive enhancements such as a bypass at this time, the work that we are doing at the moment would not prevent such a scheme in the future. I look forward to working with her on future road plans.

T6. [902408] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Arriva in North Tyneside is letting down my constituents. Buses do not turn up or are cancelled at short notice.

Surely enough is enough when pupils at North Gosforth Academy need counselling because they are so worried about getting to and from school. Can the Minister do something to force Arriva to be a more responsible and reliable service provider?

Mr Holden: I have had similar issues in my North West Durham constituency with Arriva over the past few months. It is looking at some of these plans and, as part of the bus service improvement scheme, £163.5 million will be heading to the north-east. We are just finalising the details on that and looking at how we can improve transport services in the future. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and other colleagues across the region to deliver that.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Chair of the Select Committee on Transport, Iain Stewart.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the Chancellor's announcement last week that capital transport investment will be a central pillar of the Government's growth agenda. May I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he will be able to set out a little more detail on which projects he will be prioritising, and make a bid for the next stages of East West Rail to be among the early ones?

Mr Harper: First, I am very pleased to welcome my hon. Friend to his place as Chair of the Transport Committee. I look forward to working with him and with all members of the Select Committee, whichever party they come from, to focus on these important transport issues.

Over the coming weeks my colleagues and I will be looking at our priorities across the whole portfolio of capital projects, and we will set those out in the House in due course. I have noted his bid; he will know that the Chancellor committed to East West Rail in the autumn statement, and I hope that gives him some comfort.

T7. [902409] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): Does the Minister think it is a good idea for car manufacturers to build cars with features such as heated seats, performance modes or key fobs that can be activated only by payment of a subscription or a tacked-on fee? Are there any plans to regulate these increasing pay-to-use features?

Mr Holden: Commercial matters around car manufacture and delivery are up to the individual manufacturers. What we have seen in the UK recently is the Government putting in £100 million to help to support Nissan and the next generation of electric vehicles being delivered up in Sunderland.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will know that strike action on our railways will lead to more congestion on our roads. In Essex, that means more congestion on the A12 and A120. Will he kindly commit to meeting me and the leader of Essex County Council to discuss those two road schemes?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question and for her work when she was Home Secretary to strengthen the law to enable us to deal with those who cause disruption on our transport network. I would be delighted to meet her and the leader of Essex County Council to talk about those important road projects.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Research from the Campaign for Better Transport suggests that the Government are so far behind on their electrification plans that rolling stock leasing companies are being forced to destroy electric units that they cannot use. At the same time, the Government continue to introduce new diesel trains—more not zero than net zero. Will the Government ensure that they order no more diesel trains and get on with electrification?

Huw Merriman: The Government are committed to phasing out all diesel trains by 2040. That remains our aim and our ambition. There is electrification going on at the moment along the west midlands line, and we are certainly committed to ensuring that we can roll out more electrification, and indeed use hydrogen and battery power where appropriate, in the years to come.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The electrification of the Chase line means that passengers benefit from a more frequent service. However, passengers from Rugeley remain disadvantaged because the last train from Birmingham terminates at Hednesford. Will the Rail Minister meet me to discuss this matter and other issues that Chase line passengers face?

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend does an incredible job for her constituents, and on that basis of course I say yes to meeting her and learning more about those issues.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Last week the RMT voted overwhelmingly for strike action. Last night the Secretary of State said he would be prepared to meet the leader of the RMT. Some 50% of the public and passengers support those rail strikes. They should not just have been shaking hands last night, but they should be shaking hands today on a deal. The Secretary of State knows full well that he sets the flexibility and parameters for both Network Rail and train operating companies on the financial offer they can put forward. It is in his hands to end those strikes, and to do so today.

Mr Harper: As I set out at the start of topical questions, I very much want the strikes not to take place. I have set out my ambition for the rail sector and I will be meeting trade union leaders in the coming days, including later today. In order to pay for a better offer for rail staff, we need to deliver reform. That is why I want trade union leaders to get back around the table with the employers and hammer out the detail of those reforms. Then a better offer can be put on the table and we can end the need for these strikes, which cause enormous damage to passengers and businesses across the country.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): May I thank the Government for all that they are doing to improve connectivity at Darlington, including the £135 million invested in Bank Top station? However, my constituents

in places such as Harrowgate Hill and Whinfield still suffer from congestion and emissions on the roads. Can my hon. Friend guide me on what more I can do to ensure that we ease this gridlock by delivering a northern link road?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he and I have worked closely together on many local transport issues. National Highways and Tees Valley Combined Authority have worked closely on developing proposals for the Darlington northern link road, connecting the A66 and junction 59 of the A1. The work to date will form part of a body of evidence informing the investment plans for RIS3—the third road investment strategy—for future roads between 2025 and 2030.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): People expect the Government to be trying to help resolve these rail strikes, not block a resolution. How can the Transport Secretary claim that it is not his role to get involved when the Government are handing over tens of millions of pounds a day in indemnity payments to rail companies to back them up during this strike?

Mr Harper: I do not think the hon. Gentleman listened to my earlier answers. It is not my interest to block a settlement at all. I want to resolve this issue. I want to facilitate the trade unions and the employers getting together to hammer out some reform measures to help pay for a better pay offer for the staff. I will do everything I can to end these damaging and unnecessary strikes, and I hope he will do what he can to persuade the trade unions to get back around the table with the employers.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Tomorrow I will be visiting Whitcombe Pipelines in Rowley Regis, which has just won a substantial contract for HS2 infrastructure. Does the Secretary of State agree that this demonstrates how HS2 is already delivering significant benefits to my constituency, through jobs and growth, and that it is important that that is maintained?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The supply chain for HS2 and the spending benefits constituencies and constituents across the whole of the United Kingdom, including his and, indeed, mine.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Before the pandemic, the rail services through my constituency suffered from chronic overcrowding, yet the Government used the pandemic as an excuse to cut peak-time services from my constituency without consultation of those rail users. What is he going to do to monitor the damage that he has done and to ensure that those services are restored when those trains get chronically overcrowded again?

Huw Merriman: Southeastern did indeed ask for a derogation to consult, and changes had to be made quite rapidly during the pandemic, although may I just say that, as a fellow user of Southeastern, the hon. Member will find that there are some benefits from that? It is not just about taking down some costs; it is also about simplifying the line structure, so that at Lewisham, for example, there will not be as many trains

crossing. If he would just wait and see how matters progress, he and I might find that it has been a good timetable change after all.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Derby's bid to be the headquarters of Great British Railways has huge support: more than 20 right hon. and hon. Members, 40 local authorities, and the businesses forming the largest rail cluster in the country, and maybe even in Europe. Will the Minister confirm when the announcement will be made to confirm which of the six shortlisted locations has won the bidding process?

Huw Merriman: We have had six excellent shortlisted bids, one of which of course is Derby. The Government remain committed to reform of the railways. We will be looking at all the options, and that includes looking at bringing forward legislation to make this happen and revealing the winning bid at that time.

Mr Speaker: Sooner rather than later, I hope.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The work, business, leisure, family and educational lives of my constituents are being hugely undermined by atrocious bus services. I heard the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), but the previous Secretary of State promised to meet me to discuss this as a matter of urgency. Will this Secretary of State keep her commitment and meet me?

Mr Speaker: Chi, that is just too long.

Mr Holden: I thank the hon. Lady for her question; I will certainly meet her. I know how important bus services are, and I will also be meeting, hopefully in the near future, local authorities across the north-east so that we can hopefully deliver that £163 million for them as well.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Two thirds of Londoners have said no to the Mayor of London expanding the ultra low emission zone to the whole of Greater London. Will my right hon. Friend join me and Conservative MP colleagues to tell the Mayor of London that it is not for the poorest Londoners to foot the bill for his financial failures?

Mr Holden: As I said earlier, how to respond to the consultation and proceed is a matter for the Mayor to consider. I know that my hon. Friend has had a massive

campaign on this issue, with over 5,000 people getting in touch with him about ULEZ. If hon. Members really want to see this policy changed, the best thing they can do is replace the Mayor of London at the next election.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Some 73% of guide dog owners have been refused access to taxis, shops and restaurants in the past year. What is the Minister and his Department doing to improve access and ensure that guide dog owners such as my constituent Robert, and his guide dog Winnie, can get out and about with confidence?

Mr Harper: I am very familiar with that issue from my time as Minister for Disabled People. The behaviour that the hon. Lady describes is, of course, already unlawful. She has set out a specific case; if she writes to me with the details, we will look into it and see what further work we can do to make sure that the existing law to ensure fairness for guide dog owners is properly enforced across the United Kingdom.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I, many constituents and countless people up and down the land struggle each week with the poor and unreliable service provided by Avanti West Coast. People are missing interviews, appointments, family events and social occasions. Can the Minister give the latest Government assessment of Avanti's performance and confirm that nothing will be ruled out, including stripping it of its contract if it does not lift its game?

Mr Speaker: It is dreadful at the moment. Come on, Minister.

Huw Merriman: I am sorry for my hon. Friend's experience and that of his constituents. We are working very hard with the Avanti team to get more services restored. In December, with the good will of the unions and the workforce, we will see an increase in weekday services from the current 180 to 264, which would be a greater number than before the unions decided not to work to the rest day agreement, which is something I very much regret. I am committed to ensuring that Avanti services improve, which I know is important to you, Mr Speaker, and all Members of the House.

Mr Speaker: What happens if they do not, which they do not seem to?

Covid-19: PPE Procurement

Mr Speaker: I remind all Members that “Erskine May” states that the conduct of Members of the House of Lords can only be criticised on a substantive motion, and therefore not during these exchanges. Also, as there is the prospect of further legal proceedings concerning some of the contracts entered into, I remind Members of the sub judice resolution and the requirement not to refer to live cases.

10.37 am

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the due diligence and performance management performed on the public procurement of personal protective equipment during the covid-19 pandemic.

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will try to stay in my lane.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O’Brien): Sourcing, producing and distributing PPE is, even in normal times, a uniquely complex challenge. However, the efforts to do so during a pandemic, at a time when global demand was never higher, were truly extraordinary. Early on in that pandemic, our priority was clear: to get PPE to the frontline as quickly as possible. All of us in this House will remember that moment, and how desperate we all were to see PPE delivered to the frontline.

During the course of the pandemic—nearly at its peak—400 staff were working on sourcing protective equipment, and tens of billions of items were sourced. We worked at pace to source new deals from around the globe, and we always buy PPE of the highest standard and quality, and at the best value for money. Over the course of the programme, due diligence was done for over 19,000 companies, and over 2,600 companies made it through that initial due diligence process.

With huge demand for PPE all across the world, and with many countries introducing export bans, our risk appetite had to change. We had to throw everything behind our effort to protect those who protect us and those who needed it most. We had to balance the risk of contracts not performing and supplies being priced at a premium against the crucial risk to the health of frontline care workers, the NHS and the public if we failed to get the PPE that we so desperately needed.

As well as due diligence checks, there was systematic price benchmarking. Prices were evaluated against the need for a product, the quantity available, how soon it was available and the specification. Many deals were rejected or renegotiated because the prices initially offered were not acceptable.

There are always lessons that we can learn from any crisis, but we must not lose sight of the huge national effort that took place—I thank the officials who worked on it—to protect the most vulnerable while we tackled one of the greatest threats to our public health that this nation has ever seen.

Angela Rayner: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I welcome the Minister to his place—I think this is the first time we have met at the Dispatch Box—but to be honest, to his defence of due

diligence I would say, “What due diligence?” Last night, documents seen by *The Guardian* revealed yet another case of taxpayers’ money being wasted, with a total failure of due diligence and a conflict of interest at the heart of Government procurement.

In May 2020, PPE Medpro was set up and given £203 million in Government contracts after a referral from a Tory peer. It now appears that tens of millions of pounds of that money ended up in offshore accounts connected to the individuals involved—profits made possible through the company’s personal connections to Ministers and the Tories’ VIP lane, which was declared illegal by the High Court. Yet Ministers are still refusing to publish correspondence relating to the award of the Medpro contract, because they say that the Department is engaged in a mediation process. Can the Minister tell us today whether that mediation process has reached any outcome, and what public funds have been recovered, if any? Will he commit to releasing all the records, both to the covid-19 public inquiry and to this House, once the process is completed?

Rightly, there are separate investigations into Baroness Mone’s conduct, but the questions that this case raises are far wider. It took a motion from the Opposition to force the Government to release records over the Randox scandal. Will they agree today to do the same in this case without being forced to do so by the House? Can the Minister say now what due diligence was performed when awarding the Medpro contract?

Today’s reports concern just one single case, but this Government have written off £10 billion just on PPE that was deemed unfit for use, unusable, overpriced or undelivered. Worse, Ministers appear to have learned no lessons and to have no shame. As families struggle to make ends meet, taxpayers spend £700,000 a day on the storage of inadequate PPE. Can the Minister confirm whether the Government’s new Procurement Bill will still give Ministers free rein to hand out billions of pounds of taxpayers’ cash all over again?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can we please stick to the rules of the House on time limits? I do not make the rules; the rules are meant for us all. This is happening too often.

Neil O’Brien: The right hon. Lady asks two main questions, the first of which is what we are doing on PPE Medpro. It has been widely reported that it had an underperforming contract. Let me set out what we do in such cases. The first step is to send a letter before action, which outlines a claim for damages. That is followed by litigation in the event that a satisfactory agreement has not been reached. To answer the right hon. Lady’s question directly, we have not got to the point where a satisfactory agreement has been reached at this stage.

On the high-priority group, let us be clear about what it was and what it was not. Approximately 9,000 people came forward. All Ministers will have had the experience of endless people ringing them up directly to try to help with the huge need that there was at the time. Many of us, as Back Benchers, will have been approached by constituents who were keen to help and needed to be referred somewhere. All that the route did was handle the huge number of contacts coming in to Ministers from people offering to help. Let me be clear that it did not give any kind of successful guarantee of a contract;

indeed, 90% of the bids that went through it were not successful. Every single bid that went through the route went through exactly the same eight-stage process as all the other contracts—it looked at the quality, the price and the bona fides of the people offering to produce.

On the point about PPE that has not been useful, I set out in my answer the extraordinary context in which we were operating. There was a global scramble for PPE. People were being gazumped: goods would be taken out of the warehouse if people could turn up with the cash quicker than them. It was an extraordinary situation in which we had to act in a different way. Loads of us will remember standing up in this House and saying to Ministers, “What are you doing to get more? More, quickly!” That was the context in which we were operating.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we had not wasted billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on PPE, we would not have to increase taxes as much as we are doing? What has happened to the £122 million that was spent on 25 million gowns supplied by the company referred to earlier? Those gowns were not fit for purpose and were never used.

Neil O’Brien: That was the underperforming contract that I referred to in my previous answer, and I set out the process that we go through when we take action on underperforming contracts. There is the initial letter before action, and then a process in which we look to see if a satisfactory agreement can be reached. If not, that leads on to litigation. Of course, there was wasted PPE—my hon. Friend is absolutely correct about that—but I have already set out the context of the global scramble and the huge amount of PPE that was successfully delivered, saving lives and protecting workers in our NHS.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): From the moment we learned about the existence of this VIP lane for the politically connected, it was almost inevitable that it would come to this. This get-rich-quick scheme to fast-track cronies, politically connected pals and colleagues was never going to end well. I suspect that today’s revelations, however shocking, are simply the tip of a very large iceberg—an iceberg that could yet sink this ship of fools.

Transparency International UK has flagged as a corruption risk 20% of the £15 billion given out by the Tories in PPE contracts at the height of the pandemic. As we have already heard, they are spending £770,000 every single day to store much of that useless equipment in China. One Tory politician who had absolutely no background in PPE procurement personally made millions from those contracts, so do the Government plan to investigate proactively how many others like that are in their ranks, or are they content to sit there and watch this dripping roast of sleaze, corruption and scandal unfold on its own?

Neil O’Brien: Of course we take action whenever we find underperforming contracts, and I have set out how we do that. We are working our way through that. I say

simply to the hon. Gentleman that we were all desperate to get PPE for our health and social care workers and for everybody who was responding to the pandemic. Inevitably, some of those contracts were not going to perform, and we are now taking action against all those underperforming contracts. On the idea that the “politically connected”, as he says, had some sort of greater success, they were our constituents—they were getting in touch with all of us, they had to be referred on somewhere, they had to be managed and they went through the same process as every other contract.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think there is a little rewriting of history here. At one stage in the pandemic, getting PPE was the most important thing, and I remember Members on both sides demanding quicker action from the Government. The Minister has explained the situation fully, and I regret that the Opposition are making political points from what was actually a great success in protecting our NHS staff. Does the Minister agree with me or with that lot?

Mr Speaker: I suspect he might agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is completely correct. Some have short memories. Many of us stood up in this House to chivvy Ministers, asking, “Why aren’t you going faster? Why don’t you do more? Take the risks, get the stuff—we need it.” That was the priority. Many Members want it both ways: they criticised us at the time for not going fast enough or taking enough risks, and now they do not accept that we are going through all the contracts that did not perform.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Is it not clear that slack management in the Department led to get-rich elements of the British ruling establishment taking money from the NHS at a time of national crisis? Their watchword was “greed” rather than “public service”. Where is the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock)—I have notified him of my intention to mention him—who was in charge of the NHS when all this was going on? Is he still in Australia getting his £400,000 for eating unspeakable parts of the anatomy of various beasties?

Neil O’Brien: I cannot comment on the latest goings-on in the jungle but the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s point is the same as I have given before: there is a clear process, which every PPE supply bid, regardless of where it came from, went through.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): During my time as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, we have looked closely at the procurement of PPE. The National Audit Office found that

“ministers had properly declared their interests”,

and that Ministers were not involved in procurement decisions. Is the reality not that the civil servants making these decisions were doing their best to secure PPE supplies for the NHS and the frontline in the face of a global pandemic? While we need to learn lessons from how this was handled, some of the people commenting here seem to forget the intense pressure we were under at the time.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is completely correct. When Mrs Justice O'Farrell went through these cases, she noted in her summing up that given the time-sensitive nature of the work, it was not irrational for the Department to decide that it was prepared to take more risk than usually would be acceptable, because of that extraordinary context that is so quickly forgotten in the questions we are hearing in the House today.

Mr Speaker: On her birthday, I call Christine Jardine.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister has made much of the context of the time and the speed and the calls for PPE, but what my and, I am sure, everybody else's constituents wanted was PPE quickly and appropriately. Earlier this year the High Court ruled that the Government's VIP lanes were not only inappropriate, but unlawful, and in breach of the obligation of equal treatment. Does the Minister appreciate that constituents across the country are calling for an explanation? Will he back the Liberal Democrat amendment to ban VIP lanes for all future Government contracts?

Neil O'Brien: I have set out the challenge. We had a situation where MPs and Ministers were all being contacted by constituents who were desperate to help and who either had contacts with suppliers or were suppliers themselves of PPE. They could see on the TV every night the desperate need for PPE, and they were keen to help in that huge national effort. I have talked about the scale of the operation to supply and source that PPE in the extraordinary circumstances we were in. A way had to be found to manage all those contacts we were getting. All of us were getting in touch to try and offer help, so a way had to be found to manage all these things, and that is what I have described this morning. All these things, to reiterate, went through the same rigorous process as every other contract.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Minister says that lessons will be learned about Government procurement from this PPE scandal. Will he look at the contracts that the Home Office has for accommodating and feeding asylum seekers, which are ripping off the hotels and the food suppliers, causing asylum seekers to live in malnutrition and squalor? These contracts have many of the same characteristics—vast profits and executive salaries, and an opaque network of subcontractors run by people who may not pass fit-and-proper tests—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Lady is stretching things a bit too far. [*Interruption.*] I know it is lessons learned, but it is too clever and not clever enough. We will leave it at that.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Today's revelations show further evidence that the Government's VIP lane was possibly criminal and was exploited by Members of the Government party. Will the Minister today commit to publishing in full the names of the Ministers, MPs or officials who referred firms on to that fast-track lane? Stop being evasive. We need to know what corruption happened.

Neil O'Brien: I have good news for the hon. Member. We published the information about who referred in which contracts in November 2021.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I heard what the Minister said earlier about the process and how meticulously it was followed for every company that applied for contracts during covid. What is it about the individuals or companies that had associations with the Conservative party or Ministers that made them so adept at getting through the process?

Neil O'Brien: As I said, 90% of them did not get a contract, so it was not that they were being given some sort of guarantee of a contract. That scheme was a way of managing the contacts that were happening with Ministers. They were being directly contacted by MPs from across the House and all sides of it. There had to be a way of understanding what was happening with each of those bids, because otherwise it would have been completely overwhelmed. To reiterate: all the bids went through exactly the same process—not done by Ministers, but by civil servants—of checking the quality, the price and whether they could realistically deliver. There was no difference in the process that they went through.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): These are issues that many Opposition Members in particular have been raising for a long time. My Ministerial Interests (Public Appointments) Bill, now in its third iteration, has its Second Reading next Friday. Given the current situation, and given that my Bill would help to address some of the issues of transparency, can the Minister assure me that the Government will now incorporate that into their programme?

Neil O'Brien: I will look closely at all the suggestions that the hon. Member makes. I have not had a chance to look at the Bill, but I am sure that we are always in the market for constructive ideas.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): At the same time as the Government were being obstructive and deliberately attempting to block Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust in the north-east from providing PPE from a factory of its own, people who were closely connected to the Government were making millions from PPE. Minister, is that just a strange coincidence?

Neil O'Brien: The people who came through the high-priority route were not politically connected people, except in the sense that they were being referred by MPs across the House. I do not know the exact details of the north-east supplier that the hon. Gentleman mentions. If he gets in touch, I will be happy to take that up and provide him with a full explanation of what the issue was with that bid for a contract.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for the answers he has given. There was a heavy use of direct award contracts to purchase PPE items. As of April 2021, £371 million had been paid for PPE direct award contracts in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that, in hindsight, there should have been better insight into the supply chains of this PPE, where it came from and who was making it, given the reports that PPE contracts were given to Chinese firms using labour schemes?

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman always makes constructive suggestions, and today is no exception. He knows that we have an ongoing inquiry into the lessons

that can be learned and a dialogue with the Health and Social Care Committee about many of these issues. Given its heritage, Northern Ireland was an important supplier of textiles and PPE equipment. Inevitably, given the global balance of production, a lot of items did come from China, as he says, but as part of the lessons learned, we should be thinking about domestic supply.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): We have all seen the shameful *Guardian* front page this morning, but the front page that sticks in my mind is the one showing nurses in bin bags—not PPE on the frontline, but bin bags. This was at a time when Luton Borough Council was facing another cut of £11 million. People are struggling, so why are this Government not lifting a finger to get our money back? They could start by releasing the records after the mediation process.

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Lady's question takes us back to that extraordinary moment when we had a huge crisis of PPE, and we were desperate and doing every conceivable thing we could to get the PPE that those nurses needed; that is what I have been referring to in my answers this morning. It is just not true that the Government are not lifting a finger to get the money back. We have a process, and there is a substantial team in the Department working on it right now.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister said that constituents contacted many of us looking for the ability to access contracts to aid PPE procurement. He told the hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) that the information was published last year. Can he confirm for the House how many Conservative MPs were able to provide access to the VIP fast-track line, and how many Opposition MPs were able to? It is a fairly simple question.

Neil O'Brien: I do not have that information to hand, but I have a seat on the edge of Leicester, an important textiles town, and I had loads of constituents get in touch with me to ask, "Where can I go?" We sent them on to a mailbox, and after they were in that mailbox, they went through the usual process that every other supplier went through.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): For Tory peers and other chums of the Conservative party to have been profiteering at taxpayers' expense from shoddy, unusable PPE, especially through the VIP procurement lane, at a time when people were locked down in their homes and tens of thousands of people, including my loved ones, were dying is absolutely sickening, shameful and unforgivable. Given that *The BMJ* estimates that the Government have written off approximately £10 billion in unusable, undelivered or shoddy PPE, will the Minister take the opportunity to apologise to bereaved families for the amazing lack of integrity at the heart of the whole process?

Neil O'Brien: I set out earlier what the high priority route was and was not: it was absolutely not a guarantee of any kind of contract; it was a way of managing the huge numbers of contacts and offers for help that we were all receiving. It delivered something in the order of

5 billion items of PPE, all of which helped to save lives and protect workers in our NHS and social care settings. Of course, we had to take up those offers of help and respond to them when people wanted to help in the middle of a huge national and global crisis. We had to process those offers, but they were processed in exactly the same way as every other bid for a contract.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): After Lord Agnew resigned, he wrote in the *Financial Times*:

"Fraud in government is rampant. Public estimates sit at just under £30bn a year. There is a complete lack of focus on the cost to society, or indeed the taxpayer."

The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which is currently in Committee, is full of holes and the Government have refused sensible requests by the Opposition to fill those holes. Will the Minister reconsider those amendments in the light of the rampant corruption in Government?

Neil O'Brien: We keep all those things under review, but the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill is part of addressing some of the issues that the hon. Lady is concerned about. We are blurring together two different issues slightly—[*Interruption.*] Let me finish the point. Lord Agnew was talking about the loan scheme, but that relates to the same issue of the need for pace, which all hon. Members were calling for at the time. There was a need to get loans out to small businesses, which saved tens of thousands of jobs in my constituency and, I am sure, her constituency as part of the huge and unprecedented £400 billion spend to preserve lives and livelihoods.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): BCB International in my constituency, which is an accredited bona fide pre-pandemic supplier to the Ministry of Defence, adapted production lines to produce a range of PPE. It supplied the Welsh Government and other public bodies such as the police, yet in spite of repeated attempts, it did not get a look in—or even a reply—from the UK Department of Health and Social Care. Today, we might have heard why. Despite the shoddy way that he was treated, its managing director Andrew Howell has offered to meet the appropriate personnel to discuss any possible low-cost, legal and easy solutions to maintain British supply security of essential equipment. Will the Minister now facilitate that meeting?

Neil O'Brien: I mentioned that due diligence was done on more than 19,000 companies—a huge number of companies and people got in touch to offer to help—but let us continue that conversation. I am happy to talk about the particular issue that the hon. Lady raised.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Welsh Labour Government received £874 million for PPE as its population-proportionate share, but spent only £300 million—about a third of the money given. That suggests, says Cardiff University, that the UK Government could have saved £8 billion, or £300 a household across the UK, had they used public authorities, health authorities and councils instead of private profiteering contractors known to Ministers. Will the Minister look carefully at the Welsh model and, in future, use the public sector rather than private sector cronies known to Ministers

[Geraint Davies]

such as the former Health and Social Care Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who is out in the jungle making more money for himself?

Neil O'Brien: Inevitably, a huge amount of the PPE that is produced in the world is produced by private companies. There is no world in which we could avoid the use of private companies to supply PPE.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): My colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee are at an important evidence session this morning, otherwise I have no doubt that many more of them would be here. The report on PPE contracts, which was unanimously agreed by the Committee earlier this year, stated:

“At no point was consideration given to the extent of the profit margin that potential suppliers would be taking on payments for PPE. Neither was consideration of any potential conflicts between individuals making referrals through the VIP lane and the companies they were referring. We”—

the Public Accounts Committee, unanimously—

“are therefore unsurprised to see the reports of excessive profits and conflicts of interest on PPE contracts.”

Yet if today's *Guardian* reports are correct, the extent of lobbying of Cabinet Ministers, one of whom is back in the Cabinet, by a senior Conservative politician went significantly further than the Public Accounts Committee was aware of at the time. Can the Minister confirm that the reports of additional lobbying in today's *Guardian* are accurate and, if they are not accurate, can he come back with a statement to confirm that?

Neil O'Brien: I read the same article as the hon. Gentleman. I notice that it did not lead to a contract—the case that was mentioned in *The Guardian*—but more generally, absolutely, there are many lessons to learn about this process. However, we were having to pay, in some cases upfront, for PPE because, as part of the global scramble

for PPE that I have described, if we were not prepared to go that extra mile, we would simply not have had the PPE and we would have had more nurses without the vital protective equipment that we all needed.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am sure that many MPs on this side of the House had no idea that a VIP lane existed for PPE contracts, but even if I did know about a VIP lane for referring contracts, if a constituent came to me and said, “Alan, I have never worked in a PPE environment. I've never ordered it before, but I've got a great plan. I can order it from China. Just refer me to a Minister”, I would not have done that because it would be impossible to do proper due diligence. So it beggars belief that this Government accepted recommendations from companies with no involvement and no expertise in PPE contracts, and still awarded these billions of pounds of contracts. Instead of mediation with PPE Medpro, is it not the case that a full investigation is needed and, if the Government are not going to do it, surely we need a public inquiry into PPE procurement.

Neil O'Brien: We are prepared to litigate whenever a company did not provide. There is a process, which I set out earlier. In many cases, there were people who did have important contacts in China and in other countries where PPE was being produced, and it was important to pursue all those leads because we needed to have that. But, to the hon. Gentleman's point, due diligence had to be done and was done on all those cases in the same way. I have talked about the scale of the challenge and the 19,000 companies on which due diligence was initially done, and the huge drop-off between that number and the 2,648 companies that actually made it through that filter. So we can see in the difference between 19,000 and 2,648 that there was a huge amount of filtering done by the team of 400 people who were working so hard to try to get the PPE that we needed to the nurses and doctors in our NHS.

Business of the House

11.7 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 28 November includes:

MONDAY 28 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 29 NOVEMBER—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 30 NOVEMBER—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 1 DECEMBER—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Counsellors of State Bill [*Lords*], followed by a general debate on World AIDS Day. The subject for this debate has been determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 2 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 December includes:

MONDAY 5 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Online Safety Bill (day 2).

Right hon. and hon. Members may also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will now rise for the Christmas recess at the close of business on Tuesday 20 December, and return on Monday 9 January 2023. The House will rise for the February recess at the close of business on Thursday 9 February, and return on Monday 20 February. The House will rise for the Easter recess at the close of business on Thursday 30 March, and return on Monday 17 April. The House will rise for the coronation recess at the close of business on Wednesday 3 May, and return on Tuesday 9 May. The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the close of business on Thursday 25 May, and return on Monday 5 June. The House will rise for the summer recess at the close of business on Thursday 20 July. I will announce further recess dates in the usual way. I hope that news is welcomed by the House.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the business and the recess dates.

Tomorrow is the United Nations Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls, which I have been involved with for decades, so it is desperately sad that we still have two women a week tragically murdered by partners or ex-partners, the same as in 1992. Laws have changed, but sadly too many attitudes have not. I also recognise Islamophobia Awareness Month and join my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) in urging the Government to produce the official definition of Islamophobia; it is three years since they promised to.

I must admit that a bit of infighting has hit the shadow Leader of the House team: a bit more than the Bristol channel divides us this week with England taking on Wales on Tuesday. The Leader of the House's party will be far more prepared for division among colleagues than we are—because it has had plenty of practice this

year—but may I take the opportunity to wish both home nations well? Who knows—maybe we will see each other in the final?

The Leader of the House's business statement is testament to her Prime Minister's poor judgment and weak leadership. Pulling Monday's votes on their flagship Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill marks just the latest stage of the Tories' long-running psychodrama. In one corner—the Prime Minister desperately trying to find at least some manifesto commitments that he can still deliver on. In the other corner—50 of his own MPs threatening to back an amendment against their Government's own Bill. It is a complete shambles, with the Government running from their own Back Benchers, leaving the levelling-up agenda in tatters and, more importantly, the British people with a broken housing market. If he cannot stand up to his own party, how on earth is he going to stand up against vested interests? Do the Government even intend to continue with the Bill? If so, when will they bring it back?

Since I became shadow Leader of the House, I have had a ringside seat for the chaotic way in which the Government have dragged the Online Safety Bill through Parliament with the grace and decorum of a reversing dump truck. It was first mooted a decade ago and it has been four years since they promised it. In that time, online crime has exploded, child sexual abuse online has become rife and scams have proliferated. I now hear that, in a bizarre move, the Government want to send the Bill back to Committee to try to remove a crucial section that deals with legal but harmful content. The Bill was designed to deal with legal but harmful content, self-harm, suicide and racist content, so why are they trying to take that out? If the Bill does not come back soon, it risks falling entirely—it will run into the end of the Session. The Leader of the House knows that there is no option to carry it over in those circumstances. So will we have Third Reading on Monday 5 December? Will it come back to the Commons in time to finish remaining stages before the end of the Session? Will she guarantee that there will be enough time?

It is not just the Tories making poor use of parliamentary time. The SNP is busy debating independence and a plan to turn the next general election into a *de facto* referendum, rather than getting rid of Tories—and delivering a Labour Government. The NHS—Labour's greatest achievement—was invented in Scotland. NHS bosses in Scotland have set out plans to privatise the health service. Should they not be working out how to sort out 15 years of SNP mismanagement and underfunding instead?

Another issue that I have raised before is the Government sending Ministers to answer questions who simply do not have answers. We had the latest incident on Monday. A Minister was dragged to the Chamber to answer an urgent question on the COP27 climate conference who said herself that she was “not the Climate Minister”. Members have important questions to put to Ministers on behalf of our constituents. I ask the Leader of the House—not for the first time—to press the Government on the importance of sending Ministers to the Dispatch Box who are actually able to answer questions.

If the Conservative party cannot fill its legislative programme effectively, it could make way for a party that can. Does the Leader of the House want to swap places? As Leader of the House, within the first 100 days

[Thangam Debbonaire]

of the next Labour Government, I would schedule an employment Bill—legislation for an economy built on fair pay, job security and dignity. There would also be a race equality law to tackle racial inequality and legislation to kick-start a credible strategy for fairer, greener growth. That is what we would get with a Labour Government. So she can swap at any time she likes.

Penny Mordaunt: I start by joining in the hon. Lady's good wishes to both England and Wales for their matches tomorrow; I wish them all the luck in the world. It would be wonderful to see them both in the final, although we may be faced with difficulties if that comes to pass.

The hon. Lady mentions violence against women and girls, an incredibly important issue. Our nation can take great pride in the work we have done globally to combat it. In particular, I put on record my thanks to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office envoy. I think a summit is taking place very shortly to help consolidate a lot of the work on this and the work Lord Hague has done in putting it firmly on the agenda globally. This country has some great non-governmental organisations who are also doing fantastic work globally, supported by the UK Government, but we know there is still more to do. There are some nations in the world where perhaps only 1% of women and girls will not have faced horrific violence, so we must continue to do all we can to ensure every woman and every girl across the world can grow up in peace and security.

The hon. Lady mentions that it is Islamophobia Awareness Month. The Government are committed to ending all anti-Muslim hatred. Our work ranges from supporting Tell MAMA to our places of worship protective security fund, which for this financial year is £24.5 million. We are also bringing in new measures to protect faith schools. The work of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the definition of Islamophobia is progressing. My understanding—I will correct this if it is not the case—is that there is a difficulty with the definition formulated by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims and its compatibility with the Equality Act 2010, but the Department is looking at that. If that is not the case, I shall make sure the hon. Lady knows the facts.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady has still not condemned the train strikes, even in the run-up to Christmas. Many people working over Christmas will want to visit relatives. For those who are completely reliant on train services, the strikes are very disappointing indeed. I still hope the Opposition will support our legislation to ensure that minimum standards on these important services are maintained.

As for other legislation, I will make an announcement on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and the Online Safety Bill in the usual way. They will still be making progress through the House. I hope that Opposition Members will support those important Bills.

The hon. Lady mentions what Labour has to offer in its legislative programme and its policies. On the Government Benches, we are tackling the serious challenges that our country faces. In contrast, Labour's policies would make things worse. Labour's policy is £115 billion of unfunded spending, which would fuel inflation. Labour voted against the effective £1,000 tax cut for low-income

families, when it voted against reducing the universal credit taper rate. It is not on the side of working families. It has no plan on illegal migration. It voted against the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and would scrap the efforts we are making to deter and frustrate illegal migration. And I seriously doubt that a Leader of the Opposition who voted to block us leaving the EU 48 times really wants to deliver on the Brexit dividend. I think the public, when they are asked, will look at Labour and see it has no clue and no plan, and say, "No thanks."

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): On Saturday, in the big football match, King's Lynn Town are playing in the second round of the FA cup. The Walks will be full of fans backing the Linnets, and it will be on BBC 1 for anyone who cannot get there. In addition to joining me in wishing the team the best of luck for the match, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the importance of football clubs to their local communities?

Penny Mordaunt: What a timely question from my hon. Friend. I join him in sending congratulations. The World cup presents a huge opportunity to get people interested in the sport. Grassroots football is absolutely fantastic in giving people that opportunity, encouraging talent and, of course, contributing to health and wellbeing across the nations, so I thank my hon. Friend for raising that today.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments made about violence against women and girls and Islamophobia Awareness Month. Yesterday, the Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish Parliament cannot legislate for an independence referendum without Westminster's permission. I make it clear that the Scottish National party fully respects and accepts the Court's judgment. It should be emphasised, however, that the Supreme Court does not make the law; it interprets and applies it. The Court was not asked to decide whether there is a democratic mandate for a referendum, nor was it asked what democratic means remain by which Scotland can choose its future.

The ruling proves beyond doubt that it is no longer—if it ever has been—a voluntary or equal Union, so the situation we are in transcends arguments for and against independence. This is fundamentally an issue of democracy. Do the people of Scotland have a right to self-determination? If we do, will the Leader of the House tell us how that right can be exercised if the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to do so? If the people of Scotland keep electing a majority of pro-independence MSPs and MPs, what is the democratic route to realising that mandate? Will the UK Government recognise that democratic injustice and amend the Scotland Act 1998 so that the right to self-determination for the people of Scotland is protected, or will they continue to deny democracy?

Later this afternoon, a Westminster Hall debate is taking place on the infected blood inquiry and compensation framework. That terrible tragedy continues to devastate lives. Last month, following decades of campaigning, the Government paid interim compensation payments of £100,000 to those infected and bereaved widows and partners. However, the families, estates and carers of deceased victims are being excluded from any interim compensation, which is an enormous injustice that the UK Government are carrying out in plain

sight. My constituent, Justine Gordon-Smith, is the executor for her late father Randolph's estate. Justine was her father's carer throughout his painful struggle and ultimate passing, and she has suffered enormous and lasting personal trauma. When will people such as Justine receive justice? Will the Government make an urgent statement on the specific issue of excluded family members such as my constituent?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady, and I hope that she had a good birthday, which I understand was yesterday—

Deidre Brock indicated dissent.

Penny Mordaunt: Oh no, my intelligence was wrong! Well, I am glad to hear that, because I thought that it would be very unfortunate if it fell on the same day as the Supreme Court ruling.

Let me start with the infected blood inquiry and the interim compensation scheme. That is incredibly important, and I am glad that the Government have made some interim payments. It is not often recognised that, as well as the initial wrong that those people had to suffer, they have also suffered layers and layers of injustice over years and years. That includes the loss of their homes, the inability to take a job, travel or get insurance, the stigma, further inequality for their children, and many other things. We are very conscious of that.

I was pleased to set up the compensation review. I am glad that it is having a positive impact for some families, but we must ensure that all the injustices that people have suffered are properly dealt with and that they are compensated. To do some of that properly, we will need the main inquiry to report, but rest assured that the Government have acted on this after years and years of other Governments not acting, and we are determined that to see that justice is done.

The hon. Lady asks what the mechanism is with regard to the Supreme Court ruling. The implication of her question is that a mechanism does not exist. If that was so, how on earth did we have a referendum roughly eight years ago? Even if the SNP wishes to forget the fact that we did or to ignore the result, there was discussion. Political parties, the Scottish and UK Governments and civil society agreed with one another. There was a consensus, and we decided in this very Chamber that that should be so on 15 January 2013. None voted against it, and I have brought the *Hansard* from that day with me. Those are the facts. SNP Members try to paint themselves as the defenders of democracy, despite ignoring the result of the referendum and despite their voting to deny the people of Scotland and the whole UK their say on whether to be part of the EU—I have brought that *Hansard* with me, too. I remind the House that the SNP was the only party to vote against the EU referendum. Despite believing passionately in the Union of the United Kingdom, Conservative Members and I voted to give the Scottish people a say.

Mr Speaker: Order. I just say to the Leader of the House that it would be better if her answers were addressed through me. This is becoming a personal battle. Let me put it that way.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I recently met a group of Stroud secondary school headteachers, and I have spoken to countless schools such as Berkeley Primary

School, and they are all concerned about pressures on special educational needs, including funding, up-front costs, delays to education, health and care plans, endless paperwork and difficulties recruiting teaching assistants. These are smart, committed education experts who welcomed the recent extra funding, with education being viewed as key to the UK's growth plan, but special educational needs and disabilities remain a gap. Can my right hon. Friend update us on when the Department for Education will respond to the well-received SEND Green Paper, and on when we can expect a Bill?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. We published the Green Paper in March, and the Department is reviewing it. I suggest that she raises it at Education questions on 28 November. I will flag her concerns and her request to the Department so that it is brought forward swiftly.

Abena Opong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Rail cuts will be implemented in my constituency in early December without consultation. This follows a derogation from the Department for Transport on consultation. I wrote to the Department to find out how many derogations there have been in the past few years. Today I received a disappointing response from the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), that not only did not answer my question but arrived late. Given that the Leader of the House recently stated that all changes and cuts to rail services should involve consultation, can she please update the House on her position? Will she also urge the Transport Minister to respond to my question?

Penny Mordaunt: I do not know whether the hon. Lady managed to get any further information at Transport questions, but I will certainly write to the Department for Transport on her behalf to ask that it responds to her concerns.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): A world heritage site in my constituency has just been awarded levelling-up funding by the Arts Council, for which we are very grateful, but the Arts Council has also withdrawn funding from a fabulous music project at Old Park Primary School in Malinslee, in which every child learns an instrument and experiences the pride and joy of playing with an orchestra at concerts. Does the Leader of the House agree that levelling up is about creating opportunities for communities such as Old Park Primary School, which serves a disadvantaged area? Can we have a debate on Arts Council funding and levelling up?

Penny Mordaunt: If my hon. Friend were to apply for a debate, I think it would be very well supported. The Arts Council has funded about 1,000 organisations across England, so I know that other Members will also want to look at this issue. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions are on 1 December, and she may want to take up the specifics of this fantastic project in her constituency with the Secretary of State.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Grid infrastructure is now the biggest issue holding back renewable energy development in the UK. Despite this, the Government are stalling on plans to reform Ofgem's remit to allow

[Wera Hobhouse]

for pre-emptive investment in grid infrastructure. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the Government's plans for Ofgem's remit?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions are on 29 November, when she may wish to raise her question directly with the Secretary of State. I will write in advance to ask the Department to respond to her questions directly.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend was right earlier to reference the fact that the Opposition still refuse to condemn the rail strikes, which will hit retailers and the hospitality sector at a time of year when they are most dependent on trade, and will frustrate schoolchildren getting to school and patients getting to their hospital appointments. Will she therefore make time for a debate that looks at the impact of those rail strikes and, furthermore, at ways in which we can prevent a double-whammy from cancelling planned engineering works over that period, in the interests of rail passengers?

Penny Mordaunt: On my hon. Friend's last, practical suggestion, I shall certainly write and put that in front of the Secretary of State for Transport. We want to do everything we can to ensure that the travelling public, and especially those who are completely reliant on rail services, can travel. We could hold a debate, which I am sure would be well attended, certainly by Conservative Members, but what we really need is some legislation to ensure minimum standards, so that the travelling public are not disrupted as they currently are. We are doing that and I hope the Opposition will support it.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to do this only now, but I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am eternally grateful, Mr Speaker. I was wondering whether I was possibly off your Christmas card list!

I thank the Leader of the House for the business and for notice of the comprehensive list of proposed recess dates, which is really useful for diary planning for Members from across the House. If there is to be any Back-Bench business in the weeks beginning 19 December and 9 January, early notice of that would be helpful and useful to the Committee for debate planning.

Students at universities across the north-east have been contacting me, because of my work on the Select Committee on Education, about their maintenance loans. An average maintenance loan is about £485 per month for each student, but, like everyone else, they are experiencing huge increases in energy, rent and food bills. So may we have a statement on sustainability for students in our higher education sector, as many are really struggling at the moment and there is a danger to the institution, to the individual and to society as a whole of drop-outs due to unaffordability?

Penny Mordaunt: On being able to plan Back-Bench business, the hon. Gentleman will know that even if the dates are not set in stone, we will tip his office off and try to ensure that he can plan as best as possible to

facilitate that for all Members of this House. He raises a good point about the additional cost of living pressures on students, which everyone else is facing. I will write on his behalf to the Education Secretary to ask that this matter is looked at, but the hon. Gentleman will know better than anyone else here how to apply for a debate.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): When I founded Grassroots Out, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and Councillor Helen Harrison, we wanted to end the free movement of people, to stop sending billions of pounds to the European Union each and every year and to make our own laws in our country, judged by our own judges. I recall that the Leader of the House made a fantastic speech at one of our GO rallies. The former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) delivered all those things, so may we have a debate in Government time, led by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, entitled "Brexit, a roaring success. No turning back"? [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]

Penny Mordaunt: As someone who campaigned for Brexit and who was delighted that the nation voted that way, I must put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend for his part in that campaign. While he was wanting to loosen certain ties, he was also producing some very fetching ties, one of which he is wearing today—the GO green tie. He is absolutely right to say that leaving the regulatory orbit of the EU enables us to capitalise on some new freedoms to deepen our trading relationships, not just with the EU, but with countries around the world. I think in particular of the opportunities of a £9 trillion market in the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. We had not been able to do those things, be they trade deals, the memorandums of understandings we are doing with US states, or opening up opportunities for our technical professions and procurement. There is a lot that we have done, but there is still more to do. I can assure him that this Government remain totally committed to that agenda.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The shadow Leader of the House said that November marks Islamophobia Awareness Month. It is a reminder to root out this awful hatred that impacts communities across the UK and worldwide. I commend the Leader of the House for her leadership in the past and suggest that she meets Zara Mohammed, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, who, I remind the House, is the youngest, first woman and first Scottish leader of the MCB. Whether it is the ongoing genocide against the Uyghur Muslims in China or the fact that the British Muslims suffer from the highest number of hate crimes in the UK year after year, more work needs to be done. Sadly, the Government have failed to produce a definition on Islamophobia after promising to do so for three years. Can we have an urgent debate, in Government time, on Islamophobia?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter. Other Members have also raised that in today's questions. I will write on his behalf to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ask that he updates the Members who have raised that issue today. I refer the hon. Gentleman

to the answer that I gave earlier. This is an incredibly important matter for this Government in terms not just of the programmes that we do, but of ensuring that the right policies are in place.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In Iran, 60,000 people have been arrested for protesting, hundreds have lost their lives, and many are being warned that they face the death penalty. The agreement on the joint comprehensive plan of action seems to be in complete tatters. Thanks to you, Mr Speaker, two urgent questions have been granted recently, but we have never had a debate in Government time on what is going on in Iran and what the Government's position will be. Can we now have such a debate? Today, there is an attempt at the United Nations Human Rights Council to launch an investigation into Iran's activities, and its activities against its own people. Surely now is the time that our Government should be launching a debate in Parliament so that we can pile on the pressure.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important matter. I know that it is of huge concern to Members in all parties. Many events will be taking place in Parliament to ensure that the voices of the Iranian people can be heard and that we hear about what is going on there. The UK supported the special session at the UN to which he referred. I will write to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Foreign Secretary to make sure that they have heard his concerns today.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In 2010, 26,000 people used food banks. Last year, the figure was 2.6 million—a hundredfold increase. This year, we have one in four households in food poverty. Has the Leader of the House looked at the evidence from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, including that of FareShare and the Food Foundation? Indeed, the UN special rapporteur called for a right to food and also supported what the Welsh Government are doing in ruling on universal free breakfasts and lunches for our schoolchildren across the nation. We should do the same in England at a time of this desperate hunger among English children in English schools. Let us do it. Let us have that debate and make it work.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. One benefit of having debates is that we can also share good practice across the UK. Food banks are one particular type of support. The pantry and larder schemes, I know, are also expanding. I shall certainly write to the relevant Department to let it know about the hon. Gentleman's question today and to ensure that those opportunities are taken up.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): We recently celebrated 150 years of Barrow shipyard—not just the institution, but the men and women, past and present, who have worked there. It was once said to me that a nuclear submarine is the most technically complex thing that we build on the planet; in Barrow we are building many of them at the same time, which is tribute to the skills and ingenuity of the people working there. Those boats keep us and our NATO allies safe 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the workers in our shipyard and agree

that there is no more fitting tribute to the work that has gone on there and is going on now than awarding royal borough status to Barrow? Can she advise how we might go about that?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on speaking up for the silent service. Although we are very used to seeing aircraft carriers and other surface ships, it is rare that we see a submarine in dry dock and can truly marvel at it. They are huge and much more complicated than anything that goes into outer space—they are incredible. There are massive opportunities under the AUKUS alliance to produce more, to enhance those capabilities and to share technology. Conferring royal status is very rare, but I shall certainly write to the Cabinet Office so that it can advise my hon. Friend on that matter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House aware that Arwen Lark Hayes-Sheerman, our 13th grandchild, was born last week? Is she also aware of my campaign to ensure that every child in this country can breathe clean, fresh air wherever they are? At the moment, the poorest people in our country breathe in the filthiest air. Will she support my Motor Vehicle Tests (Diesel Particulate Filters) Bill, which would at least tackle the diesel particulate filters, which do not work and are not properly tested in the MOT?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure I speak for the whole House when I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his family on that very good news. I am aware of his ambitions and his private Member's Bill, and I shall certainly write to the Department for Transport and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure they have heard his comments.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): May I say pob lwc—good luck—to the Wales football team for next Tuesday, especially Anglesey's Wayne Hennessey?

Today is a special day for Anglesey and for Wales. I have championed Anglesey's becoming a freeport—I have mentioned it more than 26 times in this Chamber—and today is the day that bids are submitted. I am delighted that more than 1,000 supporters have signed the Anglesey Freeport website and more than 45 companies from all over the world, including BP, Bechtel, Rolls-Royce and Sizewell C, have endorsed Anglesey's bid. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on freeport proposals for Wales?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her continuing campaign. Business questions is becoming known as “Freeport Thursday” in my office, because she is always championing the project. I also congratulate her on the non-partisan way she does so. In addition to campaigning in Parliament, she is winning over supporters from her community and from across the political divide: I understand that the Isle of Anglesey County Council is putting jobs and local prosperity before politics and is supporting her and the Conservative manifesto commitment to enable this project to go ahead, bringing benefits not just to Wales but to the whole UK.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Everybody in the House knows that the reason the Bill on Monday has been changed is that the Government cannot deliver a

[Jon Trickett]

majority for their top-down, random house building targets to be imposed on various local councils. May I make a helpful suggestion to the Leader of the House? Why not have a debate about house building and how we deliver our targets without damaging local democracy? That would test the views of the House and give me a chance to oppose a 3,000-house development in south Featherstone, which will do massive damage to the community and the local environment.

Penny Mordaunt: We are continuing with the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. There will be a second day on the Bill. That will happen shortly, and I will announce it in the usual way. The delays to some Bills are because of things such as the Finance Bill, which is pretty important, but house building is incredibly important. We want to ensure that people have the opportunity to have a safe, secure home and also the opportunity to own their own home, so I am sure that a debate on that topic would be welcomed by all Members.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Last week I had the pleasure of joining celebrations at Penny Hydraulics Ltd, which has just received a royal warrant. This is a specialist engineering company that I am proud to say is based in Clowne in my constituency, although it started as a small family business in nearby Eckington. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate to celebrate the importance of small, local and family businesses and the successful role they play in our fantastic economy?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has asked a very timely question, as this week is Family Business Week. I have warm feelings towards Penny Hydraulics. It sounds like a great firm. There are currently 5 million family-owned businesses in the UK. They enable 4 million people to have a pay cheque and contribute about £575 billion to the UK economy. I am also pleased to say that the number of small businesses in the UK is up by 1 million since 2010.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Following on from that question about the importance of business, the right hon. Lady will of course be mindful of the fact that energy support for businesses is due to end on 31 March, leaving many struggling to survive, from those in hospitality and corner shops to community post offices. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out an understanding of the need to extend this vital energy support beyond the end of March and also the need to provide more certainty to business, which is a fundamental part of our economic and social infrastructure?

Penny Mordaunt: We do want to provide support for business, and that is what we have done. We have done it throughout the pandemic and with the energy packages. We have announced our intention to continue to support businesses and households with what they need to get through challenging times, and I refer the hon. Lady to the recent statement that the Chancellor made.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Bereavement, regardless of the time since someone lost their loved one, is totally overwhelming, and talking about loss is

often the route to dealing with the pain. It took me very many years to realise that. Finally sharing my story in a bid to help others was the most difficult thing I have ever done, but it was also a great honour knowing that it had helped others. I am therefore delighted to be working with the Co-op on launching a campaign, “Let’s Talk About Grief”, to share real stories of bereavement and encourage those who are grieving to speak about their loss. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Co-op on the campaign and also congratulate it on all the work it does in supporting bereaved people all the time?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on this other campaign. She has a reputation in this place for a doing a huge amount of good on issues that affect enormous numbers of people, but which are often not spoken about or focused on. I congratulate the Co-op and her on the work they are doing on this, and I am sure that all Members of the House would want to get involved and support what she is doing.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As the shadow Leader of the House said at the outset, tomorrow is International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. It is also known as White Ribbon Day, which is a campaign that engages men to prevent and end violence against women and girls. Tomorrow I am hosting a coffee morning that will bring together support services including Women’s Aid, elected local representatives, men’s groups and sports clubs, so can we have another debate in this place on men’s role in ending violence against women and girls?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. It is absolutely fundamental that we address it, whether through international campaigns—HeForShe and other campaigns of that nature—or grassroots local campaigns that help provide education, support and opportunities for men, both to help change the culture and to contribute to resolving these ongoing issues. I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he is doing in his constituency, and I hope many Members from across the House will be doing similar.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In light of the fact that the Government have been forced to confront the housing crisis that we are seeing, because of the rebellion on the Leader of the House’s own Back Benches, I hear that the Secretary of State is now meeting with Conservative MPs to talk about their issues, as opposed to trying to hear what the issues are in many of our constituencies where we have had a crisis for so long. Can we have a debate on housing in Government time, to inform the future of housing and planning and to address the housing crisis that we see on a daily basis?

Penny Mordaunt: This is a matter of considerable concern to many Members. We want to improve the quality of housing; we want everyone to be able to have a warm, secure home that is in good condition; and we want people to have the opportunity to own their own home, too. The Secretary of State’s door is always open to all Members of this House, and I will ensure that he knows about the concerns that the hon. Lady has expressed.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), I can inform the Leader of the House that the issue relating to Southeastern was raised at Transport questions, and the Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), confirmed that he had adopted the role of Fat Controller when it comes to Southeastern trains and had cut peak-time trains through my constituency and others, without consultation with our constituents. That is the key point: our constituents were refused the opportunity to be consulted. As they have not had the opportunity to have their say, will the right hon. Lady grant them a voice by giving us a debate in Government time, so that we can debate this terrible decision by the Department for Transport?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly write to the Department for Transport to let the Secretary of State know about the concerns that have been raised today. It is important that local communities are consulted about such changes, and I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Today, we have seen a damning report from Surfers Against Sewage regarding the scale of discharges being committed by water companies. In particular, the report includes new revelations about dry spills that pollute our rivers and beaches even when there is no rainfall. My own son was ill after entering the water earlier this year, in the summer—he came down with a spell of gastroenteritis, as did his friend—so I have some personal experience of this issue. Thanks to that report, we now know that South West Water, which covers the Tiverton and Honiton constituency, is one of the worst offenders. Will the Leader of the House make time available so that hon. Members from across the House can discuss the report's findings in relation to dry spills?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I am very sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman's son was ill, and that this was the cause. This issue is vital, and this Government have committed through the Environment Act 2021 and other work done by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure both that genuine storm overflows are reduced and that we are monitoring what water companies are doing. In 2016, I think only 5% of such discharges were monitored; from next year, that figure will be up to 100%, which is a key part of getting to the bottom of this.

The report is an important one. I do not think there will be Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions until 12 January, so I will write on the hon. Gentleman's behalf and ask the Department to respond to his question.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Last week, representatives of PANS PANDAS UK met a multidisciplinary group of medical professionals to discuss the future of diagnosis and treatment for those suffering from neurological disorders as a result of viral infections. That meeting was reported as being positive. There is clearly an issue with diagnosis of neurological disorders that is causing grave concern for many individuals, including people in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time to discuss these very important issues?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Diagnostics are vital. We must ensure that people get the chance to find out what ails them, even though we have a backlog from covid; that is why we have stood up the new diagnostic centres. It is clearly a highly specialist area, so I will write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and ask him to respond to the hon. Gentleman's query.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Other UN member states' leaders and Prime Ministers did not have to be dragged kicking and screaming to COP27. I was there, and I witnessed the frustration that many people have about the lack of climate leadership from the UK Government. Getting rid of climate questions, removing anyone with climate in their brief from the Cabinet and allocating 100 new oil and gas licences simply makes us a laughing stock on the world stage. Can we have a statement from the Prime Minister about why he is so determined to keep us driving on the highway to climate hell?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did not have to be dragged kicking and screaming to the conference of the parties. Labour Prime Ministers were not dragged kicking and screaming to COP, because all but one of them did not attend at all, so I am not going to apologise for my right hon. Friend's attendance at the summit. What he is also concerned about is our very real issues at home, which I know are his prime focus and care. All those issues, from the health service to the cost of living, are what he is focused on.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent has had to flee domestic abuse and has three children with significant health problems, so her life can be stressful at times. The Department for Work and Pensions recently advised her that it was transitioning one of her sons from the disability living allowance to the child disability payment, but for two universal credit assessment periods in a row she lost the payments despite updating her UC journal. It was only my office's intervention that stopped her losing her payments for a third month in a row. Can we have a Government statement on how the DWP will resolve what appears to be a systemic failure in legacy benefit transitions and stop it happening to many others?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that case. With regard to the systems and how they can be improved, he will know that the next Work and Pensions questions will be on 5 December. If his constituent is still in difficulties and the situation has not been resolved, and if the hon. Gentleman gives the details to my office, I will raise the case on his behalf with the Department. It is important that we ensure that what is already a very stressful time for families is not made more stressful because of glitches in such systems. I would be very happy to help him with the case.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Few Bills in modern memory have done more to protect children than the Online Safety Bill will, but it has been delayed for more than three years, which is completely unacceptable. We were making significant progress with the Bill. I am glad to see that it is coming back on 5 December, but I ask the Leader of the House to answer two straightforward questions put to her by the shadow Leader of the House,

[Chris Elmore]

my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire): will the Bill go back into Committee—something without precedent in this House in the past 20 years—and will it have a Third Reading on 5 December? People who have lost children because online platforms have not dealt with the harms found on them really need an answer. The delays have gone on for far too long.

Penny Mordaunt: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman and all Members of the House about how seriously the Government—particularly the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who is steering the Bill through the House—take these issues. I know that she will have met many of the affected individuals and organisations and will be very aware of the tragic consequences of the content that is sometimes pushed towards children and vulnerable people. The Bill's focus is very much on protecting children. I am proud that the Government are bringing it forward; I hope that all Members of this House will support it when it comes back to the House. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is coming back very soon.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): In the last few days, several primary school headteachers have written to me about the serious issue of Government funding for free school meals. Currently, schools pay £2.30 per child for a school meal, but catering services are raising prices, in some cases to £3 per child. In one school that amounts to £20,000 a year. A high number of children in Lewisham East receive free school meals, and this very serious issue will affect schools beyond my constituency. Will the Leader of the House ask her Cabinet colleagues to come to Chamber and make a statement on what the Government are going to do about it?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that she can raise the matter at the next Education questions, on 28 November. Currently, just under 2 million pupils are

eligible and claiming free school meals, saving families about £400 a year on average. She will know that the budget for schools will increase by £2.3 billion next year, and by a further £2.3 billion the year after that, taking the core budget to £58.8 billion—that is incredibly important. We expanded the free school meals scheme. I hope that she will raise that on the 28th.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): If the Government are going to continue to ignore the outcome of votes on Opposition days, or not participate in them, what is the point of Opposition days?

Penny Mordaunt: They are traditionally for Members to raise issues and concerns that affect their constituents. Alas, when SNP Members have had Opposition days, they have tended to focus not on matters of concern to the Scottish people, but on their obsession with having another referendum.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Healthy n Happy, a community trust in my constituency, is running the “Give a Gift of Joy” campaign in Rutherglen and Cambuslang until this Saturday, gathering gifts for children and young people who face a difficult Christmas. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the trust for its great work, and schedule a debate in Government time on the pressures faced by families this festive season?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very happy to put on the record my thanks to that organisation. This is an incredibly important issue, and there will be many opportunities, in debates and in oral questions, to raise matters of concern for families under pressure this festive season. I hope that the hon. Lady will make use of all such opportunities.

Point of Order

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. How can we get more Members to realise the importance of business questions? They are Back Benchers' equivalent to Prime Minister's questions—and may I say that we have better answers and a better quality of debate, from the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House? How can we spread that point more widely to Members, so that they can find out how useful this session is?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I could not agree more. I think business questions are a very useful way of raising matters. It is advertised well in advance, so let us hope that people look out a little more and get a better idea of the opportunities it presents.

Backbench Business

UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities

12.3 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

I am pleased to say that the broadcast of this debate is also available in British Sign Language, which is a first. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their support as co-sponsors of it.

The UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities falls on 3 December, during Disability History Month. I use the term “disabled people” as opposed to “persons with disabilities” because I am a firm advocate of the social model of disability; it is the disabling barriers in society that limit opportunities and prevent full and equal participation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. The public sector equality duty requires public authorities to consider the impact of their policies on people with protected characteristics, such as disabilities, at the policy development stage. Does she share the concern that this could be used merely as a box-ticking exercise and that Ministers should look at ways of making these considerations more naturally ingrained in processes?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. These exercises should never be seen as just ticking a box; they should have meaningful value.

The day is an opportunity to celebrate the advancements and achievements of disabled people. For example, the purple pound shows the contributions we make to our society. For decades, there have been many moments of celebration for many of the achievements we have made. In just the last year, we saw Rose Ayling-Ellis winning “Strictly” and the annual “Disability Power 100” list featuring many people across different sectors. Just yesterday, we had the first disabled person to join the European Space Agency's astronaut program.

The day also presents an opportunity to highlight the many barriers that still exist in society and to redouble our efforts to protect and promote the human and civil rights of disabled people. It was the last Labour Government who signed up to the UN convention that aims to eliminate discrimination, to enable disabled people to live independently and to protect against all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation. Sadly, 13 years later, the convention is yet to be fully incorporated into UK law.

Some 669 people contributed to this debate by sharing their experiences, which demonstrates just how important it is. I thank each and every one of them, and acknowledge their moving, thoughtful and detailed contributions, which have helped me to prepare for today. It is important

[Marsha De Cordova]

to recognise that for many respondents, 60% of whom are disabled, completing a survey like this may have taken a lot of time and effort, not to mention emotional energy. I also thank deaf and disabled people across the country, people such as Ellen Clifford, as well as the Disabled People's Organisations forum and charities including Disability Rights UK, Scope and the Royal National Institute of Blind People, along with the many others who have provided invaluable input.

There are 14 million disabled people in the UK and a further 6 million carers. They are represented by Members across the House. An accessible, inclusive and equitable society is what we all are striving for. However, discrimination, social barriers and Government policies have significantly limited disabled people's ability to participate fully and independently. I will briefly outline just some of those areas.

To begin with, we have the disability employment gap, which has remained stubbornly around the 30% mark for more than a decade. TUC research also shows that the disability pay gap is over 70% and gender exacerbates it. It is clear that societal barriers preventing many from accessing good-quality work still exist. We all agree that everyone deserves to live in safe, decent, warm and affordable housing, yet only 9% of housing stock is accessible and disabled people are significantly more likely to live in unsafe accommodation. That is why I have been calling on the Government to implement the recommendation from the Grenfell inquiry that would mandate landlords to prepare personal emergency evacuation plans, or PEEPs, for disabled people living in high-rise blocks.

Too often, disabled people continue to face barriers when travelling, whether because of floating bus stops, cuts to bus services, inaccessible rail stations or the closure of many ticket offices. Those barriers continue to hamper the ability of disabled people to travel independently.

The pandemic shone a light on the stark health inequalities and barriers. Nearly 60% of covid deaths were of disabled people or those with a long-term health condition. There was also the horrific blanket application of "do not attempt resuscitation" notices during the early part of the pandemic. In last week's autumn statement, the Government decided to shelve their social care reforms and delay the introduction of the social care cap. A third of working-age disabled people rely on that social care cap, and many of them are in social care charge debt.

Disabled people have been disproportionately affected by Government cuts, and there is mounting evidence that real-terms reductions in health and social care spending since 2010 may have led to thousands of excess deaths among disabled people. The Disability Benefits Consortium found that disabled people were more adversely affected by cuts to social security as a result of the conditionality regime. There is also the unfit-for-purpose assessment framework. The Government spent over £120 million fighting personal independence payment and employment and support allowance appeals between 2017 and 2019, but 70% of PIP and 57% of ESA tribunals resulted in successful outcomes, which demonstrates that there is something wrong with the framework and with decision making.

Just recently, the Information Commissioner ruled that the Department for Work and Pensions unlawfully breached the Freedom of Information Act by preventing the release of internal process review reports into the deaths of at least 20 social security benefit claimants. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will shed light on when the Government will publish the report. It is clear that the Government do not want to publish it, as it shows the negative impact that some of their policies have had on people claiming social security. We all must remember the premise of social security: it is there as a safety net, to support those in need. Four million disabled people are living in poverty, and the current economic emergency will only worsen these inequalities, as some face extra costs of around £600 a month.

Many Members know of my experience and that, before coming to this place, I worked in the disability rights movement. I can safely say that the last 12 to 13 years of the hostile environment and cuts have resulted in an assault on disabled people's civil and human rights, which has had a devastating impact. This is evidenced by the UK becoming the first nation state to face an investigation under the convention for its violations of disabled people's human rights. The Government's national disability strategy published last year was also ruled unlawful. Many of us did not believe that it was credible in the first place. This speaks to the wider issue that the Government must take heed of the mantra, "Nothing about us without us" and commit to co-producing and co-creating policies with deaf and disabled people.

I hope that the Minister will address some of the points I have raised but also some of the following points. First, why have the Government not committed to full incorporation of the convention? It has been 13 years. Hate crime against disabled people rose by 43% in the year ending March 2022, so why do the Government refuse to follow the Law Commission's recommendation and Labour's policy to make sure that disability is classed as an aggravated offence, which would ensure that everybody is treated equally under the law? If they are serious about getting people into work, why will they not commit to mandatory disability pay gap reporting, as the Labour party has?

The Access to Work scheme has the potential to be one of the best forms of employment support. I have been a recipient of it in the past, as have many others, but I believe it could be enhanced by removing the support cap and creating a more streamlined process that also includes portable passports. Will the Government commit to doing that?

I turn to the Disability Confident scheme—or, as I sometimes choose to call it, the "not so confident" scheme. We need to have confidence in this scheme. Currently, it does not make it mandatory for anyone found to be a Disability Confident employer to actually employ any disabled people. Will the Government commit to introducing independent evaluation, monitoring and quality controls, so that the scheme can be given the credibility it needs for people to want to be part of it?

In this economic crisis, with inflation at a 40-year high, the additional £150 disability cost of living payment announced in the statement last week is clearly not enough. We need to understand what additional targeted support will be available to people. With winter fast approaching, when will these cost of living payments actually be made? Will the Government consider reversing

the eligibility criteria for the warm home discount scheme, which saw over 300,000 disabled people moved out of the scheme as they no longer qualify?

I want to end by remembering two former colleagues and friends who passed away recently. The first is the fearless Seán McGovern, who was a staunch disability rights campaigner and a strong trade union champion for disabled people's rights. He was a mentor to me, and it was him who encouraged me to put myself forward for public office. But for his continued encouragement and support, I might not have been here today. I also pay tribute to the late Roger Lewis, who passed away just this week from bowel cancer. He was a strong supporter, and he changed and touched the lives of so many disabled people, so many deaf people, and so many blind and partially-sighted people. He was totally blind, but that never stopped him being a champion and an advocate for the rights of disabled people. Our movement is poorer without them.

As we go forward to mark the UN international day of disabled people, let us also remember the amazing achievements that so many of us continue to make, while also recognising the many challenges and barriers that we must overcome to create the fully inclusive, accessible and equitable society of which we all strive to be a part.

12.18 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the initiative that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) has taken in applying for and obtaining this debate. I want to pick up on a number of important points that she made in her excellent speech, but I will begin by commenting on the problem that the Government have over engagement with disabled people.

We know that poverty is particularly focused among families living with disability. That is very clear in the work of the Social Metrics Commission, chaired by the noble Baroness Stroud, who was the special adviser to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) when he was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, so this is not a partisan point at all. Poverty is focused among those families, so it is not surprising that disabled people, from time to time, have cause to criticise the benefits system.

In the last few years, the Department for Work and Pensions has tended to respond to that by pulling up the drawbridge and refusing to talk properly to people, which led to the fiasco of the disability strategy to which my hon. Friend referred. It was launched with some fanfare in July last year but declared unlawful in January this year because of the failure to consult disabled people. As far as I know, it is still languishing—stuck and going nowhere—as a consequence.

The Social Security Advisory Committee is appointed by the Government and made up of experts, not politicians. It is chaired by Stephen Brien, who was one of the original architects, with the Centre for Social Justice, of universal credit. The committee produced a useful paper in December 2020 called, “How DWP involves disabled people when developing or evaluating programmes that affect them”—a slightly long-winded title, but it is clear what it is about. It says:

“DWP officials themselves acknowledge that the Department is not trusted by many disabled people and by some of the organisations who are led by, or work with, disabled people. Our

own research confirmed this. Some of the individuals we spoke to did not believe that the Department engaged with disabled people's organisations or sought views from individual disabled people. There was also a widespread belief that DWP would not represent accurately disabled people's views when they did seek them.”

The committee therefore recommended that:

“DWP should develop a clear protocol for engagement...It should cover both national and local engagement”.

That is a clear, straightforward, constructive and helpful suggestion to try to overcome that serious problem, but the Department's response was simply to reject the recommendation.

The committee also recommended that the Department should routinely report on its engagement with disabled people, but the Department rejected that as well. It said:

“We believe that our existing reporting provides sufficient information on our engagement with disabled people and stakeholders.”

I must say, however, that that is not the view of disabled people, as a Conservative Member of the House of Lords, Lord Shinkwin, told the Work and Pensions Committee that

“the DWP is handling its engagement with disabled people badly” and, he said, with “palpable disrespect”. We now know that it is not the view of the courts either, hence the fiasco over the disability strategy.

The Department commissioned a report from a respected external agency to investigate disabled people's experiences of the benefits system. It talked to a large number of disabled people in carrying out that research. When asking if they would take part in the study, it told each of them that the results would be published. When Ministers saw the report, however, they decided not to publish it, which is a clear breach of the cross-Government protocol on social research that requires such documents to be published. The Select Committee used its powers to obtain a copy of the report from its authors and published it, so that it reached the public domain.

It is true, of course, that being open about criticisms and difficulties exposes Ministers to awkward questions, but refusing open discussion and trying to keep things secret or keep a lid on them does far more damage than letting such debates take place in the open. I warmly welcome the new Minister and his colleagues in the ministerial team to their posts and I hope that they will take the opportunity to have a fresh look at how they deal with, talk to and engage with disabled people and their organisations. The practice of the team led by the previous Secretary of State was unnecessarily disastrous—there was no need to try to hide all those things. It would have been far less damaging to be open and to, yes, sometimes have a robust exchange. To try to keep it all hidden was very damaging and counterproductive.

As a first step, we have been told by the Department that it will not publish the number of work capability assessments that it carries out each month—I have no idea why; it is absolutely basic and fundamental data. I suppose the reason is that, if people know how many are being carried out, they can ask awkward questions about what is going on. That is another example of that damaging and counterproductive attempt to bury what is really happening.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am sorry that I came late to the debate; I was delayed in traffic after another meeting. I remind my right hon.

[John McDonnell]

Friend that some of the concerns expressed by disabled organisations over the years commenced largely around the WCAs. I remember that he, I and several other hon. Members simply asked the DWP whether it was monitoring, for example, the consequences and impact of WCAs on certain vulnerable people and the suicides that were taking place. It denied us that knowledge at the time, so it is understandable that a number of disability organisations are sceptical about its role.

Sir Stephen Timms: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct that this has quite a long history, but my sense is that it has got considerably worse in the last few years and the Department has stopped publishing things that obviously should be published and answering perfectly reasonable questions. As a result, it has badly damaged its reputation with disabled people. I hope that the new ministerial team will want to rebuild those links and rebuild trust.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea made some important points about the disability employment gap, which has increased in the last two quarters. Many disabled people would like to work but cannot. The pandemic has had a damaging impact, because since then, there has been a steep rise in the number of people who are out of work on health grounds. We urgently need to be able to support disabled people who would like to work into jobs, because that is one of the key ways to tackle the current labour shortage. We can take advantage of that big opportunity.

In July last year, the Select Committee published its report on the disability employment gap. Shortly before the 2015 general election, David Cameron announced a target to halve the disability employment gap, but the target was scrapped shortly after that general election. We want it reinstated. Our report called for a radical overhaul of employment support for disabled people. The big national Work and Health programme is helpful but it is not working for many people. The truth is that, as we can all recognise, smaller specialist providers are often best placed to deliver the help that is needed. People have to be on the ground locally to know who can do the best job; that kind of support cannot be commissioned from Whitehall.

We proposed that funding for this employment support should be devolved. Where the capacity exists, we want groups of local authorities, probably based on the new NHS integrated care system boundaries, to be responsible for commissioning and delivering employment support for disabled people. The Department should allocate funding, monitor performance and publish detailed comparative performance data, but it should not deliver the support, which should be closely integrated with the local health service, colleges and voluntary sector groups. In its response to our report, the Department did not reject that idea, but it has not moved in that direction at all since; I hope that it will.

My hon. Friend was right about Access to Work, which is vital to overcoming work-related obstacles resulting from disability. It is a lifeline for many, but it is not well enough known. Many employers do not know about it and it is dogged, as she said, by a bureaucratic and extraordinarily cumbersome application process that

puts people off and leaves many in limbo. Once they have applied, they sometimes have to wait for quite a long time to find out what support they will receive. If somebody benefits from Access to Work in one job and then changes job, they have to go back to square one. There should be a passporting arrangement, as my hon. Friend argued. If they apply for a new job at the moment, their potential new employer cannot be certain what, if any, help Access to Work will provide.

The Minister's predecessor told the Select Committee about a planned "digital transformation" for Access to Work, which I hope will address those obvious failings, and I hope the Department will involve disabled people themselves in the redesign of the Access to Work programme. I would be particularly grateful if the Minister, in winding up, could give us an update on the progress of that initiative.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The right hon. Member is making some powerful points. Does he agree that, where there is a cap on individual benefits through the Access to Work scheme, that stops some people getting everything they deserve, while money for that purpose is left lying in other pools?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Lady is right and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea made that point as well. I think that is unhelpful and should be removed.

We also called in our report for larger employers to be required to publish the proportion of their employees who are disabled, and my hon. Friend referred, rightly, to disability pay gap reporting. Like her, the Select Committee thinks it is high time for a rigorous evaluation of the well-intentioned Disability Confident scheme.

For our current inquiry, we conducted a survey of personal independence payment and employment and support allowance claimants. My hon. Friend referred to the experiences of some of those applicants. We are going to publish our report from that inquiry soon, but it was striking how many respondents to that survey said the assessments had damaged their mental health. In describing the assessments, many respondents said that they were humiliating, undignified or even, in some cases, traumatic. There is a serious PIP application backlog at the moment.

Marsha De Cordova: My right hon. Friend is making an interesting point about the negative and long-lasting impact that the assessment frameworks for employment and support allowance and PIP are having. Does he agree that now is the time to overhaul those assessment frameworks to something that is co-created with disabled people, is less intrusive and focuses on providing the essential support and extra costs of living support that are needed?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree. There is a big job to be done, and involving disabled people in doing it would be an important part of the solution.

There is also an industrial injuries disablement benefit backlog at the moment. It remains the case, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, that when people appeal against an adverse PIP decision, the great majority win their appeal, which shows pretty clearly that there is something going badly wrong.

The Department did introduce some welcome, imaginative flexibility in assessments during the pandemic. I pay tribute to those who came up with some new ways of doing things—telephone and video assessments—when obviously the old ways could not be applied during the pandemic, and who took advantage of those long term. It is important to maintain flexibility. For some people, being able to be assessed at home over the telephone or via a video link avoids enormous distress and is a real boon, but for others it is important to be able to talk about their impairment face to face and they are happy to travel to an assessment centre to do so. I do not think there is a single solution here, but I think the flexibility that has been introduced of late will be valuable.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is in negotiation with the Department on a section 23 agreement over the protection of vulnerable claimants, arising from grave concern, which we have heard about already, about claimants who have been badly treated by the Department too often having lost their benefits or being sanctioned when the issue was, for example, a known and serious mental health problem. Too many benefit claimants, as we have been reminded, have taken their lives in these circumstances. So I welcome the initiative that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has taken, and very much hope that the section 23 agreement will be concluded and published soon.

The new ministerial team has the chance to establish a new, much more positive relationship with disabled people, based on openness in place of defensiveness. In welcoming the new Minister to his post, I urge him to take that opportunity.

12.34 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can I first say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for setting the scene so very well? I was very pleased to go to the Backbench Business Committee with her and others to request this debate because it is an important debate. I feel particularly strongly about it. I am happy to be in the Chamber today to seek support along the lines that the hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) referred to, because it is important to debate this issue.

In her introduction, the hon. Lady referred to Roger Lewis and said that he was the encouragement for her to be here. I would just say honestly to her and everyone here that that is a man who has blessed us with her presence. We are very pleased that he was able to encourage her, and that we as a result have the benefit of the powers she clearly has.

I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, which is for eyesight and eye care. The hon. Lady leads it, and she leads it well. Yesterday, she was not able to be there and asked me to substitute. I said to all those around that she could do it much better than me and I would never be able to chair the meetings as well as her and, yesterday, I think everyone recognised that.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the hon. Member for his stellar leadership of that group prior to my taking over as chair, but also for always stepping in for me at the last minute, and I know he chaired that meeting really well.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is most kind, and I hope that was the case.

I am pleased to be here to speak. I am also a vice-chair—in this place, I chair many APPGs and I am vice-chair of numerous others—of the APPG on disability. So it is always great to be here to promote the rights and wellbeing of those with disabilities and their contribution to all aspects of our society—educationally, socially, culturally and politically. As my party's health spokesperson, I will always stand up for those with disabilities, because I want to see a society—I think the Minister would want to see such a society as well; I think we all do in this House, to be fair—that recognises achievement and ability, and does not look down upon somebody who just happens to have a disability, which I find disappointing for some of the people we meet in life, and we do meet them regularly.

It is always good to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), in her place—I know she is a lady of great experience and capability, so we look forward to her contribution—and also the spokesperson for the Scots nats party, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who is always here whenever we have such debates. I welcome the Minister to his place and I look forward to the answers that we seek today. I think that these are open door requests—I really believe that—and that it is hard to say no to the requests that we are making on behalf of those who are disabled, so we look forward to the Minister's contribution.

The latest estimates from the family resources survey indicate that 14.6 million people in the UK had a disability in the 2020-21 financial year. That represents some 22% of the total population, and one in five—one in five—of the population in Northern Ireland. So it is important to remember the range of disabilities and impairments that people suffer with. Some are not visible—for instance, autism or bipolar disorder. I am not smarter than anybody else, but I understand these things because of my direct contact with my constituents. A large proportion of constituents come to see us about disability issues. Some are not noticeable—for instance, fibromyalgia. We cannot see that in the hands when constituents come in and present themselves, but they can tell us about it and about just how bad that is for many of them. It features in almost every one of the applications for personal independence payments that I do in my office. Again, I am not an expert—far from it—but I do understand. Regardless of that, we have continued to ask for respect for how someone's disability impacts their daily life. I want disabled people to be recognised for their ability and achievement, not for their disability.

One of my staff members deals specifically with benefit queries in my office, whether that be disability living allowance, children's DLA, PIP, income support or ESA—the most prominent forms of benefit claimed. We never truly know how different disabilities can affect one's mobility and getting around. My staff member does that five days a week and does nothing else but benefits. That gives an idea of the magnitude of the issue. As a physically active Member of Parliament, I fill in the application forms as well. That gives us an understanding of the benefit and how to deal with it. It gives me an understanding of how life at present is so different.

The RNIB, which the hon. Member for Battersea referred to, is important. It has referred to the energy price and food price increases. While we who are able-bodied in this Chamber are able to budget and cut the cloth

[Jim Shannon]

accordingly, many people who are disabled do not have that ability. I will ask this later again, but what can be done to help people who have disabilities in particular when it comes to dealing with those things?

The hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for East Ham referred to tribunal success. In our office, we have a 75% to 80% success rate in the benefit tribunals that we do on all those different benefits. I say this gently, because I understand that people make decisions based on what they have on paper in front of them: sometimes, when you have a face-to-face with a person at a tribunal, you can see things differently. Sometimes the tribunal sees things differently and it also provides a chance to bring forward the medical evidential base to back up the case. Perhaps these things could be done in the process as we go forward. None the less, it is a pleasure to represent people on the things that they need us to do.

On 24 September, the Minister for Communities in Northern Ireland announced that work would begin on a new social inclusion strategy, including a disability strategy that aims to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and ensure their inclusion in society. I welcome that. It is good to do that. We should be focused on how we can do it better and that we see not the disability but the person and their potential to achieve and do well. That is what I want and what I hope to see. At the end of the day—I say this with respect—those people are human beings, just like everyone else.

The RNIB has been in contact with my office—it has also been in contact with the hon. Member for Battersea and others in the Chamber—and made it clear that the cost of living crisis is becoming increasingly difficult for people with disabilities. It said that more than two thirds of people with disabilities said that their financial situation had gotten worse, and more than a third often go without essentials, such as food and heating, and struggle to make ends meet. I hope the Minister will be able to answer this question: what can we do to assist people with disabilities when it comes to the energy crisis, food price increases and everything in life that seems to be getting more and more expensive? That is a big ask of the Minister.

Margaret Ferrier: The hon. Gentleman, as well as the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), mentioned the RNIB and people with a disability with sight. A real concern that many constituents have raised with me is the confidence of some taxi drivers in turning away passengers with guide dogs. Of course, that is illegal, but they struggle to see the consequences of that as it continues to happen. Does he agree that Governments across the UK should be tackling that together and stopping it?

Jim Shannon: As often, whether it be in the House or in Westminster Hall, the hon. Lady gives us a salient reminder of the issue. Back home, even though it is illegal, as she said, it is still happening in certain parts. I do not understand the logic of it, because those guide dogs are among the best I have seen. Many years ago, the RNIB took me to Hollywood in Northern Ireland, gave me a guide dog and let me walk through the high street with a mask on. I could not see a thing; it was pure darkness. That was one of my better experiences in coming to understand how it is for some. I must say that

I did not know the guide dog and it did not know me, but it stuck to my knee and negotiated the whole way down the high street. It is a busy high street with obstructions—people have coffee tables out—and we came to footpaths where I did not know what was going on, but the dog did. That is a fond memory, if I can say that, which has helped me to understand better what it means to be blind and the importance of that understanding.

I feel strongly about encouraging disabled people into education and employment. The most recent labour force survey showed that some 38.9% of people with a disability in Northern Ireland were employed in 2020, compared with 78.4% of people who were not disabled. Wow—that is a big factor to address. We need to squeeze the gap in opportunities for those with a disability and able to work to allow them to stand alongside those who are not disabled.

The hon. Member for Battersea referred to accommodation, which is another issue that regularly comes up in my office. Many times, we have people come in who are on benefits and have mobility issues. They might be in an upstairs flat or a house with stairs, which was okay when they were not disabled, but, as life has progressed, they have become disabled and that property is no longer suitable for them. That is a regular issue, as is people finding themselves in wheelchairs and needing a disabled facilities grant for their home, which in many cases may involve extensive changes to doorways, a ramp to the front of the house and perhaps one to the rear, and a walk-in shower and a bathroom all at a level. Perhaps we need to look at those things as well.

The rate of those with disabilities in employment has incrementally increased, which is a great sign that there is more public encouragement and awareness that people who are disabled are just as capable of doing jobs. Will the Minister outline what steps will be taken to encourage employers to employ those who are disabled? My requests will always be made in a constructive fashion—I mean that—because I look for the answers and the solutions. I know that that is what he wants as well. Many of the disabled people I meet have incredible intelligence and ability. I confess that I am no good at IT, but some of the people I meet are absolutely first-class; nay, with their IT skills they could do a job as well as others or a lot better. What can we do to increase their employment in a way that makes life better for them?

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the disability pay gap. Both previous speakers referred to it. It seems that, for those who are disabled—I say this gently—their time in employment is worth less than anyone else's. It should not be, so what are we doing to address that? Employers sometimes need to understand that they should look not at the person but at their ability and power to achieve. In 2020, the disability employment gap in Northern Ireland was 42.2 percentage points, compared with 27.9 percentage points in the rest of the UK. That is not the Minister's direct responsibility, but has he had any opportunity for discussions with his equivalent Minister in Northern Ireland? I know that he will do that. It is always good to share stories and experiences, because sometimes we can learn from things—I always do—and our Ministers can learn from where they have fallen short while things here are better. How can we share those experiences to make things better?

In addition, some disabilities are not recognised as such in the benefit system. For example, endometriosis and asthma have only recently been recognised as disabilities

in PIP assessments despite being long or lifetime conditions that disable somebody from everyday tasks. We often have those issues.

There must be a proper consensus in the Department on what a disability is.

Myalgic encephalomyelitis and multiple sclerosis were first brought to my attention many years ago. In those days, doctors often did not quite understand what ME or MS were. I could see clearly from the person and the medical evidence from a consultant that there was a disability, but unfortunately—it is not a criticism; it is about how we move on and learn things—GPs sometimes did not have that understanding. Today, however, MS and ME, whose symptoms include incredible fatigue and pain, are recognised as disabilities.

Not every person who has a disability can work, but at the same time they are not always entitled to benefits. I believe the best way to encourage disabled people into work is to take away stigma, as many disabled people are forced to challenge stereotypes and prejudice when they are looking for work. In the autumn statement, I genuinely welcomed, because it is a positive step, the help for those on benefits trying to get back into work. Many people want to work, and they should be encouraged and helped along that pathway, as long as they are able and can do it, so that was one of the good things that came out of the autumn statement.

Disability inclusion is an essential condition to upholding human rights, sustainable development, and peace and security. People with disabilities are no different from us—I have said it before and I will say it again—and the United Nations disability inclusion strategy, which is part of this debate, provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the work of the United Nations. We all must work on disability inclusion within our own constituencies, in Strangford and across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in employment, education and society to promote the inclusion of all, and equality and fairness in our modern society. Would it not be wonderful—I always seek wonderful things, and it is not wrong to do so—if disabled people across society could have that as a key part of their employment, education, housing, health and benefits? That is the purpose of today's debate.

I commend the hon. Member for Battersea and the right hon. Member for East Ham for their contributions. I look forward to others' contributions, especially the Minister's. We have set you a long list of asks, Minister. We look forward to the answers.

12.52 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): As ever, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I truly want to congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing this important debate. I listened with great interest to the contribution from the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms)—I was going to say West Ham, because I am thinking about football the moment. I hope he will forgive me.

The hon. Member for Strangford says I am always appearing in these debates. That is because I am the SNP spokesperson on disabilities, but since I took on that role I have really learned and learned to understand how important it is that we debate these subjects, so

even if I cease to be the spokesperson I will still be here, because what we do with regard to people with disabilities, and talking about them, is really important.

It is a privilege to mark the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which falls on 3 December, to promote the rights, dignity and wellbeing of people with disabilities across the globe. Disabled people are key members of society and they make a huge positive impact on the world we live in. That huge impact is embodied by the inspiring story of the former British Paralympian John McFall, who this week became the first disabled astronaut. Isn't that amazing? I also note that it is Disability History Month, and there are a number of wonderful events taking place across Parliament. I will be speaking in one directly after this debate today, organised by ParliAble. I encourage my fellow parliamentarians to attend some of the events. The people here probably will, but I am sending the message further—further of the Chamber, as we would say in Scotland—as we celebrate the history of those with disabilities.

In my role as spokesperson, I regularly meet disabled people and disability organisations and would like to pay tribute to those with disabilities and their carers who regularly offer inspiration to me personally. In line with the UN's commitment to "leave no one behind" as part of its 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the UN has outlined that in moments of crisis it is vulnerable people, such as those with disabilities, who are most often left behind and excluded.

About 1 billion people in the world live with a disability, with 80% of them living in developing countries. There are higher levels of disability among women, the poor and the elderly. The significant cut to the UK Government aid budget has left a £4.6 billion black hole in the budget compared to 2019, resulting in a significant reduction in the number and size of programmes targeted at disabled people. Many disabled people in developing countries will be impacted. For example, in Rwanda 150,000 girls and 50,000 boys, including 8,000 adolescents with disabilities, are no longer able to take part in an education and life skills programme.

The covid-19 pandemic, as we have heard, deepened already pre-existing inequalities in society, and the latest rise in inflation has disproportionately hurt the most vulnerable. That feeling of being left behind is something I have heard from many of the organisations I have met recently, as many disabled people feel left behind by the current Government in response to the ongoing cost of living crisis. The Government's inadequately targeted measures have done very little to address the concerns of disabled people and their families, who have much higher energy needs. Simply putting on another jumper or taking measures to limit the use of gas and electricity are not feasible possibilities for those living with disabilities. Staying warm is essential for many disabled people, and many risk worsening their condition if they cut corners by not putting the heating on. Likewise, many disabled people cannot cut corners with electricity as they need to charge or power essential life-saving equipment such as ventilators and wheelchairs.

Recently, at a Muscular Dystrophy UK drop-in event in Parliament, I was shown a stark graphic that reinforced that point. A mother of a child with muscular dystrophy showed a picture of the six plugs needed to charge her child's life-saving equipment at any given time. For disabled people and their families, the choices between

[*Marion Fellows*]

charging, heating and eating are impossible. The position this Government are putting the parents of disabled children in is totally unacceptable and devoid of empathy. Those parents are certainly not reaping the rewards of the so-called compassionate conservatism we hear so much about in the Chamber. One example is the recent case of Carolynne and Freya Hunter, which demonstrates the inadequacy of the Government's targeted support. Carolynne, the mother of Freya, was facing an energy bill of £17,000 to keep Freya's life-saving equipment running. Fortunately, the actress Kate Winslet most kindly stepped in to cover their bills, but it is unacceptable that society's most vulnerable in the United Kingdom have to rely on philanthropy and the charitable nature of others to live with dignity.

The UK's reliance on charity, rather than Government policy, to ensure vulnerable people can survive this current crisis is also demonstrated by the increased use of food banks. The Trussell Trust has released research showing that disabled people are hugely over-represented in food poverty demographics, with 60% of food bank users having a disability. Poverty and disability are often mutually reinforcing and almost half of all disabled people are planning not to turn their heating on, despite the reasons I have given for doing so.

John McDonnell: The hon. Lady mentioned an aspect of this. If a family includes a person with a disability, that is a key factor in ensuring that the whole family lives in poverty. I chair a group of unpaid carers and the key issue is the lack of support for unpaid carers and the low level of carer support allowance for them.

Marion Fellows: I totally agree and thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am hugely impressed and inspired by unpaid carers, many of whom save this country an absolute fortune and get no thanks for their work. I take this opportunity, on behalf of everyone here, to thank them for what they do.

According to Scope, millions of disabled people will be cold, hungry and at risk. Disabled people are "at the sharp end" of this cost of living crisis, and Government support has so far simply not been enough. A one-off cost of living payment to disabled people is an inadequate form of support.

However, disabled people being left behind by this Conservative Government is not a new phenomenon. The Government's national disability strategy last year left behind the views of those with disabilities. It was found to be unlawful, as has been said, and those with lived experience of disabilities were not talked to adequately. We do that in Scotland. I have talked in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall about what Scotland does. Will the Minister please look at what Scotland does, because it is worth looking at. Disabled people here in Parliament have come to me and said, "I wish I lived in Scotland; you do it so much better." We are a small nation. Parts of the social security system are devolved, and with that devolution we are doing everything we possibly can to help disabled people and to treat them with fairness, dignity and respect. As the right hon. Member for East Ham said, we do not do that here. People are made to jump through hoops unnecessarily. Please look at what we are doing and learn lessons.

Sir Stephen Timms: The Work and Pensions Committee visited Glasgow and met senior officers of Social Security Scotland. There is a great deal in the approach for which the hon. Lady is advocating. She is right and the Minister would do well to take a look at that.

Marion Fellows: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have spoken to many people who were employed by the DWP in Scotland. They are able to compare and contrast the two regimes and they are so pleased to be working for Social Security Scotland.

Those with disabilities are fearful of being left behind once again, with the return to the parliamentary agenda of the British Bill of Rights Bill and the corresponding abolition of the Human Rights Act, if that goes ahead. Its worrying re-emergence rekindles the fears of many disability organisations regarding the removal of statutory protections for those with disabilities. At a time when we should be strengthening the protections in place for those with disabilities to ensure that they can live with as few barriers as possible, the Government risk regressing the regulatory regime for disability rights. The Human Rights Act offers a critically important mechanism for recourse for those with disabilities; abolishing it would weaken avenues for those with disabilities to enforce their rights. I would welcome the Minister telling me that I am wrong and that that will not happen, as I think we all would.

The British Institute of Human Rights has drawn my attention to a story highlighting the necessity of challenging inequality for disabled people using human rights legislation. Bryn was 60 years old and lived in supported living. He had learning disabilities, epilepsy, was non-communicative and blind. Staff at the home became concerned that Bryn had a heart condition and called a doctor from the local NHS surgery, who came to visit. Bryn had an independent mental capacity advocate who was supporting him. The advocate attended a multidisciplinary meeting to represent Bryn. At the meeting, the GP stated that he would not be arranging a heart scan for Bryn as "he has a learning disability and no quality of life".

Bryn's advocate challenged that by raising Bryn's right to life, under article 2 of the Human Rights Act, and his right to be free from discrimination, under article 14. The advocate asked the doctor whether he would arrange a heart scan if anyone else in the room was in that situation. The GP said yes and then agreed to the scan. The Human Rights Act gave the advocate the legal grounds to challenge the discrimination and take steps to protect Bryn's life. Sadly, Bryn passed away because of his heart condition before any treatment could take place. I would like us all to reflect on that. I thank the British Institute of Human Rights for bringing that to my attention.

Clause 5 of the rights removal Bill destroys positive obligations, which is the positive duty on public officials to protect people from harm. The new Bill allows public bodies to refuse to act to safeguard people like Bryn, and to raise financial resources or operational priorities as the reasoning behind not taking action. Disability rights groups across the UK are gravely concerned that public officials will not take proactive steps to protect disabled people from harm, due to discriminatory attitudes or the resources required to protect that person, and that the rights removal Bill removes accountability for that. That is very dangerous and increases the likelihood

of more awful stories like Bryn's occurring—[*Interruption.*] I want to complete these points, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I beg your indulgence—[*Interruption.*] You are shaking your head.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Exceptionally, I will allow you to finish, but agreements were made.

Marion Fellows: I will be very brief.

In Scotland, we try to do things differently to foster a more inclusive society for all, based on fairness, dignity and respect—please heed those words. Although we are constrained by the limits of the current constitutional arrangement and budget, the Scottish Government continue to put measures in place to remove barriers facing those with disabilities. We want everyone to reach their full potential.

The Scottish Government have committed to introducing an overarching Scottish diversity and inclusion strategy covering Scotland's public sector, educational institutions, justice system, transport and workplaces. The strategy will focus on the removal of institutional, cultural and financial barriers that lead to inequalities in relation to many protected characteristics, including disability.

Thank you for your forbearance, Mr Deputy Speaker. We need to look at what Scotland is doing. I hope that the Minister will agree to a meeting with me on this issue—it is a bit cheeky for me to ask at this point, but I used to have regular meetings with the disabilities Minister. I have given examples of cases, as have other Members. We need to sort this out. The Government need to respect the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. We need to make life better for them, because there is a huge pool of people out there who want to work and who want to be able to live a decent life and contribute more to society. We need to, we must and we should give them that opportunity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Opposition spokesperson.

1.8 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Minister to his place and thank my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for securing this debate and for her tireless campaigning on these issues both in this House and, for many years, in civil society. She made a typically powerful and well-evidenced speech, as did all the other contributors from whom we have heard. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for all his work with the Work and Pensions Committee, based on his extensive knowledge in this area, and to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as always, for his characteristically thoughtful, detailed and humble remarks.

I also take this opportunity to thank the many organisations, charities and activists campaigning to improve the lives of disabled people. Next Saturday we will be marking the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which, like my right hon. and hon. Friends, I will henceforth refer to as the International Day of Disabled People because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said, we subscribe to the social model of disability not the medical model.

I wish I could say that we are all here purely to celebrate the International Day of Disabled People. There is certainly a huge amount to celebrate, and many

Members have rightly referred to the truly inspiring case of John McFall and this week's wonderful news about him potentially becoming the first disabled astronaut. There are so many others we could mention, not least on the "Disability Power 100" list, which my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea mentioned. The fifth of Britain's population who have a disability are obviously achieving incredible things.

I associate myself with the gratitude that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea expressed for the lives of Seán McGovern and Roger Lewis. Seán was a Unite member and trade unionist, and I thank both of them for all they achieved. I express our sympathies to their family and friends on their loss.

There is clearly no lack of ambition among disabled people but, sadly, they are far too often blocked from realising those ambitions, and therefore we must not shy away from the challenges they face, which have become increasingly intense over recent years. Even before the pandemic, public service and social security cuts since 2010 fell disproportionately on the shoulders of disabled people.

Since then, disturbingly, disabled people made up three in five of those who died from covid-19 in England during the first wave of the pandemic. Successive failures in social care and social security have left disabled people more vulnerable to the health and economic consequences of the virus. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea rightly said, so many challenges for disabled people are connected to those areas and others. She mentioned the challenges around transport and the lack of social care reform, which disabled people have been promised so many times. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) also talked about the impact of cuts to international aid on disabled people internationally.

One area that all speakers rightly mentioned is disabled people's participation in the labour market. I am concerned by the recent figures showing that in 2021 the proportion of disabled people either unemployed or economically inactive rose from 45.9% to 47.7%. Four million disabled people are now locked out of work, and the disability employment gap has recently grown—marginally, but it is growing—from 28.1% to 28.8%. That is unacceptable. We need to see much more action to support disabled people into work and in work.

Of course, we also need to see much more action on the cost of living crisis, which is impacting disabled people's livelihoods. Their ability to eat decently, to heat their homes, to work and even just to access basic medication and equipment is often in peril. The charity Scope estimates that the additional cost of being disabled amounts, on average, to around £600 a month, and those calculations were undertaken before the intensified price rises for goods and services in recent weeks.

All of this has real-life consequences for disabled people. Last month, the Office for National Statistics found that over half of disabled adults—55%—report finding it difficult to afford their energy bills. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw rightly said, not being able to power the equipment they need can have a direct impact on people's health. That compares with a lower proportion of non-disabled people, 40%, who are finding it difficult to afford their bills. Over a third of disabled people—36%—find it difficult to afford their rent or mortgage payments, compared with 27% of non-disabled people.

[Anneliese Dodds]

The response to all this has been to publish the extremely delayed national strategy for disabled people. As others have said, the strategy was ruled unlawful by the High Court because disabled people were not consulted on what they need. The strategy was about disabled people, without disabled people. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham rightly made clear, such engagement is important not only in showing respect to disabled people, rather than the palpable disrespect that the Government were found to have shown, but in ensuring that policies for disabled people will actually work and be effective.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), the shadow Minister for Disabled People, for all the work she has done to make sure disabled people's voices are heard. I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw concerning the Government's approach to the Human Rights Act, which looks set to remove some of the levers for disabled people.

Another topic mentioned in this debate is the incidence of hate crime directed towards disabled people. We are still waiting for a new hate crime strategy, despite disability-related hate crime increasing more than sevenfold in recent years. What is the Minister doing to replace the national disability strategy and properly consult disabled people? How will he close the employment and wage gaps for disabled people? Will he commit to tackling hate crime perpetrated against disabled people? And what is he doing to shield disabled people from the economic crisis that is worse in our country than in many comparable countries, partly because of decisions made by successive recent Governments?

We need a different approach. The last Labour Government did more to advance equality than any other Government, and the next Labour Government will build on that track record. We will work with disabled people, in a spirit of dignity and respect, to develop the right policies for and with disabled people. That includes, for example, introducing flexible working by default. We will move ahead speedily with disability pay gap reporting in the first 100 days of a new Labour Government.

We need to do that because this year's disability pay gap shows that disabled workers earn £2.05 less per hour than non-disabled workers. Disability pay gap reporting will shine a light on this inequity and encourage employers to act to rectify it. We will level the playing field for disabled people, to ensure that the horrendous hate crimes against them are treated as the aggravated offences they are.

It is also critical that we consider the situation for different groups of disabled people. Last Sunday was Equal Pay Day, when women essentially stopped earning for the year, compared with men, as a result of the gender pay gap. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said, gender exacerbates the disability pay gap. The pay gap for disabled women is disturbingly high, with the latest statistics suggesting it stands at a whopping 22.1%. Their Equal Pay Day was way back on 12 October, which is when they stopped earning relative to all men. Nobody should face unfair and unequal pay at work, but this shows how disabled people are even more disadvantaged. I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for

East Ham. Transparency, both in the workplace and from Government, is surely the very least that disabled people should expect.

Tomorrow is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls, marking the start of 16 days of activism against such violence. Disabled people experience domestic abuse at double the rate of non-disabled people. During their lifetime, one in two disabled women in the UK experiences domestic violence, compared with one in four women overall. Disabled women also experience higher rates of economic abuse and of having treatment or equipment withheld.

In the month of Equal Pay Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls and the International Day of Disabled People, what will the Minister do to end violence against women, girls and disabled women, and to close the pay gaps that affect them? Will the Government treat disabled people with dignity and respect? Will they fulfil their promises on flexible working to make it easier for disabled people to get to work? And will they finally bring forward a strategy for disabled people that actually consults and involves them? I look forward to his response.

1.19 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): I am pleased to join colleagues in speaking in this debate to celebrate the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities. I pay tribute to and thank the Members who secured this debate, particularly the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who opened the debate eloquently; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who highlighted eloquently and superbly the enormous contribution made by disabled people across our society in many forms; and, of course, the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). I believe I have had cause to vote for him previously to become Chairman and I reflect upon the fact that I may well come to regret that vote; he is an assiduous Chairman and I look forward to engaging constructively with him and colleagues in the work the Select Committee does in scrutinising our work as Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions.

We have heard a number of moving and inspiring contributions reflecting the diversity of disabled people's lived experience. That is noteworthy, as we talk today about John McFall and his remarkable achievement. I know all of us across this House want to commend him for that and send him our very best wishes—it is hugely exciting.

The theme for this year's International Day of Persons with Disabilities is: "Transformative solutions for inclusive development: the role of innovation in fuelling an accessible and equitable world". It is a timely and important theme, and we aim to step up our efforts to build back better and fairer, for a society that is inclusive and accessible to all. I am going to talk about our global leadership on disability inclusion and give some examples of the work we are doing domestically on this year's theme.

Margaret Ferrier: I welcome the Minister to his place. Although I am grateful that the Government supported private Members' Bills in the last Session, such as the British Sign Language Bill and the Down Syndrome

Bill, which gained Royal Assent, may I ask the Minister to look at providing some priority time within the Government's legislative programme, rather than relying on private Members' Bills, because measures such as those are so important for people with disabilities?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point, which will speak somewhat to the points I will go on to make later. I hope they will give her some confidence on this.

We are working towards equality on the global stage, through both the example we set here in the UK and our international co-operation. The UK has long provided global leadership on disability inclusion. The UK Government ratified the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and its optional protocol in 2009. We remain fully committed to implementing this convention, through strong legislation, and programmes and policies that tackle the barriers faced by disabled people, in order to realise their full participation and inclusion in society. Along with Kenya, we started the Global Disability Summit movement in 2018 and we have continued to support it, providing funding to the secretariat and advising the Governments of Norway and Ghana ahead of the second summit, which took place in February this year.

Most recently, the former Minister of State with responsibility for disabled people, my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), attended the 15th session of the conference of states parties to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities in June 2022. She participated in bilateral meetings and wider debates, and met global counterparts with the aim of strengthening the international political commitment for the rights of disabled people. I would like to place on record my thanks to her for all her work, particularly in this week when she has announced that she will not be standing for re-election to this House. She has been a trailblazer for disabled people, leading that work in government. I am proud of the huge contribution she has made, which provides strong foundations upon which I, along with the Secretary of State, will be building.

The UK continues to support disabled people living in lower and middle-income countries through our flagship disability-inclusive programmes. We are also providing support to disabled people in Ukraine.

Marsha De Cordova: The Minister says that his Government support disabled people and want to ensure that they continue doing so, but it has been 13 years since the last Labour Government signed up to the convention, yet successive Governments, including the current one, have not committed to fully incorporating it. He says that the Government are committed to it, but why are they not seeking to incorporate it? For example, when will the Government commit to incorporating article 19 of the convention, on independent living for disabled people, into UK law?

Tom Pursglove: To directly address the hon. Lady's point, we are fully committed to the convention, but as a general principle the UK Government do not incorporate international treaties into our domestic law. However, the rights of disabled people under this convention are largely reflected in existing domestic policies and legislation, including the Equality Act 2010, in England, Scotland

and Wales, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, in Northern Ireland. As I have said in the context of other debates in previous ministerial roles, it is for this House and this Parliament to interpret our international obligations and to reflect those in our domestic body of legislation in a way that this House, and Parliament more generally, sees fit.

Let me get back to the wider points. The UK continues to support disabled people living in lower and middle-income countries through our flagship disability-inclusive programmes. We are also providing support to disabled people in Ukraine. We are providing global leadership, but we are clear that more needs to be done. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office published an ambitious disability inclusion and rights strategy to embed disability inclusion across FCDO's diplomacy, policy and programming work at the Global Disability Summit in February 2022. The strategy reaffirms the UK's commitment to act as a global leader on disability inclusion, setting out our approach through to 2030.

The FCDO also announced 18 public commitments in February to make its international development work more disability inclusive. The commitments include increasing meaningful participation with disabled people, and specific work on tackling violence against women and girls and on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The FCDO's disability inclusive development programme is a six-year, £30 million programme designed to test "what works" for disabled people. By the end of March, the FCDO had provided more than 375 disabled children with a quality education, almost 6,000 disabled people with improved access to healthcare and more than 6,400 people with disabilities with training and skills development to improve their income, and encouraged more than 16.5 million people to change their attitudes and behaviours towards disabled people to tackle stigma and discrimination.

The UK also supports the growth of the global disability movement by providing capacity-building grants to disabled people's organisations around the world. The FCDO funded the training of more than 1,200 disability activists last year to help them advocate for disabled people's human rights and hold Governments to account for progress on disability rights. A new allocation of £15 million in funding will help local responders in Ukraine and Poland support up to 200,000 of the most vulnerable impacted by Russia's invasion, including older people and those with disabilities. That will fund grassroots civil society groups to provide food assistance, water and sanitation, psychological support and childcare services, alongside other emergency assistance.

I would like to take a moment to bring attention to some of the progress made by this Government that has positively impacted the lives of disabled people. Our Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill received Royal Assent on 25 October 2022 and will enable people who are thought to be in the final year of their life to get fast-tracked access to disability living allowance, personal independence payment and attendance allowance.

John McDonnell: This is the Minister's first outing, so it is not the time to rough him up on anything. However, the background to this, for those of us who participated in it, is the UN report, which demonstrated that as a result of austerity there have been systemic gross violations

[John McDonnell]

of human rights of disabled people in this country. One point that has been made by Labour Members is the importance of the Government engaging with disability organisations. May I suggest that one of those should be the preventable harm project, run by Mo Stewart, who might be able to take the Minister through some of the issues, particularly those associated with the work capability assessment, that developed the problems we have with regard to the violation of human rights of disabled people in this country?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I would be happy to meet him to discuss those issues further. I am determined that Ministers will have constructive working relationships with colleagues across Parliament, and with third sector organisations and international organisations pertinent to this work, to ensure that we deliver the best outcomes possible. I would be happy to have a conversation with him about the particular point that he has raised.

We also made similar changes to universal credit and employment and support allowance in April this year.

One particular Bill reflects positively on the cross-party constructive work that has gone on. The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) brought the British Sign Language Bill to Parliament and worked constructively with Ministers to deliver it, including with my right hon. Friends the Members for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and for Norwich North. The Bill passed into law earlier this year and will recognise BSL as a language of England, Wales and Scotland in its own right. It is also supported by a duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to regularly report on what each relevant Government Department has done to promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in its communications with the public.

We laid regulations in the summer to allow more health-care professionals to certify fit notes in addition to doctors. Nurses, occupational therapists, pharmacists and physiotherapists can all legally certify fit notes, reducing the pressure on NHS doctors, particularly GPs. This followed legislative changes in the spring, which removed the need for fit notes to be signed in ink.

On World Mental Health Day in October, we announced the expansion of a joint programme by DWP, DHSC and NHS England—with expenditure of £122 million—to expand the provision of employment advisers in improving access to psychological therapy services across England.

Sir Stephen Timms *rose*—

Tom Pursglove: I am conscious that I need to make a bit of progress, but I will gladly give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir Stephen Timms: As the Minister is running through the things that the Government are doing, can he clarify what their intentions are on the national disability strategy? That was stuck in the courts in January. Do the Government intend to move that forward and, if so, when?

Tom Pursglove: I will get to that very point. It is one that I want to reflect on briefly in my remarks. I will get there and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will welcome what I have to say.

This voluntary service will recruit an additional 700 employment advisers to support people with common mental health conditions to improve their mental health, while also helping them to stay in or find work.

A key priority for this Government is increasing disability employment and reducing the disability employment gap. We have heard strong representations for that important objective across the House this afternoon. The Government have a range of programmes and initiatives that are supporting disabled people and those with health conditions to start, stay and succeed in work. This includes disability employment advisers providing specialist expertise and upskilling work coaches in our Jobcentres. The schemes include Access to Work and Disability Confident; and employment programmes such as local supported employment, where we are working in partnership with local authorities to support adults with autism and learning disabilities.

As a Government, we are committed to supporting all people with a disability to lead fulfilled, independent lives. That is a mission that the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Secretary of State and I are determined to deliver on. We are delivering a wide range of actions that will positively impact the everyday lives of disabled people—from education to transport, from housing to leisure. We are also committed to challenging unhelpful perceptions of disabled people—all changes that can make a big difference and all changes that feed into enabling disabled people to thrive.

The latest disability employment figures show an increase of 240,000 on the year and an overall increase of 2 million in work since the same quarter in 2013. Our improving lives strategy set out the Government's goal to see 1 million more disabled people in work between 2017 and 2027, in line with the 2017 manifesto commitment. The figures released for quarter 1 2022 showed that, between quarter 1 2017 and quarter 1 2022, the number of disabled people in employment increased by 1.3 million, meaning that the goal was met after only five years. Our goal to reduce the disability employment gap remains. We will continue to galvanise action across Government and outside Government to ensure that we are ambitious about the employment of disabled people and people with health conditions. It was to that end that, last week, I went to the Jobcentre in Stratford to learn more about the initiative that we are rolling out across the country to deliver additional work coach time. That is designed specifically to help support people into work, where possible, meeting those individual needs and widening the access and availability of work coach support, which is very welcome.

Returning to the theme of innovation, assistive technology is key to our ambition for the UK to be the most accessible place to live and work. We are taking vital first steps towards our overall aim to make our country the most accessible place in the world to live and to work with technology. Advances in technology aimed at increasing disabled people's participation in society can result in trickle-down benefits for wider society. Some advances can be especially beneficial for disabled people, as I heard about at an excellent event that was held in Parliament only last week.

To capitalise on the many advances in technology, we need to translate what is cross-party political enthusiasm and the Government's overarching policy commitments into well-designed, evidence-based, and funded initiatives.

As a first step to achieve that, we are carrying out an ATech needs assessment. That will explore the needs, demands and impacts on the lives of disabled people and help us to better understand the market capacity for procuring and providing ATech.

Also on the theme of innovation, businesses have an important role to play. Important partnerships have been formed with our disability and access ambassadors. These are senior business leaders who use their influential status to push forward improvements to the accessibility and quality of services and facilities for disabled people. New ambassadors were appointed in July 2021 and in January 2022. In total, they cover 19 private sector industries, from advertising to housing. I am committed to working with these ambassadors to shine a light on their sectors to ensure that disabled people have increased opportunities to participate in a modern, inclusive British society. I thank the ambassadors for all the good work that they do.

I now wish to briefly touch on a few of the points raised by my colleagues here, mindful of the wide variety points that have been raised during the debate. On the point about inclusive and cumulative impact assessments of social security policies on disabled people, in line with the public sector equality duty, the Government carefully consider the equality impacts of policies on those shared and protected characteristics. That is in line with both their legal obligations and their strong commitment to fairness.

On the cost of living, we have had many debates about the comprehensive support that is being provided by this Government to help to address the pressing challenges that many families across the country understandably feel at the present time. That help and support should be seen in the round. As I am responsible for overseeing this, I know that the current latest batch of cost of living payments are being made at the present time. That is welcome support and, no doubt, we will have the opportunity to talk more about cost of living support in the debates that we will have in the weeks and months ahead.

On energy, the warm home discount scheme currently provides around 3 million low-income and vulnerable households across Great Britain with a £150 rebate off their winter energy bill. We have extended the scheme to 2025-26, expanded the scheme to support 800,000 more households and reformed the scheme in England and Wales to provide more rebates automatically and better target households that are in fuel poverty.

On the national disability strategy and the court judgment, what I can say at this stage is that the UK Government strongly disagree with the UN inquiry's findings and we were disappointed with the NDS ruling, which we are appealing. We continue to be fully committed to the convention and will be publishing our response shortly.

On personal independence payment appeals and work capability assessments, since PIP was introduced, we have made 4.5 million decisions, and only 4% of those have been changed after tribunal hearings. For employment and support allowance, there have been 3.3 million completed WCAs on ESA claims between October 2013 and December 2021, 3% have gone to complete an appeal of a fit-for-work decision and 2% have been overturned. But I am not complacent. I am determined

that we will do everything we can to ensure that we focus on quality decision making and that decisions are got right first time.

There were also, rightly, comments made about Access to Work, which is a very effective scheme in enabling people to access employment opportunities and to sustain that employment. Access to Work developed the health adjustment passport, which has been rolled out across Jobcentre Plus. To support the transition from education into employment, Access to Work has delivered a passport pilot in universities. Both have received positive feedback and we are keen to go further. That is an area that I am looking closely at. Again, if colleagues have any observations or ideas, I would be keen to hear them so that I can reflect on them as part of my consideration.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised the issue of taxi and private hire drivers and disability access, particularly for individuals who are blind. Under the Equality Act 2010, private hire drivers and taxis have a duty to carry guide dogs and assistance dogs at no extra cost to the passenger. On accessible transport more generally, officials will deliver a review of the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000 by the end of 2023, which will ensure that future decisions on accessibility standards are based on an updated understanding of passenger needs.

I also want to touch on hate crime, a subject that came across strongly in a number of the contributions. Speaking as someone who was a former policing Minister and victims Minister, this is an area that I feel very strongly about, as I think we all do. We must come together as one House of Commons and as a society in calling out hate crime wherever we see it, in whatever form it takes. The UK Government have asked the Law Commission to review existing criminal law for harmful communications both online and offline. Following the Law Commission's final report, the Government are taking forward the recommended harmful communications, false communications and threatening communications offences through the Online Safety Bill.

In my role as the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, I am committed to driving forward the disability agenda across Government, tackling the barriers that disabled people face.

Sir Stephen Timms: Is the Minister going to come back to the subject of the national disability strategy and tell us what the Government's intentions are on that?

Tom Purslove: I could speak at some length on that, but I think I will write to the right hon. Gentleman as Chairman of the Committee and provide him with an update on where we are in relation to that particular point. I think that is the best way of addressing that question.

I assure the House that I will continue to work with ministerial colleagues across Government, especially as convener and new chairman of the ministerial disability champions, who were appointed in summer 2020 at the request of the then Prime Minister to help to drive progress across Government to help to improve the lives of disabled people. That commitment remains. The ministerial disability champions meet regularly throughout the year. They act as personal leads within their respective

[Tom Pursglove]

Departments, encouraging joined-up working across Departments and committing to championing disabled people.

I am keen to look at, consider and try to advance particular projects that colleagues and wider society feel would be beneficial in improving things for disabled people. I will also continue to meet with disabled people, disabled people's organisations and disability charities across the UK, so many of whom are inspirational with the work that they do and in the example that they set.

Ensuring the voices of disabled people are heard is a priority for this Government. We continue to work closely with disabled people and disabled people's organisations to ensure we hear from the full diversity of the community. Only this week I have met the Disability Charities Consortium, Disability Benefits Consortium and DPO Forum England to discuss issues impacting the lives of disabled people. I hope that that reassures the House about my determination, commitment and willingness to engage thoroughly and extensively. No one person has a monopoly on good ideas about the next steps we should take.

The disability unit runs multiple stakeholder networks to support and supplement Government engagement with disabled people and their organisations. Departments across Government also have their own networks specific to their policy focus. The unit is currently considering how we can strengthen our engagement with the sector even further. We stay cognisant of opportunities to consult and co-create with the sector in designing and delivering impactful policies to improve disabled people's lives, which is our ultimate aim.

Ahead of this year's UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities, I wish to emphasise our ongoing commitment to drive forward inclusion for disabled

people at all levels of British society and continue to be global leaders in the disability space. I know that that is a firm commitment that we share across this House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For up to two minutes, I call Marsha De Cordova.

1.43 pm

Marsha De Cordova: I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to what I believe has been an important and particularly timely debate, given the lived experience of so many disabled people, ahead of the UN day on 3 December.

I take the point my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) made that this is a new Minister and we have to be constructive, but I must say that I would have really appreciated detailed responses to many of my questions that the Minister did not respond to. I hope he will write to me when he has had an opportunity to review my speech and provide me with some written answers to the questions that he was unable to cover.

None the less, we have celebrated the many achievements of deaf and disabled people and acknowledged the huge challenges and barriers they still face. I again allude to the national disability strategy, because it is in the courts and it has been ruled unlawful. It is really for the Minister to set out what is going to happen now. We are in a cost of living emergency. There are challenges with the social security system, the social care system, transport, education and many other areas, so we need to actually understand what action the Government are going to take now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Independent Review of Children's Social Care

1.45 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important and timely debate on children in the care system.

It is imperative that we see investment in a new approach to keep young people safe and supported, and to rebuild services and skills around their needs. In this debate, we must be mindful that millions of parents have excelled in nurturing their children in loving, secure homes—but sadly that is not everyone's story. Good parenting takes skill, time and patience. That is why parents, foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents are simply amazing. No matter the relationship, when there is a cry for help, it must be heeded.

Asylum-seeking children, disabled children and those with learning disabilities or from minoritised groups need excellence and care; they need safe, secure and loving homes. That is what we want for every child. Tragically, for too many, that is not their experience. We worry, and we have to act. Serious case reviews shake us, they are aired in this place and then they are filed, until we are reminded by the next report, and then the next.

The story is familiar: invisible children, overstretched services, social workers drowning in demands, warning signs—and then it is all too late. Children disappear between agencies, between the multitude of social workers who are never given the chance to excel as they are squeezed by demand. Parents are let down, children are let down. Parents endure the pain of separation from their children, just because life failed them—life went wrong. If only the system had time to break in and break the intergenerational cycles to provide the very best early interventions.

There are half a million children in need of support, 82,170 of them residing in the caring system. If we do not pivot, it will be 100,000 in a decade. But they are not numbers: they are our future, they are our now, they are our children. Like all of us, they want to know they are safe. They want love. They want family.

We get it. Life is hard. Parenting is really tough, and where there is little support and stress presses in, something breaks. However, when children's social services are under-resourced and overwhelmed, reparation is harder. Take Ava, who was placed in foster care when family hardship meant she was not provided with the care she needed. She moved far away, separated from her brother and sister. On the cusp of turning 18, she was told to move out and is now living alone in an unfamiliar town, all because her family struggled. That is not care.

I think of the young mum desperate to do the right thing, but not supported to parent before the painful adoption order is granted. The trauma never leaves her. I think of parents not coping with complex needs and complex relationships, coercion and control, violence in the home, poverty knocking on the door, isolation and poor mental health. I think of the children left lonely, afraid, neglected, in need of care, and sadly, for some, in

need of safety. I think of those sucked into slavery: from county lines to sexual exploitation, they disappear, lured by the promise and the hope of better, then destroyed. Sometimes, things just go wrong.

We all know the stories, because these are our constituents. That is why we are here—not to make another speech but to lever in change. The Minister has the power to make that happen. There is a blueprint on the Minister's desk: to cut the number of children in care by 30,000 in a decade and to make countless more families thrive. If Government really grasp the urgency and importance of this, they will find the money, too, not least as they will see the return quickly.

Last May, Josh MacAlister published his independent review of children's social care. We are waiting for the Minister's response. We need the reforms and the funding in full. For children in and around the care system, time is not on their side. Key parts of the workforce are contemplating their future. Families are under ever growing stress, as are services, and children need to be kept safe. The power of the report is in its echoing of the voices of people with care experience. Their aspirations must turn into Government ambitions. From the outset, it would be unethical for Government to speak of pilots for implementation. Clearly, every authority has its differences—some have better leadership, some better funding, and some are already on the path of reform—but to leave an authority behind would be to leave a child behind.

Secondly, on funding, may I remind the Minister that the total package would cost just £2.6 billion? The cost of children's social care is £10 billion a year right now, and the current cost of adverse outcomes is £23 billion a year. Not to act will cost £15 billion in 10 years' time and have a higher social tariff, too. The Minister cannot afford not to implement now. Any delay will cost her and cost families.

Investing in families is the most pressing reform, by bringing together multidisciplinary teams from across agencies together to input into, support and transform families, with health, mental health, education, social services and families working together. It is about building families, investing in families, and getting the right support to families in the right time. We need family help delivered by brilliant practitioners through family hubs and schools, with skilled and intensive support from the first 1,001 critical days through to childhood and adolescence, and into young adulthood—one team around one family, one assessment process and one plan; radical help, bringing radical resolution.

Rachel de Souza's report, "Family Matters", encourages the wider involvement of family, recognising their role in raising a child and, if the child is entering care, the interventions they can make, including through kinship care, which is today homing 162,000 young people. Having a family network plan will unlock the potential of the wider family role in supporting parents and caring for children, not least when a new placement is sought. The Mockingbird project provides networks of support around foster carers, but could be extended to recognise wider community networks. Supporting families in the context of society builds more sustainable, resilient families.

For some, adoption is the path forward, but this must change, too. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for adoption and permanence. Our report, "Strengthening

[*Rachael Maskell*]

Families”, highlights the cracks in the system. There is inequality, with some children taking longer to place—sibling groups, minoritised children, disabled children, and older children too. We need better matching, and they need better support, but adoption is more than family matching. We need excellence in family building and trauma therapy, too.

In the social media age, children are finding birth parents, and birth parents are finding children. Instead of being well prepared, they are doing that on their phones, alone in their bedrooms. The trauma from the intrigue can be devastating, not least as life's journey of questions may not produce the hoped-for answers. At worst, it can destroy both families and the child. More open processes can be safer.

Strong leadership leads to strong services. We need the very best leaders heading up services—one controlling mind driving through this once-in-a-generation reform. From here, we need confident and competent key workers. Social workers are too often thrown into the deep end before learning to swim, or are drowning in paperwork when families need their skills. Sixty-five per cent. of children have more than one social worker in a year, and 27% more than three. It is not acceptable. Building an early careers framework will grow the skills of graduates, so that they gain experience, make a positive difference and work with a safe case load, with the mentors, learning and supervision necessary to make them excel as professionals. After five years, practitioners can then seek posts that demand higher levels of expertise and clear, focused, decision making, such as in child protection. They need that experience.

There is a proposal for a national pay scale, which is right. I look at what Agenda for Change did for the NHS. It built workforce stability and pay transparency, and it helped people to build their careers. The pay market, fuelled by the spike in agency workers, is like a magnet. Areas that pay less are often where the greatest needs are, escalating workforce churn and leading to disruption for families. The use of agencies must end. Not only are costs out of control, but it is in the interests of neither the practitioner, the service, nor, especially, the child. Everything must relentlessly focus on young people, improving their futures, opportunities and safety. Service improvement commissioners must challenge and improve services, not just assess them, so that excellence is achieved in all areas at all times.

But even when taken into the arms of the state, into residential care, as 16% of children in care are, they face multiple placements, of which 20% are neither good nor outstanding. Thirty-seven per cent. of placements are more than 20 miles away, some in unregulated, unsuitable settings, as I found out from children in my own constituency. These are places profiteering out of the most fragile of children. Seventy-eight per cent. of residential care places are provided in the private, for-profit sector. This failure on availability, quality and costs demands reform, as set out in the Competition and Markets Authority report. On average, profit margins rose by 22.6% from 2016 to 2020, an average of 3.5% a year above inflation, with total costs of £1.33 billion to these organisations, but for a child with complex needs the costs are limitless. So why are people profiting out of children?

As for quality, these services are rated more poorly, violate more requirements and are rated more negatively. The CMA's “Children's social care market study” also outlines fears of market disruption, as private equity firms have overreached and carry substantial debt. A closure would be disruptive. Even the Minister, Baroness Barran, said

“it sticks in my throat to have private equity investors”—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 7 November 2022; Vol. 825, c. 449*]
in this role.

The chair of a Government review of private children's home providers found that children are being failed as the largest providers make millions in profit. New regional care co-operatives need to sort that out. As partners of local authorities, they can provide the scale and focus to oversee fostering—particularly when 9,000 new foster carers need recruiting, training and supporting—and residential care. We must rid the market of such responsibilities and rebuild outstanding therapeutic and homely facilities, with the very best of staff.

The ambition of the review must be fulfilled, so that every child is loved, healthy and happy, excels in school and then work, and is safe and secure. Being care-experienced will never leave a person, but adopting this as a protected characteristic will help with navigating life. Above all, the child must always have a strong voice. The independent reviewing officer has been that voice and changes to the role, while questioned, have pointed to the conclusion that every child needs a competent practitioner the child trusts who will advocate for them. Of course prevention is vital. Understanding the intersections between poverty, life's challenges and family must guide wider policy choices, but starting with the reforms we are debating today will secure a necessary workforce reset and provide every child with the care, love and safety they need. We must not let these young people down; they have ambition and so must we.

1.59 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for York Central (*Rachael Maskell*) for securing this important debate. Those of us who see this issue as one of the priorities of any Government, whatever that Government's hue, always struggle to get a collective sense of responsibility in this House, let alone more widely across the country. That is why regularly bringing the issue to the Floor of the House is such a crucial part of ensuring that the good work that does go on is properly scrutinised, and ensuring that the support we give the most vulnerable children in our society is the best it possibly can be for their futures.

Like the hon. Member for York Central, I start by thanking all those who work in the child protection system and more widely in children's social care. In some ways, relative to other services and agencies that work in the public sector, often in partnership with the private sector—such as the police and the education system—our child protection system is one of the least mature. We are still learning; we are still understanding how best to provide the services that those families and children need, at the right time and in the right way. However, relative to the international child protection systems that exist, we are actually quite mature, and many countries around the world look to us when

trying to understand what a child protection system looks like—we have to remember that many countries do not even have one. When thanking those who work within the child protection system and children's social care, it is worth remembering that in many ways they are at the vanguard of what we know works, while always looking to improve.

That is why this report from Josh MacAlister and all those who worked with him—which is analytically strong, well-evidenced, and ambitiously couched in terms of deliverable, whole-system change—gives those of us who want to see further improvement a really ambitious programme of work that needs a full, comprehensive and long-term commitment from the Government, not just the Department for Education. I know that the Minister—I welcome her to her place—cares passionately about these issues, but other Government Departments right across Whitehall will themselves have a part to play, and will benefit should these reforms be put in place in their entirety and taken to their conclusion.

It is also worth saying that this report is not the first part of the journey. Many Governments with the right intentions have managed to get cross-party agreement about the importance of vulnerable children and families, and how we can provide them with what they need; we may have a different view about what that looks like, but the aim and intention remain the same, irrespective of who is making those decisions.

When I look back on my time as Minister for Children and Families between 2012 and 2017, I think we made some really important changes during that period, not least through the Children and Families Act 2014 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Quite unbelievably, no amendments to either Bill were pushed to a vote on Report, as I remember—perhaps the Bill in 2017 had one or two, although not in my area of policy, of course. That shows that there is a consensus on much of what those two important pieces of legislation were trying to achieve, and what this independent review and report are trying to achieve.

The hon. Member for York Central rightly talked about blueprints. The report provides a strong and comprehensive blueprint for how we reform, revive and renew children's services right across the country, but when the Minister is looking at how it can be implemented, I ask her to learn from what we have tried before and what has been found difficult to achieve. I take as an example, in an unashamedly self-promoting way, the "Putting children first" strategy that we published in July 2016, during my time at the Department for Education. That was a vision for children's social care and services based on three pillars: people and leadership, practice and systems, and governance and accountability. In many ways, the strategy reflected a lot of what we see in Josh MacAlister's report, which leads me to the conclusion that much of this is about having the ongoing will, determination and commitment to implement many of those reforms and the vision behind them.

We can look at examples of where we have managed to make some of those changes happen and assess the impact they have had on children's lives, such as the pupil premium plus, which provided additional money for children in care. That policy has been expanded to cover those who are under special guardianship orders and those who are adopted. Since that policy was introduced, over £350 million has been spent on providing

those children with support through virtual school heads—a not insubstantial amount of money, but also a recognition that there needs to be additional support at the time those children would otherwise fall further behind. We can also look at the change to the law regarding the age at which children leave foster care—the staying-put arrangements. From the report, pleasingly, those changes have led to a doubling of the time that children who stay in foster care beyond the age of 18 remain in full-time education.

Those changes in themselves are not going to solve the myriad issues that this very well-evidenced report raises, but they demonstrate what can be achieved if we look carefully at where we are falling short, and how we can put in place a strategy, a plan, and a practical, deliverable outcome that can be measured to see what works. That is what sat behind the children's social care innovation programme that I also set up during my time as Minister.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend speaks with such knowledge and experience. Does he agree that there is often a cliff edge at age 18 when children in care are sent out into the big wide world? They really need to have that care and support all the way up to 25.

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is what was behind the staying-put reforms, as well as the introduction of "staying close" for those who are not in foster care—they have perhaps been in residential care—but need to maintain a relationship and a network of support close to where they live.

North Yorkshire County Council, in particular, started the No Wrong Door project through the innovation programme, which has morphed into what I think is called Always Here. In our own families, where we are lucky enough to be able to do so, we will still be bouncing back at times of need. We have that rock; that stability. As my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) knows, my parents fostered for many years. We still have children who came to live with us through their childhood—sometimes just for a few weeks, sometimes for many months, and sometimes for a long time—and are now in their 20s, or sometimes in their 30s, who come back to us for reassurance at a time when they may be at a low ebb and do not know where else to turn. That is where the cliff edge for those who do not have that stability becomes so drastic, and poor outcomes will inevitably follow.

We know what those outcomes are for care leavers. About one quarter of the prison population are care leavers, as are, I think, 26% of those who are street homeless. Those are hugely disproportionate numbers compared with the rest of the population, which is all the more reason why Josh MacAlister's independent review, particularly the five missions for those leaving care—I will talk about those later—is so crucial when it comes to turning the progress that has been made into a greater and more extrapolated offer to the 13,000 or 14,000 children who leave the care system every year.

Through the innovation programme, about £200 million was ultimately invested in new approaches, with about 50 evidence-based projects across the country to understand new ways of delivering children's services better, more effectively and often more efficiently. The MacAlister

[Edward Timpson]

review gives the example of the Hertfordshire family safeguarding model, which was built around the idea of having multidisciplinary teams around a child and their family—it is actually very similar to the reclaiming social work model that was used in Hackney over a decade ago and was led by Isabelle Trowler, who is now the chief social worker.

The programme has been evaluated and shown to bring significant improvements to outcomes and reductions in the use of care and the time children spend in care. Not only is it good for children and families, because it keeps bonds close and improves outcomes, but in its first year it meant savings for the council alone of more than £2.6 million, which it could reinvest in services, perhaps at an earlier stage when intervention is needed.

The innovation programme did not come about through making technical fixes. To go back to the point that the hon. Member for York Central made about leadership, it came about because there was a real sense of ownership across the multidisciplinary teams and a passionate belief in the reforms that they sought to carry out. I could give other examples from the programme that now form the basis of how we do children's social better across our country.

I know that Ofsted judgments are only one way of looking at children's social care services, but I remember that when I first became Minister for Children and Families, only one council—I think it may have been the tri-borough—was rated as outstanding. We had far too many inadequate councils, for many reasons that unfortunately still exist: pressures of work, caseloads, poor interactions between services and opaque ways of understanding what works, leading to the same mistakes being repeated over and over. We do not want any inadequate councils—we want them all to be outstanding—but although I accept that there is still a huge amount of work to do, the good news is that there has been a really good trajectory. I think about 20 councils are now rated as outstanding and about 60 as good, although we still have 17 inadequate councils, which is 17 too many.

Part of the solution, which has already started and which the MacAlister review wants to turbocharge, is in how we intervene on councils that are failing vulnerable children and families in their area. We began that process by being more interventionist and more creative in how we go about breaking the cycle of failure in children's services. Some are small, such as Doncaster; others are much bigger, such as Birmingham, which was a perennial problem for many years. Sometimes the answer was to work closely with them, put a commissioner in, change the practice, change the leadership and change the culture. On other occasions, the answer was to take the direct running of services away from the council and create a children's trust focused solely on improving the lives and outcomes of children in and around the care system.

In most cases, although not all, that approach has led to real and occasionally dramatic improvement. Sunderland went from inadequate to outstanding in three years. Having been inadequate in 2013, the Isle of Wight, which was partnered with Hampshire, an excellent council, was good by 2019 and getting close to outstanding. There are ways for the Government to be more directly involved in ensuring that we understand at an earlier stage where things are going wrong and try to fix them.

I want to take a moment to draw out some of the key aspects of the MacAlister review, which builds on much of the work done since 2012, or arguably since the Munro review in 2010 and 2011 showed us where we needed to improve. It is worth taking into account other policies across Government, such as the Start for Life programme and the introduction of family hubs, which complement the MacAlister report's recommendations.

Family help is key. We have had many debates about how intervention is often too late or too un-co-ordinated and how we often put people through a statutory process but nothing happens directly with families to improve the situation on the ground. The principle of family help, which I support, is to address that issue by bringing in a multidisciplinary team at an earlier stage when there are signs of difficulty. School is a good place to find out where the problems may be. So is the community, one would hope: communities are perhaps not as close as they were a few years ago, but they can be a really good source of information that enables us to understand where family help can work.

Fundamental to successful intervention is having an expert child protection practitioner who can co-ordinate the multidisciplinary team. When I worked on family law cases before I came to Parliament, one of my frustrations was that in many cases the social worker was very new and was not that experienced. Those who were experienced had been floated off into management, where they were far away from families and were doing no direct work whatever.

I am not saying that it has not already happened anywhere—the reclaiming social work model was based around the same idea—but moving towards a family help approach in which someone with real expertise is at the heart of decision making day by day, with families and with a multidisciplinary team structure, seems a sensible way to go. When I chaired the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, we could see even then, from the child exploitation cases that came to us and from our thematic review, that that was one of the failings that often led to children spiralling into county lines and other forms of exploitation.

That is why the changes that we have made to safeguarding partnerships are so vital. At the moment, statutorily, they get the local authority, the police and the health team working together at a senior level on strategies to create a good child safeguarding system in their area. However, it has now come to the point where schools also need to come on board; Sir Alan Wood, who has done an updated report after his original review, has made the same recommendation. More work needs to be done on how to make that happen and what it will look like, but schools are so fundamental to the effectiveness of safeguarding partnerships and family help. As the first point of contact with children and families, schools can often spot something that is not right, such as the child's attendance or appearance or their parents' interaction with the school. I urge the Minister to ensure that Government look positively at that in their response.

I also urge the Government to look at family networks. As I said, communities may not be as robust or as involved as they once were. Unfortunately, most of our community life now tends to happen online, like the dreaded neighbourhood WhatsApp or Facebook groups that tell us a lot about lost cats or about other things that are not quite so interesting. Reconnecting children

with uncles, aunts, grandparents and wider family is a way of ensuring that they have a greater network to fall back on in times of crisis, rather than having to rely on the state.

I remember once doing a case in Chester county court. The judge was on the cusp of making a care order to take a child permanently into the care of the local authority with a plan for adoption, but at the last minute, the guardian representing the child asked—perhaps in hindsight—the rather obvious question: “Have you asked any of the wider family whether they would be willing, either individually or collectively, to help to look after this child?” The answer came back, “No”. The case was adjourned, some work was done with the family, and a few months later, we came back to court and the plan had been changed: the child was going to live with their aunt, and other family members would be involved as well. That type of work with children who may be going through a period of crisis in their own home, and the involvement of families, has to happen at an earlier stage and has to happen everywhere. The recommendation on family group conferences, or family-led alternative plans for care, should be taken seriously.

On residential care, I think it worth recognising that in England, about 14% of children in care are now in residential care. In Scotland, that figure stands at only 7%, which begs the question: why? For me, it falls back to the important point raised by the hon. Member for York Central about the use and understanding of foster care. We know—Ofsted have shown this—that there is a worrying increase in the number of children whose care plan is for fostering but who end up in residential care. Why do they end up in residential care? Because they cannot find a placement in foster care—or cannot find the right placement. It also means that we are losing foster carers who have a particular specialism, perhaps in teenagers or—like my parents—in babies born addicted to heroin, for whom particular skills are needed. That placement is lost because they are the only carers available for another child who could be in a different type of foster placement.

We need a real recruitment drive for foster carers. We have seen, through the Ukrainian refugee scheme, that there is a huge amount of will out there—people want to reach out—but there needs to be some greater voice coming from Government about how we find the 9,000 carers whom we need and about the range and spread of where foster carers are. Otherwise, we will put more pressure on residential care and prices will go up exponentially. It just does not make sense to keep putting more children into residential care when that is not even their plan and there are financial consequences to doing so.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I have been listening with great interest to my hon. and learned Friend, who speaks with enormous experience and knowledge in this space. On the point he has just made about foster care, and the related point about family carers, does he agree that investing in the right support packages for foster and kinship carers is a good investment if it prevents more children from going into much more expensive residential care?

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee is absolutely right. The Mockingbird project, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for

York Central, is a good example of that—again, the innovation programme helps to fund it. The project has a network of foster families who offer different levels of skill between them, but collectively provide a great resource and ensure that children can stay in foster care when it is the right placement for them, as opposed to going into residential care homes that cost tens of thousands of pounds and often do not bring stability or the right type of surrounding care that the child or young person needs.

On workforce development, we have done a lot of work in the last decade to improve the quality of what we want social workers in the very specialist world of children's social care to be able to demonstrate. There was far too much emphasis on theory and not enough on the practice, particularly real-life experience of a child-protection event, which a children's social worker will inevitably experience. The “Step up to social work” programme and Frontline, which were introduced to try to improve and grow the social workforce, have been really important innovations, but 70% to 80% of social workers coming into children's social work are still qualifying through the traditional route, costing about £80 million a year.

There has not really been any change or re-evaluation of how that money is spent and of what comes through the system. I think there is a question about how we can level up some of those conventional routes, better support people through that experience as well, and ensure that, when they are working on the frontline, they have all the skills and the resilience they need to stay with children's social work, because retention, as ever, remains an issue. I agree that the early career framework will be a good way of mapping out a clear pathway to a career in children's social work.

On the duties that are placed upon the key agencies, we introduced the corporate parent principles in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, but they are limited in some respects. I agree with Josh MacAlister that we can do more to widen those principles out and bring them more to life. That brings me to the five missions on care leavers: loving relationships, quality education, a decent home, fulfilling work, and good physical and mental health. I do not think any of us would disagree with those missions, but how do we hold those with responsibility to account for achieving them? The local offer that goes with the corporate parenting principles is one way of doing so, but we have to go back to inspection and look again at how we measure success for care leavers and how we target the role performed not just by local authorities as the lead for children and families, but by other agencies.

On care leavers specifically, if I were to ask the Minister to take away one thing that could be done very quickly and make a huge difference, it is action on the universal credit limit for under-25s. At the moment, care leavers fall into that category, so they have the reduced rate. Of course, we heard earlier about the cliff edge and what happens to care leavers not just from the ages of 18 to 21, but from 21 to 25, which is a vulnerable time for them. This would be an easy opt-out. I know—from conversations I had when I was a Minister—that the DWP does not like exceptions, but it can be done, so I ask for that to be looked at. Let us find reasons to do it, not reasons not to.

There is much, much more in the review, and I think it is something that has to happen. I know that the Government were committed to publishing a response

[Edward Timpson]

by the end of the year, but we are getting close to it—the Christmas music has started in the shops—so we do not have long left. Will the Minister commit today to publishing the Government's response in full as soon as possible? If the response slips beyond January of next year, it is in real danger of putting at risk the timetable for delivery, particularly in relation to spending reviews—the consequence being that it would end up costing a lot more for the Government in the future.

We spend £136 billion a year on the NHS and £51 billion a year on education—I do not quibble with that—so when looking for this £2.1 billion, we must remember that it is a one-off payment that will, over the next four years, give children in the system now and in future a much better opportunity to have a fulfilling life. Yes, look at the underspends in the Department for Education, but look right across Whitehall, too, because every Department will benefit from these changes. The money is there if the measures are prioritised, and I hope that that is exactly what happens.

2.29 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) who, as a former Children's Minister, speaks with great sincerity and expertise on the subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this important, timely debate.

Our children are falling through the cracks. The pandemic has left a lasting mark on children up and down the country. As such, the timing and outcomes of this debate could not be more important. I welcome the support for kinship carers in this report. We have already heard some support for the idea. Thousands of grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings are stepping in to support children in crisis, yet the Government treat them as if they are invisible. These carers receive only a fraction of the financial support they need for the care they provide. I thank them for their incredible work. However, they need more than just a pat on the back; they need material support from our Government.

I hope that the Government will support the Kinship Care Bill in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). The Bill would introduce weekly allowances for kinship carers, just as foster carers get. It would implement proper parental leave when kinship carers first welcome in a child and provide extra funding to help children in kinship care thrive in school. Unfortunately, kinship carers are just one group being overlooked by our Government. In 2019, it was estimated that 140,000 children on the fringes of social care in England were not receiving any support. The Local Government Association suggests that social workers are seeing record numbers of children with mental health problems. Social workers say they have no time to give the children on their case loads the support they need.

Social workers are the backbone of our society, helping future generations to thrive. Unfortunately, the Government have treated them with utter contempt, asking more and more of them. No wonder we are seeing staff shortages. Who would want to work in an industry where people feel overlooked and undervalued? The Government must make the social care profession attractive to enter and

stay in, so that we have enough care workers with enough time to help the children under their care. One of the most important things that the Government must do is make it the valued profession it deserves to be.

Adverse childhood experiences, also known as ACEs, are the biggest drivers of poor mental health in children. They can be anything that threatens to overwhelm the child, including abuse and neglect. When a child is unable to process prolonged stress, it can alter normal brain function. This is what we call trauma. I know that the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury is also working hard on childhood trauma, although he is not currently listening. A child's brain helps them to survive in the moment, but assumes that that persistent stress or danger is normal. They adapt to constant adrenaline. Because of that, those who experience childhood trauma are twice as likely to develop depression and three times more likely to develop anxiety disorders.

Many children carry their traumatic experience into later life. Someone's chances of dropping out of school, being obese and even developing diseases such as strokes and chronic bronchitis are higher the more ACEs they have experienced. Those with six or more ACEs have life expectancy 20 years lower than peers with none. There is no limit to the reach of ACEs. Unnoticed and unaddressed, adverse childhood experiences are a potential lifelong sentence. The Government must look at how they can prevent adverse childhood experiences from happening.

The number of ACEs a child suffers has a clear link to the likelihood of that child engaging in social care, as well. Meanwhile, research by the WAVE Trust suggests that the adverse childhood experiences of abuse and neglect alone cost the UK more than £15 billion a year. What a no-brainer it is to do something about it. It is clear that the cost of acting to prevent adverse childhood experiences is less than the cost of inaction. Just focusing on the fallout from trauma is not enough; we must prevent every form of adverse childhood experience.

One factor that helps to prevent childhood trauma is whether the child can feel capable and deserving. Supportive, reliable adult presences are key, and we have already heard quite a lot about that this afternoon. Trauma-informed services across the board would be transformative. They allow social workers to recognise the effect of ACEs early in children's lives. Early years practitioners can spot signs of trauma at the age where they are most easily resolved.

I became a member of the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of childhood trauma, and serving on that APPG was the most informative and transformative experience I have had. I am currently its chair. Preventing childhood trauma could be the foundation of how we transform our society, because childhood trauma does not end with the child; it gets transferred into the next generation. If childhood trauma is not addressed, those who become parents will carry their adverse childhood experiences into the next generation, and their children might suffer, too, so doing something about it should be at the heart of what Government are looking into.

When we look at how trauma affects minds, we gain an enriched understanding of behaviour. Better insights and changes in approach lead to better care for children. As it stands, the Government are failing to even consider many of the problems that cause childhood trauma,

such as sibling sexual abuse. Shockingly, that is the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes. Estimates suggest that a child is three to five times more likely to be abused by their sibling than by a parent or adult living in their home environment. Its impact on the entire family is lifelong and devastating. Parents are often faced with a double dilemma of supporting both children involved in dealing with the relevant authorities.

Local and national safeguarding policies and strategies do not name, measure or prioritise sibling sexual abuse. The Home Office's "Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy" does not even acknowledge the existence of sibling sexual abuse. Even the report we are discussing today does not mention it. I had a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, which is riddled with taboo. It is so shocking that we do not want to contemplate it, but it is widespread and it is important that we name it. It is a significant oversight that must be addressed. The Government must acknowledge the problem before it can be tackled. Their blindness to sibling sexual abuse means that social care professionals are not properly equipped to offer the support needed. I hope that, in future strategies, the Government can at least investigate this terrible problem, which is beset by taboo and silence.

The Government's failure to support the social care system leaves children as the victims. We must safeguard children from adverse childhood experiences and support those who go through them. The solutions involve more Government spending, yes, but we need to acknowledge the problems that children are facing. Where would we be if we did not invest in children and future generations? We need to work for a better future for our children. It will be a better future for us.

2.37 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this debate, but I also thank Josh MacAlister for the work he has done to produce this report. The Department for Education says that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform children's social care. I certainly mean no criticism of Mr MacAlister or the hard-working people in children's social care, but it is not good enough that we have to conduct strategic-levels of this topic. As Mr MacAlister says, he has tried to echo the message from other reviews over the last 30 years. We debate the issue regularly in the House, and we have all kinds of reports and reviews, including the one I worked on with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham in 2007 called "No more blame game: the future for children's social workers", which pointed out much that is in this report. That was 15 years ago.

There is an unacceptable recurrence of tragic cases of neglect and agency failure that generate great emotion, press coverage and the political will to change, with reports published—Baby P, Damilola Taylor, Victoria Climbié, Star Hobson, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, all the way to the tragic death of Awaab Ishak. Children are all too often still becoming victims because their circumstances are not identified or followed up. While some of the cases become high-profile nationally, many others emerge all the time across the country without getting more than local coverage in the media.

I want to concentrate on a few points where we need change in this big and complex area. The first relates to expert practitioners, which is mentioned in the report. One of the recommendations in the report is that any case of significant harm should be overseen by an expert practitioner alongside the family help team. The suggestion in the report is that those should be initially recruited on the basis that they can demonstrate skills from their time in practice, with a future standard of completing a five-year early career framework.

I welcome the establishment of a standard for expert practitioners and the early career framework. We have to keep more social workers in the profession, to form the core of our expert practitioners. The picture for early career social workers is similar to that for teachers: many leave within five years of beginning their career and others move from local authority posts into agency roles. Another persistent feature is that our most experienced and able social workers are taken out of practising with children and families and moved into management roles. We asked for a career path at the frontline in the 2007 report. I am not decrying the need for good management of social care—I would argue that it needs to be improved, if anything, given the record of failures in child protection—but it would benefit everyone if more senior workers were practising and passing on their skills and experience to others in a direct way. It would improve the management of services to have experienced eyes and ears able to feed back where things are going badly and where they are going well.

The next point is advocacy. The report highlights the potential for confusion for young people about who should be speaking up for them. Independent reviewing officers are often not engaged enough with children to be effective advocates. We need a clear plan for replacing IROs, and the recommendations of the report are clear about that. I look forward to seeing the Government's full response, but I would welcome any thoughts from the Minister, who I welcome to her place, on when the Department intends to consult on a framework for advocacy. That includes advocacy for parents and for other family members acting in that role. The report finds that parents are too often viewers of child protection conferences, rather than participants. Although the report is less prescriptive on this aspect, I hope Ministers will consider a formal framework for it.

Too many children are disappearing off the radar when their parents tell local authorities that they are home-schooling their children. I know that many parents can arrange a good education for their child, but it is still important that the development and safety of children who are not in school can be monitored. I appreciate the concerns that some parents have about being registered. However, the evidence shows that we must act to look after the needs of children who are currently not being educated and cared for properly.

I am concerned that the Government might be slipping back from the long-held position that there should be registration of children being home-schooled. In a written answer on part 4 of the Schools Bill on 7 November, Baroness Barran said:

"The department's position on the Schools Bill will be confirmed in due course."

On Monday, the Schools Minister said in a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) that the Department is satisfied that the existing powers local authorities have

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

are sufficient. Can the Minister tell me whether this means that registration of home-schooled children is not now being proceeded with? If the register is being scrapped, what has prompted the change of mind on the part of Government from their long-held view, which I share, that this is important for the welfare of children?

Local authorities do great work to support children across a range of educational settings. I pay tribute to the work being done by Hampshire County Council, its leader, Councillor Rob Humby, the deputy leader and former executive member for children, Councillor Roz Chadd, and in particular, the director of children's services, Steve Crocker. Hampshire's children's services are outstanding—not excellent, but outstanding. Families in Meon Valley have a great team looking after them, but I am concerned after my recent meeting here in Parliament with Rob Humby and Roz Chadd that the funding pressures they face risk the delivery of statutory and core services. I am conscious that we are talking today about how services can be improved, but they have to be funded, and I will write to Ministers about this shortly to support the work that Hampshire is doing.

Another aspect of local authority work in Hampshire that I want to highlight and praise is fostering. I recently visited a meeting of foster carers from across the county in Hampshire's Hive pilot scheme, led by Amy Alexander and Kat Roberts, which is similar to the Mockingbird scheme that the hon. Member for York Central mentioned. The Hive model creates local groups of foster carers that are led by carer support workers, who are themselves foster carers. This helps to develop support networks for carers and encourages the development of a sense of community.

There are currently 12 hives in the pilot scheme across Hampshire and I am delighted that one is working in Waterlooville in my constituency. I look forward to meeting with Johnny Creighton and his team of families soon. The Hive model is part of a wider package of support for fostering, and I hope that it will encourage more families to look at getting involved. It can be so rewarding for foster families, as we heard from my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), as well as for the children who become part of those families.

We should also look at what charitable and social organisations can do to help young people get a sense of what is possible in life and to build their resilience. I am thinking particularly of organisations such as Plan B in Gosport, Hampshire, where John Gillard has been working for many years with young people, including some from my constituency, who have lost contact with mainstream education. John uses his skills as a sailor to involve young people in maritime-based skills and activities, as well as education. That includes boatbuilding, carpentry, sailing and all kinds of practical skills that deliver real vocational training for young people. That kind of alternative provision is a perfect opportunity for many young people from troubled backgrounds to find a sense of direction. John has helped to turn many young lives around; he is an extraordinary man.

I could not finish without mentioning this issue to the Department for Education. One reason that I am keen to have a reformed assessment at 18 is that many children have a false start in education and our current assessment methods fail them. Many children find

something like Plan B, or some other vocational setting that really inspires them, quite late in their childhood. They deserve the chance to have an assessment framework that recognises their needs and sets them on course for a career and an independent life. Education and social care have to work together and work in the same direction to improve the life chances of young people from troubled or disadvantaged backgrounds.

2.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for setting the scene so well and for giving us an opportunity to speak on the issue. I thank the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for his knowledge, focus and experience in this matter, which have been helpful for the debate. I also thank all the other hon. Members who have made and will make contributions.

As with many issues discussed in the House, Northern Ireland has different rules and laws on social care, and alternative social care guidelines, but the premise of what we do is the same. The 2019 Conservative manifesto said:

“We will review the care system to make sure that all care placements and settings are providing children and young adults with the support they need.”

That is therefore the shared goal of all hon. Members for our social care system, so it is great to be here to see how we can strengthen that further.

The Department of Health in Northern Ireland is responsible for child protection and social care. The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland co-ordinates and ensures the effectiveness of work to protect and promote the welfare of children. The most recent statistics for child social care in Northern Ireland were released in 2021. They showed that 32,070 children were in need of referrals, almost 3,000 children were on the child protection register, and 3,500 children were in care. Some £277 million is spent on family and childcare within social services in Northern Ireland, which is a significant sum. In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, where my constituency lies, there are 471 children in need.

To undertake potential reviews of child social care, we must accept and understand the four main factors behind the need for it: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. I am sure that all hon. Members have heard—regularly, unfortunately—horror stories surrounding child cruelty that make them feel uneasy and queasy. The very thought of some of the things that happen in this world—this normal world that we are supposed to live in—makes us flinch, and it is unimaginable how perpetrators try to justify that type of behaviour.

Some 681 such offences were reported in 2021-22 in Northern Ireland, which is an average of two a day and is up from 506 in 2020-21—an increase that unfortunately shows the direction that society is heading in. Child support registers are seeing an increase of reports due to substance and emotional abuse by parents, which ultimately creates an environment where children are unable to develop, are frightened and could potentially be socialised to go down a similar path to their parents.

The children's social care report stated that by 2032 “there will be approaching 100,000 children in care (up from 80,000 today) and a flawed system will cost over £15 billion per year (up from £10 billion now).”

Despite this being separate from Northern Ireland, there will ultimately be a knock-on effect and impact on the devolved Administrations, as their funding will not have the potential to increase. So we must do more to support our care givers, workers and support staff by ensuring vastly improved training, mental health support, sufficient pay and enough staff.

The report in question also highlighted a need to identify and remove the barriers that needlessly divert social workers from spending time with children and their families. We have heard that children in the social care system often have no concept of friendship, love or, indeed, companionship. How very sad it is that, in the society in which we live, they do not have those three things that our families, children and friends have. There is an imperative for social workers to play an important role in a young child's life as they grow up and learn how to form relationships, and it also needs love, friendship and companionship to make that happen.

As others have mentioned, particularly the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), we must not forget the impact that the covid pandemic has had on social care, too. The increase in referrals in childcare throughout this period shows that parents have been potentially struggling to cope. We are still very much dealing with the impact of this, and there is a backlog of referrals that have not been dealt with, putting more children at risk. I thank the local social services team in James Street in Newtownards in my constituency of Strangford, who go above and beyond to provide safe and secure services for children. Some excellent work has been done, and I want to thank in particular those who do that work in my constituency.

Prior to this debate, I was in contact with the National Youth Advocacy Service, which made me aware that three out of 10 children in care did not know how to get an advocate to speak on their behalf while they are in care, despite its being an entitlement for them. On that particular point, can the Minister give me some indication of what has been done to address the issue for such children, so they can have access to impartial support when they discuss their situation and their next steps as they move forward in their lives?

To conclude, there is certainly potential for change and a review of children's social care. With the increasing number of referrals, the social care system must be able to cope, and proper funding for that is necessary. I believe that better emotional support is very clearly at the heart of this debate and that we must support, first, the parents; secondly, the children; and, thirdly, the social workers, who are bending over backwards to support the families. I really urge the Department of Health and Social Care—and the Department for Education as well, because I think they have to go hand in hand—to engage with the devolved Administrations in tackling the increased number of referrals, the volume of social work staff and the subsequent mental health of all those who will be directly impacted.

2.52 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has again shown the breadth and depth of his knowledge of all the issues we cover in this House. I thank the hon. Member for York

Central (Rachael Maskell) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate.

I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for York Central about acknowledging that there are very many families who do an absolutely fantastic job of caring for their children, without underestimating how difficult that is. We are talking in this Chamber about families who are struggling, and I do not by any means underestimate that. As someone who does not have children myself, I give words of advice with caution and I understand that the challenge is really enormous, but surely the size of that challenge puts a bigger onus on us to support people to do it effectively.

I thank Josh MacAlister and all of the team who helped him deliver such an authoritative and important report. In particular, I thank not just the people who wrote the report, but the very large number of people, including very many people in care or who have left care, who contributed to the report. I think that that is what has given it its strength and authority, because he has done such a good job of giving people who have experienced the system a voice.

For me, child welfare is or should be the biggest priority for everyone in society. It is a really good example of an issue where it is not just the state that has a role to play, but families, society and individuals. All of us have to do something to make sure that children in our country get a good start in life. One of the main reasons why I got involved in politics was that I want everyone to benefit from the secure, warm, loving environment that I experienced as a young person growing up. We know what an important foundation that is for young people because we understand the different outcomes that people get if they do not receive that warm, loving start in life. Poor attachment to care givers leads to higher rates of delinquency, crime, offending, poor mental health and wellbeing, and unemployment.

Similarly, if we look at not just attachment but adverse events, which the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) spoke about, from all those things early on in life we can predict someone's future outcomes, and their outcomes are much worse than those of their peers. As we have heard, that is not just a moral failure but a financial failure for the state because all these things cost money across the breadth and depth of Government spending. Those costs skyrocket when young people cross the threshold to care involvement, where the gap in outcomes compared with peers gets even bigger. Sadly, their outcomes are still distant from those who have benefited from a loving start in life.

We have 80,000 children in care and many more subject to some kind of intervention. If we do not get better at supporting people, those markers and failures will get worse. The report talks about how we are heading towards 100,000 children being in care and, for each of those additional children in care, there will be an even bigger number unfortunately likely to be subject to some kind of proceedings or intervention and not getting the start in life that we would want for them.

The report lays out authoritatively what we can do. I pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), who did a fantastic job of going through all the elements of the report, including what we could do better. I will not seek to

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

replicate that as I am sure that I could not do as good a job. The report makes it clear that we need short-term funding to deliver the £2 billion that it identifies. The Minister will not need convincing that we cannot look at the costs in a narrow way—there is short-term additional spending on extra children we might see in care as well as spending across all areas of Government that pile up but which the Department itself does not see—but we must ensure that the Treasury understands the full breadth and depth of that expense when it comes to weighing up what we should be investing in children's social care.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Member agree that this really affects everything—we have prisons full of people with mental health disorders, who often carry childhood traumas with them—so investing at the beginning will help us save so much money in the end?

Dr Mullan: I completely agree. It would probably be fair to say that there is not an area of Government spending in which we could not make a saving if we did better at getting children a warm, stable start in life. As I said, I hope that the Department is clear about the breadth in spending.

I turn to one short-term area. Again, I pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury and the work that his family did, as well as that done by many families who choose to be foster carers. Fostering and adopting are probably among the most powerful, special and important things that someone in our society can do for another person. Taking on that responsibility of caring for someone else's children in the short term—not permanently—is the most noble thing that anybody can do, and I pay enormous tribute to every single person who does that.

Every child who ends up in a loving home instead of a care setting—of course, care settings can produce good outcomes—is being given the best shot at life. Again, that saves a financial cost, and the wellbeing of that young person is enormously improved. Sadly, we could do better. It is a good example of the fact that, no matter how good the Government get at doing things, individuals must step up and be willing to do it. It is not just about the state fixing the problem; we all have a role to play.

My understanding is that, of the 160,000 people who registered an interest in fostering last year, just 2,000 were registered to be foster carers. That is an absolute tragedy. Given the process of becoming a foster carer, we should expect a big drop-off once people come to realise everything involved, but that kind of drop-off is very sad. It says to me that at least tens of thousands of people who could and wanted to be foster carers did not become them. What does the Minister think we can do in the short term to get to the target of 3,000? Can we not be more ambitious than that, get to at least 10,000 and convert that huge moral willingness to help our fellow man in society and see the money that comes in savings from that?

Jim Shannon: I have a number of friends who are foster carers and I understand the work they undertake. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who take on

foster caring—caring not just for their biological families, but for other families who are challenged—are special people? That is my impression of them.

Dr Mullan: People who foster and adopt are the best of our society; there is no two ways about it.

Similarly, on kinship carers, the report does a great job of explaining how a wider family network can help. As a Conservative, the idea of giving more financial support for kinship carers causes me questions. I believe in families and normal family structures. I think it is the natural thing for family members to take care of each other potentially outside the immediate family. But when it comes to the very, very difficult financial decisions that grandparents on pensions, in particular, have to make, we have to be practical and recognise that, yes, I would want people to do that for their family members regardless of the support available to them. If that is a genuine practical barrier, it could make a huge difference for the children and the state, and we should be doing more. I support the idea that the model of support should match that of foster carers.

Mr Robin Walker: My hon. Friend makes a fair point on kinship care. I note that the report also calls for greater recognition of kinship carers. Not all the support they need is financial. I have been approached by a local kinship care group in my constituency with concerns about the challenges that grandparents sometimes face in accessing healthcare. He knows a lot about that. Does he agree that it would be good to see the Department for Education working with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that we have greater support and recognition for kinship carers, so that they do not face those challenges?

Dr Mullan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify that it is not just about money; it is about recognition in Government agencies and society of the role that kinship carers play. I pay tribute to kinship carers in my constituency, who I have been supporting to access financial support from the local authority, and to some great charities that support kinship carers. They deserve to be on the same footing as those who foster and adopt.

I want to finish by paying tribute to a couple of charities working in my constituency on areas similar to some of the work recommended by the MacAlister review. One of the many things that the Motherwell Cheshire charity for young women and girls, founded by Kate Blakemore, does in my constituency is the Believe project, which provides support, mentoring and counselling to any mother, young or not so young, who has a child who is, or is at risk of being, subject to some kind of child protection plan. What the charity has learnt is that, rightly, the authorities and those involved in child protection are focused on the child. They need to do that, but support for the parent can also make a huge difference. I have spoken to mentors, such as Donna, who support people in my constituency and they have made a difference. The latest figures are that they have saved something like £1.6 million in our local area, helped five children to return home from care and helped to prevent 21 children from going into care. If that sort of model can be rolled out, there could be huge moral and financial savings.

Another charity, Pure Insight, provides mentors, counselling and psychological support for care leavers. The mentors and support workers help them to close the gap with their peers who have not experienced care. It is largely volunteer-driven and they make a huge difference. Similarly, the charity also provides support to help parents become the best possible parents they can be. Ultimately, the ideal scenario is that we can keep families together. Of course, sometimes families cannot stay together and it is right that we intervene, but if we can keep families together, we know the outcomes are much better for the children concerned. I want to put my thanks on the record to the local Helvellyn Foundation for providing a grant to Pure Insight to support a family I was in contact with who did not quite fit the normal criteria but who were a fantastic candidate for that type of support. There are so many other charities, such as the Wishing Well charity and My Cheshire Without Abuse, that are playing their role, supported by volunteers.

For all those reasons, I hope that the Government will grip this issue, take on board the fantastic work that has been done in the MacAlister review and make a difference to these children's lives. That is the right thing for us to do not just as moral individuals, but as taxpayers. There is always a great case to be made for what the Government can do, too, when we are talking about doing the right thing for the right reasons.

3.4 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I add my thanks to those expressed by a good many Members to all who have been involved in securing the debate. It has been rich and insightful, and it is extremely timely. As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) said, when we get this right, it improves more or less everything in our country: we have a more productive workforce, people who are healthier—with better physical and mental health—a more stable society, and a society in which people are more able and willing to look after one another. All those things are incredibly important for our country's future.

Josh MacAlister's report is one in a long line of reports that give us some helpful steers about how we can improve the system. The challenges faced by children growing up in the UK change over the generations. When the Children Act 1989 was introduced, the internet did not exist as something in our daily lives. The growth of online harms and the risk they pose to children in this country are a new challenge that we have to address, and on which there are a lot of things that our social workers, police and all those who care about the effective nurturing of children in our country need to consider.

If we look at recent history, we recognise that quality protects. The Climbié inquiry, the Munro review, the Wood review and the MacAlister review all describe a system that remains based on the 1989 Act and various pieces of legislation that have come along since, including the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and various Education Acts. They identify that what works best is always early intervention, so when the system spots that a problem is developing and it intervenes early, the outcomes for a child are transformed for the better.

Every single one of those reviews describes a system that is too under-resourced to carry out that early intervention effectively. It is important to be clear that

being under-resourced is not just about money, for most local authorities. Certainly from my experience as a councillor and lead member for children's services for more than 20 years, recruiting qualified and experienced social workers, recruiting foster carers and finding families willing to adopt was not just a matter of budgets. We had money to pay foster carers, but finding the individuals willing to take on that challenge remains enormously difficult.

If debates such as this are going to serve us well, one thing that they can do is illuminate the challenges and remind our colleagues in local authorities who are trying to do this work that Parliament and national Government are really interested in it. Hopefully, to some degree, we can at least raise awareness of the continuing need to invest the time and find the people who are interested in engaging with this work to support our most vulnerable children.

We know that our care system works well. Care is often criticised. Colleagues in the House sometimes say that we should try to keep children away from the care system, but the evidence shows that the earlier a child comes into the care system and the longer they spend in it, the better their outcome. The best illustration of that is probably that a child who is adopted at birth will enjoy outcomes in life that are pretty much the same as their peer group; whereas the most challenged children are those who come to the attention of the care system towards their 16th birthday. Those children find themselves in a situation where most of the damage has already been done, and the effective intervention of brilliant foster carers, potentially even adopters and social workers cannot mitigate that damage.

Our safeguarding services are among the best in the world. The few international studies that provide effective comparisons demonstrate that the UK is seen as an exemplar for effective safeguarding in pretty much every aspect of providing effective child protection. When the MacAlister review set out its case for change, it was helpful that it acknowledged some of this history, enabling us to learn from the successes of past policies while putting them in the context we face today.

There are some very striking statistics in the case for change. For example, over the last decade there has been a 7% rise in the number of referrals to children's social care from the police, from schools, from the general public and from the health service, and from places like that, but over the same period the number of section 47 inquiries—child protection inquiries where there is evidence that a child is directly at risk—has risen by 129%; the number of child protection plans has risen by 32%; and the number of children brought into the care system, where the local authority has gone to court, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) described, to seek a court order to take them from their birth family and bring them into the care of the state as the only way to keep them safe, has risen by 24%. Something is certainly changing in how our local authorities and child protection services respond to the evidence they see of what is happening in a child's life.

It is important to recognise that, in a system that is under pressure, we risk raising the threshold at which local authorities, the police and other agencies take action. We see that in the NHS, for example, and we see some evidence of it in the police service. When resources

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are tight, agencies simply say the point at which they respond will be when things have gone more wrong than would have been the case previously. We need to ensure that we do not get into a situation where tight resources mean there is less and less early intervention and, therefore, a cohort of children going through our system for whom life will be much more challenging, whose cost to the taxpayer will be higher, and whose ability to contribute to and thrive in our society will be reduced.

There are some worrying signs, because the case for change in the MacAlister review identifies that, behind these stats, we have seen a rise in statutory spend—the money local authorities put into the things they must do in respect of risks to children—from £6.6 billion to £8.2 billion, and a drop in non-statutory spend, mainly on early-intervention services, from £3.5 billion to £2.3 billion. It is important that we never have an auction of spending promises, and over that period we have seen a significant rise in this country's child population, so we would have expected to see some rises, but it suggests there has been a slightly worrying shift of spending in a less productive direction.

It is important to recognise that this is pretty much the only area of local government spend in England that has grown over this period, and it has grown not as a result of additional Government funding but because local authorities have reduced their spending on things such as libraries, planning services, the environment, and sport and leisure, in order to prioritise the urgent needs of children who may be at risk.

The main driver of this spend remains neglect. Although important issues such as familial sexual abuse and, indeed, stranger sexual abuse, physical abuse, family alcohol abuse and mental health issues remain significant, neglect is overwhelmingly the reason why a child comes to the attention of statutory authorities in England today. This is where there are some promising signs.

The family hub model, which was piloted by local authorities in advance of being picked up by this House, recognises that, rather than imposing strict periods, such as ages zero to five, when the state will intervene and provide support, we need to recognise that every family and every child is different and that we need to provide a broad range of support at local level, exactly as North Yorkshire County Council's No Wrong Door project identified, so that families can find and access the support they need, rather than being passed from agency to agency. That will be absolutely critical.

The way in which those family hubs operate needs to reflect the growing evidence base from the What Works centres about how interventions can be tailored to really make a difference in the lives of children. One criticism, borne out by the research, about the Sure Start programme was that although a good many users enjoyed it, found it useful and gave good feedback about it, it did not bring about the difference in children's lives that it was intended to. I know from my time as a trustee of the Early Intervention Foundation, and having used the work of a number of the other What Works centres in my time before coming to Westminster, that using evidence about what actually makes the difference in a child's life will be crucial in ensuring that the money available in the system is spent in the most efficient and effective way in the interests of those children.

We recognise that our care system has some great strengths, with one being that looked-after children have the highest school attendance of any group of children in our education system. That is largely thanks to the efforts of virtual headteachers and local authorities, and their determination to make sure that those children get the best possible education. Of course the context for most children is that they are growing up in a community, where early intervention is not always going to be about statutory services. Even family hubs, which we know from the outset are designed to identify families that may be getting into difficulty, will often come a little further down the line for a child when life has gone a bit wrong.

I cannot praise enough the work I saw being done through services such as libraries, sports and leisure centres, and the early years centres during my time at the London Borough of Hillingdon. Simple projects such as story time in libraries, to which new parents can bring young children, in an informal setting, free of charge, were incredibly valuable, and can both provide the reassurance for families and parents who might be struggling, and signpost them on to statutory services that could help with issues such as breastfeeding, toileting and care of infants, and the emerging concerns that they might be beginning to have about children with special educational needs or disabilities. Making sure that we have a system that sees the child in the round and is there to make sure that whichever direction a family needs to go to, they can access that care and support is crucial to ensuring that the mission of making sure every child is nurtured is delivered.

Let me move towards a conclusion. The MacAlister report identifies, in particular, that the big driver of these referrals is children who are being parented in difficult circumstances. We all recognise in this country that while life for most of our people is existing at a stable level—we have a good stable level of employment; good access to work; a strong economy; good schools, on the whole; and good access to crucial public services—a significant number of families remain at risk of falling through the cracks. So I hope that the principles the Department will use as it begins to craft its set of policies will, first, include making the best possible use of that evidence to design the interventions. We need to ensure that those family hubs are picking the programmes where there is the best evidence on things such as parental alcohol misuse and dealing with health issues in children, that those are the programmes we are offering consistently and that we are measuring the impact, so that we can see and test the benefit they bring.

I appreciate that this responsibility sits to some degree with the Department for Education and to some degree with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but it seems particularly important that we breathe new life into youth work, especially for those young people whose lives are going wrong in their teenage years. Youth work has historically been a great opportunity to get them back on track. I have seen some brilliant evidence in my constituency of uniformed organisations such as the police cadets and the Royal Air Force cadets, organisations such as the Scouts and the Guides, and much less formal youth club community-level organisations providing that extra bit of help and support when parents and extended family have perhaps not been able to do it.

I am aware that, as a Government, we have allocated a significant amount of money towards that agenda, but that money has not yet been spent in a way that is constructive or that has made a difference in terms of enriching those children's lives and making sure that local authorities and other organisations help support those young people, particularly in their difficult teenage years, to enjoy a transformed set of opportunities. Indeed, there are many philanthropists who are willing to support and fund this activity. I call on the Department, working with colleagues across Government, to have a new strategy for youth work—to think about what that means and how we deploy those resources to support the volunteers and community organisations in a more constructive way.

There is a real opportunity now to look at our focus on the early years. There have been many debates in this House about the cost of, and access to, childcare, but it remains the case that we spend pretty much the least on the early years in our education system. Research evidence shows, however, that the early years has the biggest impact on a child's life. Leon Feinstein, who went to the Office of the Children's Commissioner from the Early Intervention Foundation, highlighted that, from a child's early years foundation stage results, their A-level results later on in life could be predicted. We know that there is a good evidence base that shows the impact that effective early years work has on opportunities for children. Again, it is not just about money, but about making sure that we focus in exactly the right way.

Finally, I call on the Department to think about the regulatory environment around children's social care. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) spoke powerfully about the numbers of local authorities enjoying different grades from Ofsted. Many years ago, when he chaired the all-party group for looked-after children, he had an event here in Parliament. What I found striking was the wide group of young people who fed back about their experiences as children in care. As a witness to it, I would not have known from their description of their experience whether their local authority was outstanding or inadequate. We heard very negative experiences from young people who had grown up in outstanding authority areas and vice-versa. It seems to me that we need to focus not just on the institutional outcomes, as important as they are, but on the outcomes for children.

We often hear the Government talk about how great it is that there are many more children now in outstanding schools than was the case previously. There has, of course, been a big rise in the population of children in this country, and schools were not allowed to have any Government capital funding to provide additional places unless they were already outstanding. But recent Ofsted inspections on many of those institutions that had not been inspected for more than a decade has resulted in a lot of downgrading. What that tells us is that, although it is great to be able to be proud of how good schools and local authorities are at getting good or outstanding Ofsted ratings, we need to recognise that that does not always reflect the experience of the children who are going through that system. I have seen a good body of evidence in my time as a councillor, of schools that partly achieved an outstanding rating by denying the opportunity of education in their institution to children whose results they thought would not flatter their position in the league table. That was in the form of things such

as the informal exclusion of children with special educational needs or disabilities, and refusal to engage with the local authority about taking looked-after children who they thought would not do so well. I can see a number of Members indicating that, perhaps, they have had the same experience.

We need to ensure that our regulatory environment is not one that is about saying, "Look at how many schools and local authorities are good or outstanding", although that is important, but, "Look at the outcomes that children for whom we are the corporate parent, for whom the state has chosen to take this action, are achieving." We should remember that those outcomes at 16 or 18 may not equate to those of their peers, but we need to recognise that we are giving them the chance that a good family would, so that by their early 20s perhaps they will have caught up.

Mr MacAlister's review is enormously helpful and I think today's debate has reflected on that. I hope that the wide variety of views that have been expressed by Members will be found to be useful by the Department. There is a great deal of experience in this Chamber, drawn from local government and central Government, which, hopefully will enable us to ensure that the additional resources, the money and the commitment that we see in Government will be spent in a way that will continue to deliver positive, transformational change for the most vulnerable children in our society.

3.24 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate and congratulate those who secured it—the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and me. I also declare an interest as the chair of the safeguarding board for an independent children's company.

Although we have not had a huge number of speakers in this debate, the quality of the contributors has been very high. We heard from a former Children's Minister, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), from the former head of the Children and Young People Board at the Local Government Association, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the new Chairman of the Education Committee, whom I have not yet had time to congratulate, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who was involved with children's issues, as she mentioned, well before she became a Member of this House.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who has great experience in this area, as well as the hon. Members for York Central, for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It has certainly been a debate of quality.

It is difficult to follow the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, because of his experience in local government of the real experiences of children in the care system at the sharp end, for which he did so much and has been such an advocate for so many years. However, it is good to be debating children's issues again in this Chamber, which we have not done for a while. We often talk about, and the news headlines are often about, social care—but adult social care. Of course adult social is a huge priority and a big

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challenge facing central and local government, but we should not be focusing on adult social care to the neglect of children's social care.

If we do not get it right in those early years, as we have heard from many contributions, then I am afraid we are condemning children to a lifetime of disadvantage and catch-up. Those early years, from conception to age two in particular, when the child is forming an attachment with his or her parents, are absolutely crucial. As we have said for many years, not to invest in or focus on the area is a false economy. We have heard that in so many different respects in this debate.

I am also delighted that we have a new Minister, who I know shares great enthusiasm for the subject. Her job is the best in Government—two of us contributing to this debate from the Back Benches have done it—and I am sure she will throw her all into it. It is such an important area, which affects every constituency in this country and so many of our constituents.

I welcome the independent review of children's social care. It is certainly a weighty tome and an extensive report. A lot of hard work went into it, and I congratulate Josh MacAlister on what he has achieved in its publication. However, the tragedy is that it could have been written 10 years ago. There is frankly nothing new in this report; it is largely a revisiting of many truths and deficiencies that those of us who have had the privilege of being on the Front Bench dealing with children's issues have known about and tried to tackle, with some success, over many years.

Many of the problems described in this report this year were put forward and described in previous reports. I just have a selection, having gone through my bookcase. We have "No more blame game: the future for children's social workers", from the commission on children's social care that I chaired in 2007, ably helped by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley. From 2009, we have the Conservative party commission on social workers' response to the Lord Laming inquiry; from 2010, the Conservative party review of adoption; from February 2010, "Child Protection: Back to the Front Line", ahead of the election; from 2011, the first report commissioned by the new Conservative Government, the Munro review of child protection; and from 2012, Positive for Youth.

I could go on. Everything mentioned in this report was mentioned in any one of those reports, and more, going back 10 years, a limited amount of which has been enacted, but too much of which has not. Over the last decade, I am afraid we have failed too many children by not taking up the challenge that those reports presented, putting in the resources and delivering the outcomes that some of our most vulnerable members of society desperately needed. There have been many successes, and I do not want to underplay them, but too many children have been left behind. That is the problem that we face today, and it is no less urgent than it was 10, 12 or 15 years ago.

Much progress was achieved 10 to 12 years ago, particularly on adoptions, which several hon. Members and hon. Friends have mentioned. We managed to just about double the number of adoptions in the early years of the coalition Government. The baton was picked up by my hon. and learned Friend the Member

for Eddisbury, and there was a real initiative to improve not just the numbers of adoptions, but particularly outcomes for the more challenging children in the care system, who just failed to get considered for adoption. It was not all about adopting shiny new babies that everybody wanted; it was about those black teenage boys whose chances of getting adopted were so disadvantaged.

We introduced things such as adoption scorecards, whereby local authorities were judged not on the number of new, additional adoptions, but by how many adoptions of challenging children in particular they were able to succeed with and how many new adoptive parents they brought forward. This was a sector that was completely racked by prejudice, where adoption was an absolute last resort, even though many people knew that these parents were sadly incapable of bringing up their children, so the sooner we could take a child into an alternative long-term care arrangement with new adoptive parents, the more that would be in the best interests of that child. It was a sector where political correctness meant that a child of mixed heritage had to be matched with an identical adoptive family of mixed heritage, which held children back so much from being given a second chance in a stable, happy upbringing with loving adoptive parents.

We made a lot of progress in those early years. Alas, the adoption numbers have halved since the peak, some seven or eight years ago, and adoption seems to now be less of a priority. That is a great pity because adoption is one of the great successes in how children can be given a second chance at a happy, loving family childhood, which in many cases they cannot get themselves.

Edward Timpson: I thank my hon. Friend again, and also for the work he did on adoption as Children's Minister. Another area that we have addressed, which has made a significant difference to families who have already adopted or are thinking about adopting, is the adoption support fund and the therapeutic interventions that are necessary, often long after an adoption has taken place. Does he agree that that is exactly the type of policy change that we need to remain committed to, so that we can start to bring adoption back into the lives of children again, where that is the right permanent option for their future?

Tim Loughton: My hon. and learned Friend is so right. The adoption support fund was such an important part of the complex programme of getting adoption back on the front foot again. Too often, where adoptive placement was deemed to be best for a child, I am afraid there was too much, "Here's the child, dump them with the family," and then the local authority disappeared in the dust. Children who are going into adoption, in many cases with complex and traumatic problems underlying that decision, need a lot of support in the early years.

If we are to make an adoption work and prevent an adoption disruption, we need to put in the groundwork and do the leg work right at the beginning, to make sure that child gets the extra professional therapeutic work that might be required to make sure that family placement can work. The adoption support fund was a really important way of ensuring the resources to provide that professional expertise, so that the adoption stood a better chance. It is a false economy not to do that,

because the amount of money the local authority saves is considerable if we can make an adoption work, so why not put in the resource at the beginning to make sure that the adoption is likely to work and that child can stay in a stable, loving family environment?

Wera Hobhouse: I know that I am blowing the trumpet for trauma-informed services, but does the hon. Member not agree that they are at the bottom of understanding most traumatised and difficult young people?

Tim Loughton: Yes, and we must understand that, too often, we are too keen to show the statistics that prove the underachievement of children who have been in the care system, be that in education or other outcomes. Why should we expect somebody who has been taken from their birth family, who has been deprived of the loving care of their birth parents because they are not able to give them that loving care, who has been abused as a child—who has perhaps been sexually abused as a child, as so many children are—and who has gone through such a traumatic upbringing, to be able to achieve as much as other children without getting that extra support? Whatever form those trauma services take, it is a no-brainer that we should provide them if we are serious about wanting those placements to work, be that a long-term foster care placement, a long-term home placement or, ultimately, an adoptive placement if that is the right place to go. It has to be horses for courses.

What we also did those 10 or 12 years ago is reduce the bureaucracy in the children's social care system. When I took over as Children's Minister, the manual for children's social care, "Working together", consisted of 756 pages, or something of that order. For the previous 10 years or so, since the death of Victoria Climbié, every time a high-profile safeguarding scandal happened and another child lost his or her life—often at the hands of his or her parents or carers—the Government rushed to legislate. It was a Labour Government at the time, but frankly, we were all guilty of going along with it: "The solution must surely be more legislation and more rules." Ten years later, we had reached a stage where social workers were so saddled with regulations and rules that they were constantly looking over their shoulder, constantly referring to page 642 in the rulebook to see what they should be doing, rather than using the professional judgment and instincts that we train them for. Being a social worker is not an easy profession: one has to be a combination of a detective, a psychoanalyst, a forensic scientist and whatever else, because people who abuse their children are usually quite smart at covering it up.

The most important thing I said to social workers was, "I want to give you the confidence to make a mistake for genuine reasons"—hopefully not too often, but by using their professional judgment, rather than covering their back by saying, "Well, that's how it said I was supposed to act in this case on page 602 of the manual." That was the problem. We tore apart that manual—it was reduced to something like 70 pages—and said to social workers, "You've been trained as a social worker. We trust you: you have the nous. You need to go out and get the experience. You need to judge something on having face-to-face time with a vulnerable child or that child's parents and to make a value judgment on

whether you think that child needs to be taken into care, to have some support while staying with the birth family, or whatever. You make that judgment—occasionally, you will make it wrong, but you will make the wrong judgment for the right reasons. That will give you more experience to make sure you make it right the next time."

David Simmonds: I commend my hon. Friend for the work he did on slimming down "Working together", which had a huge impact on boosting the confidence of social workers. Does he agree that this is a good example that illustrates the point about focusing on a child's outcomes, rather than on the system?

Historically, for example, local authorities were measured on the regularity with which a child in the care system or a child at risk had a meeting with a social worker, not on whether that was the same social worker—the person who knew the child's case, understood their circumstances and could progress things. We could tick a box to say that the child had met a social worker, but that meeting had not done anything to improve that child's life. That shift in focus, saying that what is to be measured is the quality of the relationship the child has with the social worker and those caring for them and the progress it enables them to make, should be at the heart of our regulation.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is so right. I fear I am in danger of making a long speech; I rarely do so, but we do have some time this afternoon, and such good interventions are being made that I will indulge them—if you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is such an important subject, and my hon. Friend is right that too often in the past, we have measured things not on the quality of the outcomes, but on the way we can measure them and tick the appropriate box.

At the end of the day, what matters is not whether all the processes and procedures set out in the rulebook have been followed. The only thing that matters is whether the intervention of the state through the medium of the social worker, the local authority children's social care department, the foster carer, or whoever has had a meaningful and beneficial outcome for the welfare of that child. That is what section 1 of the Children Act 1989—which is still so relevant today, 33 years on—says is how we should judge whether we should be making those interventions, and how we should measure their impacts. I am afraid that it was too much about whether we complied with certain pages in the manual and whether we could tick all the boxes, regardless of the impact or the outcomes for the child.

The problem 10, 12 or 15 years ago was that too many people were studying social work at university because it was an easy degree to get into. A third of them dropped out during the degree, another third dropped out after a year in the social profession, and only a third went on to be social workers. We spent a lot of money on training people, two thirds of whom did not end up in that important profession, which I call the fourth emergency service.

"No more blame game" was appropriately titled, because social workers were always the butt of everybody's criticism. Social workers do not kill babies and vulnerable children; it is evil carers or parents who do that. For social workers, it is a question of how and when they can intervene, hopefully to lessen the chances of adults

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doing cruel things to children, which they will always do. All we can hope to do is minimise the opportunities and try to detect them before they manifest themselves.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. One of the things that has constantly dogged the profession has been the pressure, the extent of the case loads and the circumstances that social workers and other professionals work under. Those pressures are not abating at the moment, as local authorities are facing significant pressures as well. Is it not crucial that we build a proper multidisciplinary workforce plan to ensure that every child gets the time and the professional support that is needed to do the things that the hon. Member is talking about?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I will come on to case loads in a minute.

It is about getting highly motivated and qualified students to go into studying social work. It is about getting better training for those students to become professional social workers and then holding on to them, because we have a real problem with retention at the moment.

We raised the status of the profession by bringing in principal child and family social workers, who were senior social workers with great experience. They were not just put behind a desk and given managerial responsibility when they were promoted. They also had frontline casework, so we did not lose their valuable experience; they were able to pass it on by mentoring newly qualified social workers.

Step Up to Social Work was a fantastic programme, like Teach First, with well-qualified, motivated and energetic people making a change in direction and going into social work. In many cases they were the shock troops, going into really challenging areas and bringing a fresh approach. That approach was carried on by Frontline, to an extent, but its origin was in Step Up to Social Work, and I have to say that it did it in a rather more cost-effective manner.

We created the role of chief social worker. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley will remember well our conversations in 2007 with the chief social worker for New Zealand, which was the inspiration for our recommendation. Of course we should have one—we have a chief medical officer and a chief veterinary officer, so why would we not have a chief social worker to look after the interests of children? That was one of our key recommendations in 2007, and the chief social worker was appointed some five years later.

The new report mirrors the plea that the Munro report made in 2011 for early help—all we have done is rename it family help. As hon. Friends have said, we can be so much more effective by intervening early than by responding retrospectively and firefighting the problem when a child may have been irreparably damaged. We need to ensure that we have vulnerable families on the radar, getting intervention and support services early on, if possible to keep the child with their birth family by giving them the support they need, rather than have the social worker knock on the door when the child is about to be taken into care. It is such a false economy to react rather than intervene proactively. We have lost too much of that proactiveness, I fear.

We find ourselves coming almost full circle to high vacancy rates in the social work profession. Too many experienced, grey-haired social workers are burnt out and leaving the profession early, and are unable to pass on their great wisdom, experience and mentoring skills to new social workers coming into the profession. We find ourselves with case loads that are, again, too heavy. I remember one former, very distinguished director of children's services, Dave Hill, who very sadly died just a year or two ago. He started part of his career in Essex and later became president of the Association of the Directors of Children's Services. When he took over the Essex children's services department after it had been failed and was going through a rough period, he got all the social workers in front of him and said to some of them, "Right, list your cases." Several social workers went through their cases, and when they got to No. 16 or 17, they started struggling to remember them. Mr Hill's response was: "That's probably the limit of the case load you can manage, isn't it?"

It is not rocket science. If a social worker is struggling even to remember the names of the vulnerable families they are looking after, they probably have too many families. That approach was not rocket science but common sense. Too often, social workers' case loads are too heavy and they are chasing their tails from one case to the next. That is when things get missed. In their complex and challenging profession, social workers have to notice things, and they can do that only when they cross the door threshold, look in the fridge to see why the kids are not being fed properly, inspect their wardrobe and eyeball the mother who they suspect is not looking after the kids properly. It is not all done on a computer, and it cannot be done if social workers have to rush to their next appointment because they have so many cases to get through within an eight-hour working day.

David Simmonds: Does my hon. Friend agree this is another good example of where the regulatory environment and the use of data at a local level are important? I say that because during the course of a peer-review visit to a local authority that was exceptionally challenged, we discovered that there were two vacant social worker posts on the system that held 174 child protection cases between them. It was clear that because there were no staff to do that work, nobody was working on those 174 cases, and that had the effect of reducing the caseload across the workforce. It is important that the expectations that the Department places on lead members and directors of children's services are not just about chasing numbers to make the institution look good, but about ensuring proper engagement with the lives of the children.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is, again, absolutely right. It is a false economy to look after too many cases but do them moderately well or badly rather than concentrating on a small number of cases and doing them effectively, which offers a better chance of meaningful interventions before things reach crisis point.

It is, in many cases, depressing that despite all the energies spent and all the legislation, changes and regulations that have gone through, we still find ourselves, 10 years on, facing many of the problems outlined in the MacAlister report, to which the solutions are, frankly, no different from what they were 10 or so years ago. We now have 82,170 children in the care system in England and

Wales, a 23% increase over the last 10 years. Barnardo's estimates that currently, 80% of all local authority spending on children and young people currently goes on late intervention services, up from 58% in 2010-11. That means that rather less is going towards early intervention services, which stand a better chance of getting a better bang for the buck and achieving a better social outcome by preventing families from getting to crisis point. That is the most depressing and alarming statistic to have come out in the last 10 years, and it is such a false economy.

In 2021-22, 10% of all children in the care system were moved three or more times. Almost a third of all children in care were moved two or more times in the space of a year. At least 16,970 children in the care system were placed more than 20 miles away from home in the last year, often away from friends, family and the communities that matter most to them. In 2022, 43% of all children in care were placed outside their local authority area. For some children that is appropriate—some children need to be taken well away from an environment where they were subject to abuse and where there are still safeguarding issues. However, for many it represents a serious disruption. Having had the biggest disruption a child can probably have in their childhood by being taken away from their parents, then to be taken away from any other anchors of continuity, whether extended family members, friends, schoolmates or their school, is doubly disorientating. Although there will be children for whom it is more appropriate that they are out of that environment, or put in specialist services if they have particular problems that need to be addressed, we need to do better to try to keep some degree of continuity for children who cannot have the continuity of their own parents bringing them up through their childhood.

Again, these problems are not new, but they have not been solved. It makes it even harder for children to make friends and to succeed at school when they are going from one school to another, say if their foster placement at one end of the county breaks down and then they are at another end of the county. Some 11% of children in care have experienced a mid-year school move in the space of the last year. That is hugely disruptive. Bright Spots research from 2020 suggested that only 35% of children in care reported having the same social worker for 12 months. Some 27% of children reported having had three or more social workers in the last year. When someone does not have their parents to confide in, trust in and be their rock and their point of contact, having a different social worker turn up every few months—when they do turn up—is hugely disruptive. We have still not addressed that problem. That cannot be in the best interests of continuity for those children.

What happens? Not surprisingly, the outcomes for those children are well below the outcomes for those lucky enough to be brought up with their own parents. In 2022, 38% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were not in education, employment or training, compared with just 11% of all young people aged 19 to 21. There are long-term consequences from not getting this right. They were there in 2010, they are still there in the MacAlister report in 2020, and it is such a false economy not to be doing more about it.

I have a few more comments, if I may, because there are still huge differentials in outcomes and intervention levels for children across different parts of the United

Kingdom. We did a lot of work on that in the all-party parliamentary group for children. This is a couple of years out of date now, but a child in Blackpool is something like eight times more likely to be in the care system than a child in Richmond. Now, there are reasons why we see a differential between Blackpool and the rather more leafy, affluent Richmond in the suburbs of London, but eight times more likely? How can we justify such huge differentials, if we are giving each vulnerable child who needs the care and attention of the state as good care and attention as we can? Something is not working properly there.

All of this is a false economy financially, as I mentioned. Much of it is down to preventive support that could be given to parents. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for the first 1,001 days, which is concerned with perinatal mental health. One in six mothers at least—it has got worse since the pandemic—will suffer from some form of perinatal mental illness, making attachment with their child far less easy at a time when that child's brain is developing exponentially, and when attachment to a parent or carer is so essential.

One of the most alarming statistics in the research we have done in that group is that for a 15 or 16-year-old teenager suffering from some form of depression or low-level mental illness, there is a 99% likelihood that his or her mother had some form of depression or mental illness during pregnancy. It is as stark as that. Perinatal mental illness costs this country in excess of £8 billion a year. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) is working on the Best Start for Life programme, which the Government, to their credit, are rolling out, but we need more urgent roll-out. That is so essential in ensuring that children have a better chance of bonding with their parents in the early years and that parents are given all the support they need when facing the challenges of perinatal mental illness—that means mum and dad; we need a two-partner solution, where that is possible.

In addition, child neglect costs this country in excess of £15 billion every year, so we are spending more than £23 billion—the budget of a small Government Department—on funding failure by not intervening early and appropriately for some of the most vulnerable people in society. It is a false economy financially, and it is a hugely false economy socially not to do this for our future, which happens to be our children.

Josh MacAlister—slightly depressingly, I thought—described in his report the social care system as a “30-year-old tower of Jenga held together with Sellotape”.

I do not think it is as bad as that and, frankly, I do not think that such a description properly respects the huge amount of hard work, dedication and professionalism of the many thousands of social workers, foster carers, care home managers, IROs, youth workers and others whose lives are dedicated to looking after some of the most vulnerable children in society. They have dedicated their careers to looking after vulnerable children, and we need to do better to support them. The problem is that we are still losing too many experienced social workers by overloading them. We need a better workforce retention and recruitment strategy, as the hon. Member for York Central said.

I have some criticisms of the report. The review takes an unnecessarily antagonistic view of the independent sector, and I disclose my interest here. If we did not have

[Tim Loughton]

the independent sector, the whole children's social care sector would collapse. If we looked at the relative costs, we would find that there is better value to be offered in the independent care sector, which often ends up with the most damaged and most challenging children passed on by local authorities. Frankly, I do not care whether a child is being looked after by a local authority, a third sector organisation or an independent provider. All I care about is whether we are getting the best outcomes for that child in the care system, so that the child will come out of the system in a better shape than they went into it. We need to work in partnership with whoever has the expertise, the capacity, the resource and the dedication to provide that. We need a partnership of those different sectors to ensure that we are doing the best by that child.

There is a shortage of places in this country, which too often means that we have a costly spot purchasing system, which is most expensive to local authorities and too often based on where there is a vacancy and a gap in the system to fit that child, rather than the system being fitted around the child based on what they most need at that point in time. They may need a foster carer, a specialist foster carer, a residential home or an educational residential home placement. The only consideration should be what is best for that child at that particular time, not what is actually available. Too often on a Friday night, when a social worker is desperately ringing round, it is about what is available, rather than what is most appropriate for a child who has just come into the care system through a local authority. We need—I fear that the MacAlister report does not highlight this enough—better, smarter, more long-term partnership planning, with smarter commissioning and long-term agreements between all those different sectors to achieve a better outcome for children. We need a system that is centred on the needs of the child; that is the be-all and end-all.

I want to mention a couple of other things, and then I will finish, although we have left plenty of time for those on the Front Benches to make their important speeches. I am really pleased with the John Lewis advert this year. It is one of those heart-tugging adverts, better than the usual dross we often get from the supermarkets at Christmas, but it is not just an advert; it is a cause and a mission.

By flagging up children in care in its Christmas advert, John Lewis is not just trying to sell more crackers and turkey; it has actually invested in children in the care system. I believe it has taken on 17 young people who have been in the care system and it is giving preference to care-experienced young people in apprenticeships and work. It has been working on the issue for the last 18 months. In partnership with Action for Children and the Who Cares? charity, it supports young people moving from care to independent living. It is raising awareness of the disadvantages and inequalities that children in the care system face. I say three cheers for John Lewis for that, and I hope it continues. I also hope that it will raise awareness among its customers and that other people will follow its example.

The foster care organisations that I work with have already seen an increase in the number of people interested in becoming foster carers. If the new Minister has not already, I am sure that she and the Government will

want to work with John Lewis and other employers to have a national recruitment campaign for foster carers. Goodness knows that we desperately need them, given the increasing number of kids who are coming into the care sector.

I take issue with the MacAlister report's recommendation to abolish independent reviewing officers, which the hon. Member for York Central mentioned. IROs are not perfect, but they do an important job. When I was at the Department, I spent a lot of time going out with IROs, particularly in Leeds, which doubled the number of IROs it employed 10 years ago. IROs are the confidantes of young people in the care system, who often have nowhere else to go. When they work well, they are the advocates, ambassadors, representatives and shoulders to cry on for young people—they make sure that children get a better deal and they are a trusted voice. As in many professions, they are of mixed quality, but the principle is right. I take issue with that recommendation, although I understand why the review made it.

I absolutely agree with the review on kinship care. One of my great disappointments is that we could not do more about that. Some 180,000 children in this country are raised in kinship care, often by grandparents who have other caring responsibilities and have to give up work to take on a child whose mother or father is unable to look after them, frequently because of substance misuse. The grandparents take on the child as an alternative to them being adopted in the hope that one day, as often happens, they can be reunited with their birth parent when those problems have been solved.

In other countries, kinship care is the primary way that children are looked after. In New Zealand, two thirds of children in the care system are raised with kinship carers. Not all kinship carers are brilliant, but in most cases they are doing it for the right reasons—the love of the child. We have never properly given them the recognition that they deserve. I pay tribute to the grandparent charities that I have been involved with while in this House and beyond, which support those who simply want to look after their grandchildren when the parents cannot, but who need a bit of help in many cases. We need to have a proper, new legal definition of kinship care and to look at financial allowances for kinship carers, because they are too often seen as a cheap alternative to having to pay foster carers or for other placements.

David Simmonds: Kinship care is an area where the Department could do some productive work. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that the typical cost of a child in the care system to council tax payers is £54,000 a year, and the cost of a child with higher needs is, on average, in excess of £130,000 a year, kinship care offers not only a better and more familiar experience for the child, but potentially significant savings for the taxpayer?

Tim Loughton: It is a no-brainer. It is much cheaper to do it that way and people are much more likely to do it for the right reasons. Social workers looking for a placement can either place a child with a foster carer who has been properly vetted, is on their books and has a vacancy, or they can do a lot of new work to assess whether a kinship carer relative is appropriate. The easier and the more expensive option—and, again, not necessarily the best option for the child—is to go with the foster carer.

We should be placing far more children with kinship carers, but with ancillary support from the social workers; not just dumping the child with their grandparents and running, but making sure that that sort of support is available, as with the adoption support fund, so that the child is suitably resourced and cared for, with all the stuff that needs to go with it. I think we need to look at a new kinship care leave entitlement as well, particularly where we have kinship carers who have given up employment opportunities to take on the role.

We still have a particular problem with separated siblings. Nearly 12,000 children in the care system in this country are not living with at least one of their siblings. I had four groups of young people who used to come to visit me in the Department for Education every three months: a group of kids who were adopted, a group of kids who were in foster care, a group of kids who were in residential homes, and a group of kids who had recently left care. They would all come, without any adults in the room apart from me and a couple of officials from the Department, and we would give them lots of crisps and sandwiches. They would just talk and tell us what was going on, and I got my best information from those children. Why would I not? They are our customers, they are at the frontline, and they are the ones who are experiencing day in, day out the results of the decisions that Ministers, local authority directors of children's services and social workers make for them.

One of the most common stories I heard was, "I haven't seen my sister for the last year." When children have been taken away from their parents, away from the stability and anchor of growing up in a happy childhood—which I guess most of us here take for granted—if they cannot have that continuing link with their parents, they want something close to that, which is another relation. In some cases they are separated from siblings for good reason: the sibling may present a problem for their welfare, but that is in a minority of cases. In most cases, however, surely it would be better to keep those children together, but it does not happen simply because the resource is not there. We can do smart things, as I have seen local authorities do, such as pay for a house extension to provide an extra bedroom so that a sibling group of three can be taken together, rather than split up. That has to be in the best interests of those children. Kinship carers, if given that support, which may include financial support, are more likely to be able to keep a family together, and surely that is what we want.

I have two other points. Staying Put and Staying Close were great schemes that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury—he is not here at the moment—progressed and that we brought in some years ago. I do not think we are ambitious enough in just wanting to extend Staying Put and Staying Close from age 21 to 23. It should be 25, and I think we should be doing more of this. My youngest child is about to be 25, and her brother and sister are slightly older. They still come home quite a lot, particularly when they want something. Children do not get cut off from their family just when they hit the age of 21 or 23, and that is the end of it; kids need to have that ongoing support, love, care and somebody watching out for them. Those schemes do that so brilliantly, with really dedicated foster carers or people who have worked in residential homes who have a vested lifetime interest in the life of that child. We need to do better.

Another point on which I take issue with the hon. Member for York Central is the regional care co-operatives proposal, which has been put forward before. Too much of what has happened in children's social care over the last 15 years has been about processes and changing structures. We need smarter commissioning. We do not need to set up yet more structures. I want every local authority to be working closely with other good-quality providers of children's social care from whatever sector they come. The more regionalisation of this that we bring in, the further we take it away from the needs and the voices of the children on the ground whom we are there to serve. Frankly, I think that is a non-starter.

My apologies for speaking for so long, Madam Deputy Speaker. In conclusion, children's social care is still not working properly despite the best intentions and best policies—and, in some cases, legislation—over the last 20 years. I am not trying to make a partisan point. I said earlier that we have too much legislation, which has crowded out best practice and the most effective use of resources in too many areas.

I support most of the things in the report; I just want them to happen. The revolution in family help identified in the Munro report 11 years go is all about investing to save and getting those children before crisis impacts. The MacAlister report recommends:

"A just and decisive child protection system"

and the appointment of an "Expert Child Protection Practitioner" among social workers. That is fine—I have no problem with that—but that is the job of every social worker. Every social worker should have the training, the nous and the professionalism to want to sniff out another potential Star Hobson or Arthur Labinjo-Hughes—the more recent successors to Victoria Climbié, Baby P, Daniel Pelka and the litany of other children who lost their lives in such tragic and cruel circumstances.

The report goes on to refer to:

"Unlocking the potential of family networks",

along with kinship care, better, smarter foster recruitment, and

"fixing the broken care market".

I do not regard it as a market; I regard it as using all the talents and resources that we have, from whatever sector, to ensure that we have the best possible support available and placements for those children who most need them.

The report then covers the five missions for care-experienced people, which Josh MacAlister calls "the civil rights issue of our time."

It should be. They are the most vulnerable people in our society: children who do not have a voice. They are those who are too young to have a voice and those who, through no fault of their own, happen to be growing up with parents incapable of looking after them properly or, at worst, wanting to do them harm. It is a national scandal. Of course, we need to solve the adult social care crisis, but we cannot do that at the exclusion of remembering the children's social care crisis that is still ongoing.

The review continues to

"realising the potential of the workforce".

We need to remove the barriers that are diverting social workers from spending time with families. We tried to do that 12 years ago, but there are still too many barriers and too much bureaucracy. As its last point mentions, we need to be

"relentlessly focused on children and families".

[Tim Loughton]

That needs a multi-agency safeguarding approach, but still the different interested parties are not working together. There is nothing new in every safeguarding report that comes out; there is just a different set of characters, players and circumstances. Basically, it comes down to somebody not picking up the ball when it stopped with them. People did not share information and did not know when to intervene, or did not have the confidence to do so, when that intervention needed to happen.

I ask the Children's Minister: are the things in the MacAlister report going to be implemented? When will the panel get on with its work? When will we see the Government's response and the implementation plan? What will the timetable be? Will there be resources to go with that? Resources will be required to do that. It is a huge challenge for the new Minister, who I know will rise to that challenge no less than her predecessors did beforehand. But we need to rail against the system, because these are the most vulnerable people in our society, and if we cannot make it work for them, they cannot make it work for themselves.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

4.13 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Set against the enormity of the challenges facing the children's social care sector, the vital importance of the sector in seeking to support families and keep the most vulnerable children safe, and the urgency of the need for reform, far too little attention has been paid in this Chamber to children's social care in recent months. In particular, it has been six months since the independent review of children's social care was published. Aside from a short oral statement during publication, there has been no opportunity for detailed consideration and discussion of its contents. This debate is long overdue.

I would like to thank all hon. Members who contributed today. We have heard—at great length, if I may say—from Members with very significant experience of children's social care. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central made a powerful opening speech, setting out clearly the pressures crowding in on families and the urgency of the need for change. She also highlighted the costs of doing nothing.

The hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), a former Minister well-respected for his time in Government, evidenced by the fact that he managed to remain in post for five years—that makes him a real veteran by contemporary standards, since the Minister's post has been something of a revolving chair in recent months—spoke of some of the innovations that can help to drive improvement in children's social care and the importance of improving support for care leavers. I certainly agree on both points. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) spoke of the need for support for kinship carers and the importance of work to address childhood trauma.

The hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) mentioned some of the charities in her constituency that do important work with vulnerable children and young people. She spoke of the lack of progress in response to previous reviews. She also mentioned the death of Damilola Taylor. Madam Deputy Speaker, I feel I must correct the record on that point. She mentioned Damilola Taylor in a list of children who died due to safeguarding failings at the hands of parents and carers. Damilola Taylor was murdered by strangers on his way home from school. It happened very close to my constituency and I just feel I must, for his family, set the record straight on that point.

Mrs Drummond indicated assent.

Helen Hayes: The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referenced the importance of training and support for professionals working with vulnerable children and young people, and the importance of independent advocacy. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who is not in his place, mentioned the importance of recruiting foster carers and highlighted the very poor conversion rate from people who express an interest in foster care to those who eventually become foster carers.

The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) spoke from his experience as a local authority lead member for children's social care over many years and was right to highlight the transformative impact of high-quality youth work, as well as early help. Finally, another former Minister, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, made many points in his speech, but again highlighted the catalogue of reports and reviews produced over 10 years and the lack of progress in taking up the challenge of really delivering for children.

There is, as we have seen in the debate, a high level of consensus on children's social care and the need for change is indeed urgent. The independent review's "Case for Change" document, published in 2021, is unequivocal. The number of children, particularly the number of older children, in the care system is increasing and the outcomes for people with care experience are getting worse. Care-experienced people are 70% more likely to die prematurely than those who have not been in the care system. Care-experienced people are overrepresented in the prison system. Their educational attainment and levels of employment are lower, and they are far more likely to be homeless.

The appalling tragedies that have made the headlines in recent months, of children murdered by people who should have loved and nurtured them, remind us of the grave responsibilities that children's social workers carry. Their decisions about the welfare of the most vulnerable children can literally be a matter of life or death. I pay tribute to social workers across the country who are working every day to support families, to keep children safe, and to provide stability and security for looked-after children, but they are all too often working in incredibly difficult circumstances. The most recent survey of social workers by the British Association of Social Workers revealed that more than a third reported that their caseload had increased since the start of the covid-19 pandemic. The Department for Education's own analysis shows that the number of children's social workers quitting children's services altogether rose more than a fifth during 2021.

As many hon. Members have highlighted, the situation is very challenging for kinship carers—people who step in to care for a child who is a family member or close friend when their birth parents cannot do so. Kinship carers do an incredible job, maintaining family links that might be lost if the child was taken into the care of the local authority, providing love and stability. However, according to the most recently published survey by the charity Kinship, more than two thirds of kinship carers feel that they are not getting the support they need. That is surely not acceptable.

The past 12 years of Conservative Government have seen early help and support services for families decimated across much of the country. As many councils have lost more than 50% of the funding they receive from central Government, they have been forced to focus increasingly stretched resources on statutory services, including child protection. Over the 10 years from 2010-11 to 2020-21, investment in early intervention support fell by a staggering 50%, while spending on crisis and late intervention services has increased by more than a third. That loss of capacity is a disaster for child protection services. Without early help and support, more and more families struggle to provide appropriate care for their children. By failing to invest in early support, the Government are allowing families to fall into crisis, picking up the pieces only when it is often too late.

The independent review of children's social care cites parenting in a context of adversity as the reason that the majority of families become involved with children's social care. Many of the issues that cause families, and particularly children, to fall into a situation of vulnerability or danger have their roots in the poverty and inequality in our country that have deepened and widened on the Government's watch. As we debate children's social care and the interventions that exist to provide the safety net for children, we must not lose sight of the wider context, which has such a significant impact on the lives of children across our country.

While the policies of the Conservatives have fuelled the growing crisis in children's social care, they have been complacent in responding to it. Across England, 50% of local authority children's services departments are rated "inadequate" or "requires improvement" by Ofsted. That will be for a variety of reasons, including a lack of resources, but resources are clearly not the whole picture.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Southwark Council, one of my local authorities, on its "good" Ofsted rating for children's services, which was published last week. The political and officer leadership team in Southwark have managed to continue to deliver good, child-centred services, despite the council as a whole experiencing among the highest level of cuts in the country.

The reasons for poor performance in some local authorities will vary, and I do not seek to lay the blame at the feet of hard-working frontline social workers. However, the lack of grip on the situation from the Government is inexcusable. The Government have been content to preside over a shocking level of failure in children's services departments and that is simply not good enough.

Edward Timpson: I was hoping not to have to intervene on the hon. Member. She started off by talking about how much consensus there was on children's social care,

but I think she has to be a bit careful about suggesting that we somehow sat back and let this all happen with no care in the world. We have been one of the Governments who have intervened most in failing children's services. I gave examples of when we had to take control of services off authorities and put them in a trust to try to bring about an improvement in performance. Labour-run Birmingham City Council is probably the best example.

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. and learned Member for his intervention. If he thinks that 50% of children's services departments across the country being rated as "inadequate" or "requires improvement" is an acceptable situation, I fear that he somewhat misses the point. The Government have, of course, intervened in some local authorities, and local authorities of all political hues experience challenges and are not performing as well as they should be. However, I see no evidence of a real grip from the Government. Where is the support and challenge programme? Where is the sharing of good practice? Where is the drive, every single day, to make sure that no local authorities children services departments are failing children?

David Simmonds: The children's improvement board, which was set up as a partnership between the Department for Education, the Local Government Association and Ofsted, was the main vehicle that provided the drive. It is important to recognise, in respect of local authority judgments, that Ofsted has been clear that "requires improvement to be good" is an above-the-line judgment—that is, an authority that is performing "adequately", in the old parlance, but which needs to be on the journey to be "good" to make improvements. We need to be clear that it is only authorities that are "inadequate" that can be considered to be performing less well than they need to be to serve the interests of children in that area.

Helen Hayes: We need to have a higher aspiration for children across the country to be supported by the best possible services. I welcome the Minister's comments on the ongoing work to achieve that, but I believe much more can be done. That requires political will, and greater attention in this place, to drive improvements in performance.

Wera Hobhouse: Councils are struggling financially, although good and outstanding services are not all about finances. Does the hon. Lady agree that councils with the flexibility to spend a bit more money, such as Bath and North East Somerset Council, are in a much better position than those that are already in a difficult financial situation, usually in deprived areas?

Helen Hayes: It is indeed the case that local authorities with the flexibility to divert more resources into this area have that benefit, which can be significant.

The independent review of children's social care was published six months ago. It called for a "total reset" of children's social care and made a wide range of recommendations for reform. There is a high degree of consensus on many of those recommendations, such as the need to restore early help services, to provide better support for kinship carers, to end private profiteering in residential care and private foster care services, and to end the placement of children in unregulated settings. These things should be happening right now.

[Helen Hayes]

It is also essential that, as the reform of children's social care is taken forward, the professionals working with children and families, care-experienced people, and the children and families themselves are placed at the heart of the process. None of this will happen unless and until the Government prioritise children and move this agenda forward. The previous Prime Minister, during her first Prime Minister's questions, made a commitment in response to my question that the Government's response to the independent review and an implementation plan will be published by the end of the year. There are just three full sitting weeks left before Christmas. I therefore ask the Minister to confirm the publication date of the Government's response to the independent review, and to confirm that it will be before Christmas, as promised.

While Conservative Members have been arguing among themselves in recent months, taking an ideological sledgehammer to our economy and scrambling to reinvent themselves as a completely new Government with no connection to the last one, of which they were all a part, it is the most vulnerable children and young people, and those who care for them, who are being let down. Childhood is short, but its experiences last a lifetime. When will this Government stop letting children down?

4.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): I have been asked to keep my comments relatively brief, so I hope I can do justice to this tremendous debate and set out some of the Government's vision.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for a moving and passionate speech, which I am becoming used to hearing from her, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has been generous to me with his time and experience, for securing this important debate. I also thank all Members for their contributions. I look around the Chamber and see former Ministers, former care workers, former councillors and the newly elected Chair of the Education Committee. They have a huge amount of experience and compassion, and we heard the very best of the House today. I look forward to working with all of them, and I am overjoyed to see the wealth of enthusiasm for these changes.

I also thank all those who led and contributed to the vital reviews this year, and many Members listed some of them, including Josh MacAlister, Annie Hudson, the rest of the national panel and the Competition and Markets Authority team, as well as the children and young people in care and their families, who contributed and made these reports so powerful. I particularly thank Josh, who many Members mentioned today. He has been rightly praised, and he has worked closely with us since the publication of his review to encourage the depth and breadth of our ambition.

There is a lot that is good about children's social care, as all the reports have set out this year and, indeed, over a decade, and as Members have shown today. The dedication of social workers, family support workers, directors of children's services, foster carers, kinship carers and others up and down the country who work determinedly to improve children's lives deserve our

fullest praise. Many children who have been supported by children's social care go on to lead happy and fulfilling lives. That is a testament not only to their resilience, but to the quality of the help and support they have received when they have needed it.

However, the message from these reports and from the many excellent contributions made today is clear: the system is not delivering well enough, or consistently for the children and families it supports. Less than one month ago, I was given what I believe is the most important job in Government—it is excellent to hear that people who have held it previously agree. No other role provides such a huge opportunity to change children's lives for the better. That is why, when my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the then Minister for children and families, came to this House six months ago, this Government committed to taking action from day one, and I am pleased to update the House today on some of our progress.

We have already established a national implementation board and I chaired a meeting of the board last week. Hearing the experiences of the people who are care-experienced on it, as well as the wealth of experience of Josh, our Children's Commissioner and others, has given me huge confidence in its ability to help us to achieve the full extent of our ambitions for children.

We have also set up a new child protection ministerial group, and launched a data and digital solutions fund. I know that many Members talked about the importance of sharing data to encourage joined-up working. We are working to increase the number of foster care placements. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) has excellent real-world experience in this area and is pushing us to be ambitious. I want to be ambitious in this area too. That is what we are getting on with already.

Many Members have also rightly pressed me on the contents and timing of the delivery of the implementation strategy. I want to assure them that this is the thing that is keeping me up at night. It is a huge priority. I committed to publishing our implementation strategy early in the new year and I look forward to returning to this House to set out our plans in full. I am sure I will see many Members return to scrutinise them.

Today, I can share some of our vision and ambitions for the future system. The Government believe in the power of opportunity, which is why levelling up was at the core of our manifesto in 2019, and it is our belief that the roots of opportunity start with the power and importance of family. With the right support, families are the best means of protecting, nurturing and promoting the interests of children, now and forever. As the care review said:

“We all have a part to play and it starts with love.”

Our ambitions for reform will reaffirm the central role of families in the care system, and put love and stable relationships at the heart of what children's social care does. Children should grow up in loving, safe and stable families. That is where they can achieve their best. Where that is not possible, it is right that the care system should take swift and decisive action to protect them. But care should also provide that same foundation of love, stability and safety. That is what all children and indeed what all of us need to thrive.

Jim Shannon: I asked about the advocates. The figures I have from back home show that only three in 10 children have an advocate. I asked whether it would be possible to look at that process to ensure that every young child has an advocate so that they can plan their way forward in a structured fashion.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I will be looking at that carefully. The heart of what we want to do is to make sure that all people have these powerful relationships in their lives. As he ably pointed out, that is what we expect for our friends and families and actually everyone deserves to have those people who will go the extra mile for them.

On our ambitions for this area, first, I come to our ambition for families. Many Members spoke eloquently about the importance of families. They are at the heart of what makes us happy and well, so when families are struggling we should provide rapid and intensive multidisciplinary support at the right time to help to fix the issues. Lots of Members talked about early intervention and I completely agree that that is the core issue here. We want to make sure that our programmes improve early help services from birth to adulthood. We want to build a strong evidence base on what works to support families to turn around difficult situations, and I would particularly like to thank the Children's Commissioner for part 1 of her recent excellent review of family life. There was a comment from the shadow Minister about our lack of ambition in this area. I gently point her towards our ambitious reforms on domestic abuse and on drug and alcohol addiction, reducing parental conflict. We talk about prevention to make sure that people are not suffering from the kind of trauma that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) set out movingly. These programmes are both important and exactly the right place to start.

Rachael Maskell: What keeps me awake at night is knowing that poverty levels are rising sharply. It is those pressures on families that often lead children into the care system. Given that the report did not have the remit to look into the intersection between poverty and the challenges that families face, will the Minister ensure that she puts more pressure on her Government to put the protection around families so we do not see children having to go into the care sector?

Claire Coutinho: As someone who has been working on the cost of living challenge for the past 18 months, I can say that it has been a priority of this Government, during the pandemic and into the energy crisis, to support the most vulnerable households. That has exactly been our impetus in these times.

Our second ambition is for child protection. The murders of Arthur and Star have sickened us all. The recommendations of the national panel aim to ensure that such terrible incidents are as rare as possible and, when children are at risk of harm, to ensure that we intervene quickly and decisively through a more expert and multi-agency child protection response. The hon. Member for Bath had a question about developing our understanding of sibling sexual abuse. Nothing in this area should be taboo. We are looking at the evidence base via our child sex abuse centre. I am happy to discuss these things further with her.

Local authorities, police and health services are under statutory duties to work together to safeguard children. We will use the recommendations of all the reviews to support them.

Thirdly, on foster care and kinship care, I agree that the John Lewis advert was touching, providing an exciting opportunity for us to talk more about this area. Where children cannot be looked after safely by their parents, we should properly support wider family networks to step up and family-like environments. At the moment, there are practical, financial and cultural barriers to some of this, particularly some of the ethnic disparities that have been mentioned today. But moving in with a relative or people from one's own community provides a strong chance of achieving the kind of lifelong stability that children need. We need to encourage the system always to look to wider family before care outside the family and to help to equip families to do this where that is in the child's best interests. Many Members also mentioned adoption. We set out a strategy last year and that will also be an important part of our solution here.

Our fourth ambition is for the care system. Where family is not an option, the care system should provide stable and loving homes. Again, I echo the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who said that it was very sad that some people do not have what other people have: a loving family home. The care review found that supporting children in the care system also needs to be focused on outcomes. That has been widely discussed today and it is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) movingly set that out, saying that we must focus on the outcomes. I also pay tribute to John from Plan B who sounds like a thoroughly brilliant man in all the work that he is doing to help people in this regard.

The number of times that children move homes was mentioned in a couple of speeches. Care-experienced people whom I have spoken to in the past couple of weeks talked about children moving 21 times. That is not the kind of situation that we need to set up the relationship that we think are so important for people.

While we are considering all the recommendations to support young people and to get those outcomes that we have been talking about, we have also been working in close partnership with Departments across Government and with Ofsted. What is clear is that the continuing status is not an option, although I gently say to the shadow Minister that the trajectory has been positive and that there has been a huge amount of work from dedicated teams to try to get that good and outstanding level from 36% to 55%, and to reduce the number of local authorities that have been judged to be inadequate. I pay tribute to them for their work. Of course, we must continue. We must not accept any failure in this area, but they have done exceptional work so far.

Our fifth ambition relates to the workforce, which the hon. Member for York Central, who I know has great experience in this area, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who is always so interesting on this issue, all talked about. We must equip the children's social care system with the people and tools it needs to do a good job of supporting all those who need its help. That means a skilled and empowered workforce, better data and transparency and clear system direction.

[Claire Coutinho]

We have committed to a national framework for children's social care and are working to publish a draft of that alongside the implementation strategy. We will also continue to work closely with Ofsted, which plays an important role in the intervention and improvement programme.

Finally, by far the most important factor in achieving success will be the people delivering the vision. I am sure this House will join me in paying tribute to every social worker and all those supporting children, such as workers in children's homes and foster carers. They are there tirelessly, day in, day out, providing support to children and their families. We will bring forward proposals to support the workforce and foster carers to ensure they have the right skills and strong leadership.

I am proud to be responsible for a system that has been shown to help children to recover from traumatic experiences and often to succeed against the odds, but the children's social care system cannot do it all. A young person's success is driven by many different factors and actors. I want other parts of the local council system, the school system, the health service and many others within and outside Government to do all they can to give our children the best possible start in life. Children's social care cannot do it alone and we cannot do anything at once, but this is a programme for a long-term, once in a generation reform. We will start by laying the foundations for a system that is built on love and the importance of family.

4.41 pm

Rachael Maskell: This has been an incredibly powerful debate and the quality has been of the highest standards of this place. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, including my hon. Friend the shadow Minister, and the Minister for setting out her proposals.

It is disappointing to hear that we will have to wait until the new year to hear about the Government's implementation plan, but I trust it will come with strength and fortitude when it comes. Certainly we look forward to seeing that, scrutinising it and pushing the Minister further to make sure that it goes the furthest that it can.

We are indebted to Josh MacAlister for the careful consideration he has given to the future of children within the care system. We are also indebted to all those who step up, day in, day out, to care for children—be they social workers and other professional staff, charities and local authorities, parents, adoptive parents, foster carers or kinship carers. For the children who are dependent on us, we cannot let them down. We cannot give them second best. I trust the Minister will do her utmost to make sure we see the real transformation that those children deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The rules of this House are very clear: should any hon. Member be visiting another Member's constituency, they are to inform them in advance and in good time. The ministerial code is also very clear that any Minister undertaking an official visit should do the same. Today, the Secretary of State for Education visited a school in my constituency but sadly failed to inform me of the visit. I am concerned, because she is the third Minister to visit my constituency in the space of six weeks without informing me. My making this point of order is becoming a regular occurrence and something I should not have to do. May I just seek your guidance on how to ensure that everybody adheres to the rules of this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for having given me notice that she intended to raise a point of order. I take it that she has informed the right hon. Member to whom she refers that she intended to make this point of order?

Marsha De Cordova *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, she has; I thank her for having done so. She is right to have observed the courtesies, and she is also right to say that the rules of this House are clear. Mr Speaker has made it very clear on many an occasion that he deprecates the discourtesy of any hon. or right hon. Member, no matter whether they are a Minister or not, going to an event in the constituency of another Member without having informed that Member. It says that very clearly in "Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons"—this little booklet that I sometimes wonder if anyone has ever noticed. We took some trouble to make the rules really clear, in a readable form, and they really ought to be adhered to. We are well into a Parliament. Nobody has any excuse for saying that they do not know what the rules of this House are. It says very clearly in paragraph 43, on page 14:

"All reasonable efforts should be taken to notify the other Member"

if

"you intend to visit a colleague's constituency (except on purely private visits)...and failing to do so is regarded...as very discourteous."

I regard it as discourteous for a member of the Cabinet to make a visit to the hon. Lady's constituency without having informed her, and I hope that an apology will be forthcoming.

Death of Awaab Ishak and Rochdale Boroughwide Housing

[Relevant document: *First Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, Regulation of Social Housing, HC 18.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Wood.)

4.46 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I rise to speak in what is probably one of the saddest debates that I have had to take part in. It concerns the death of Awaab Ishak, a young boy whose tragic death was made more tragic by the fact that it should never have happened.

In a way, it is easy on these occasions to look round for where for where responsibility lies, and I will do that in a few minutes, but I want first to record the dignity of Awaab's family, who have made it very clear that all they seek is to ensure that this can never happen to another family or another child. I pay enormous respect to the family for precisely that level of dignity, and I stand with them even now, two years on from the death of their child, because of course a child is irreplaceable.

We now need to ask what went wrong. On many occasions I have risen from these Benches and criticised the Government for funding lapses, but this case is simply not about funding. It is about a housing association that did not do its job. We know that some of the factors that led to the death were things that simply should never have happened.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate and for his tireless efforts. Awaab's death was an avoidable tragedy, and I am sure that Members from across the House have casework where tenants in both the social and private rental sectors are too often left in terrible conditions similar to those that caused this incident. Will he join me, in thanking the *Manchester Evening News* for its important campaign with Shelter to bring back regulation on consumer standards for social housing? Does he also agree that we must strengthen the rights of all tenants, regardless of whether they are living in the social or private sector? Finally, does he agree—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I cannot hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying because he is facing away from the Chair. If he spoke to the Chair, we could all hear him.

Afzal Khan: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. Finally, does my hon. Friend agree that, in view of this systemic failure, the whole board is in an untenable position and must go?

Tony Lloyd: I will deal with my hon. Friend's initial points a little later, but on the question of the board, I do think that we now have to question the way it has operated. To allow the chief executive to cling on to his job until public pressure made that impossible is an indictment of those who sought to give him that cover.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, while it is welcome that Rochdale Boroughwide Housing has apologised, that is not good

enough in these circumstances? It has admitted to making assumptions about lifestyles and therefore not dealing with the issue, which has cost such a young life and shows an inherent lack of leadership. The law has to be changed to make sure that landlords, both social and private, cannot ignore the health risks of damp and mould.

Tony Lloyd: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend. The reality is that blaming lifestyles in a case like this is ridiculous; we know that the things that went wrong go way beyond individual decisions and lifestyles.

As I was about to say before my hon. Friend intervened, it is ludicrous to say to people that painting over mould is the answer. In my dim and distant youth, I lived in accommodation with mould, and when you walk into a building like that, you can feel it on your lungs. We know that children have much more sensitive lungs, so that combination cannot be blamed on lifestyle. The ventilation in the flat in this case was inadequate, but things could and should have been done about that. We know that the response of the housing association, RBH, was slow—as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) knows, RBH's responses are customarily slow.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this very important debate, and I agree that it is probably one of the more distressing debates that any of us has had to participate in. He has made an extremely important point: tenants repeatedly have to report issues to RBH, and sometimes those issues simply are not logged. In fact, I have an example from just today. Yesterday, I asked two members of my team to visit people who had made complaints about RBH. We wrote to RBH about those specific complaints, and today it acknowledged the complaints—which had been lodged four times by the tenant—and said that it had now opened a case. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is absolutely ludicrous that tenants are not being listened to by their housing association, and have to come to their Member of Parliament to get basic, decent housing standards?

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Member is absolutely right. Sadly, that kind of response—among other things—is what led to the death of Awaab; that failure to do the basics right is at the heart of what went wrong. I also had a response from RBH this week regarding a constituent, telling me that it had dealt with the mould problem in her property. One would think that at the moment, mould would be so high on Rochdale Boroughwide Housing's agenda that it would be its No. 1 priority, yet the tenant has come back saying that far from the work having been done, the mould is still there. She has sent photographs to confirm that point.

When the Ishak family went to a solicitor because they could not get justice directly through the housing association, RBH used a legal block, which automatically put a block on repairs. Most of us would regard a policy like that as ludicrous, but in this case it was more than ludicrous: it was dangerous. We know that many, many things went wrong, but the thing that probably got me most was that a letter from a health visitor was lost through bad IT. The health visitor recommended that the family be rehoused, yet that recommendation was never acted on. That is—well, people can choose their own words as to what it is, but it is pretty devastating.

[Tony Lloyd]

We know that many things have gone wrong. I say to the Minister that there needs to be an inquiry into RBH, even though we are two years on, because both the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton and I are of the view that RBH is simply not up to the job that we expect of it. That is not a criticism of many of the staff there: it is a criticism of the most senior managers, and indeed of the board. We need an investigation; even in recent days, whistleblowers—former employees—have talked about a culture of cost cutting at every turn, of bullying, and of failure to prioritise repairs. There is also the question of whether racism was involved, either institutional or more deliberate. Things like that have to be investigated.

This is not just a local issue. Mould does not exist just in homes and houses in the Rochdale borough; it is a nationwide problem, and we need nationwide solutions. The Secretary of State told us the other day that he believes that

“there are at least 2.3 million homes that fail the decent homes standard”—[*Official Report*, 16 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 714.]

We have to do something about that. There are 800,000 homes with damp, of which 400,000 are in the social rented sector and 400,000 are in the private rented sector. It is a problem with social landlords and private landlords, and we have to deal with them both.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) says, we need to look at having an Awaab’s law to say that certain things must be done, including automatically treating mould as a potential health hazard. When mould or damp is reported, that should lead to an immediate response from the landlord. Anything else would be ridiculous. When the duty to repair comes in, there has to be a recognisable timescale. It is basic good housekeeping and we should put it on the statute book, because we know it is not happening. I can tell the House that it will be very popular, because 120,000 people have signed the petition that the *Manchester Evening News* has launched. I applaud those people and the *MEN* for taking up the case, and I applaud the fact that now the case has been raised, we are beginning to address the issues that the family want addressed.

We also need to look beyond the immediate legal framework for housing associations. We have to ensure that if they fail to do the job we ask of them, other mechanisms will come in. Public health authorities, the local authority, the Regulator of Social Housing and other agencies all need to be involved. We have to ensure—this is a matter for the Minister and the Government—that they are properly resourced to do the job of controlling that we ask of them. We must not give them a legal duty and legal capacity unless we also give them the resource to undertake their role.

One thing is bizarre. Supposedly, the Regulator of Social Housing is there to protect our interests by ensuring not only that housing associations are run with financial prudence, but that they conform to the standards that we expect. However, six months after Awaab died, the regulator did an in-depth assessment of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing. It gave RBH’s governance a G1—the best grade it can give, which is a little surprising—and said:

“Based on the evidence gained from the IDA, the regulator has assurance that RBH’s governance arrangements enable it to adequately control the organisation and to continue meeting its objectives.”

My goodness—I am glad that it is not in control of anything that affects me directly this very day.

The regulator needs to up its own game. I say again to the Minister that we must give regulatory authorities the powers and the duties of the role that we need them to perform if housing associations and private landlords fail, but let us make sure that we give them the capacity as well. That means money, by the way, because without money we cannot employ qualified, competent staff.

I turn to the role of the Secretary of State, who is in Rochdale today. It will be nice for him to hear this from someone on the Opposition Benches: I applaud the fact that he has been proactive in the days since the coronial inquest report. He has done a number of things that we all agree to be progress in the right direction, but I am a little uncomfortable about one thing, if I may say so.

When the Secretary of State and I had an exchange in Parliament earlier this week, he spoke about the possibility of fines when housing associations go wrong. He was reported today as saying that he intends to take £1 million off RBH, from the affordable homes programme. It turns out that that may have been misreported, so perhaps it is important to set the record straight. I understand that what he proposes is simply that the money will be there for Rochdale but not for RBH; if so, I would be grateful if the Minister clarified that. Fining housing associations never seems to me to be the brightest way forward, because it penalises tenants. For residents in my constituency, it means repairs are not done and the homes they need are not available.

5 pm

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

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Wood.)

Tony Lloyd: It is rather nice to hear the chime of the Whips twice.

The important point I was making is that fines do not do the trick, so I hope the Secretary of State and the Minister will think again, because there are other ways around this. For example, it is right and proper that we look at the role of the controlling mind—the senior officers. Clearly, we can have different responses.

It is reasonable for the regulator, if properly structured, to be able to bring in disciplinary charges against senior managers. That is probably right because, as we know, the salary of the former chief executive went up to £170,000 a year at a time when the repair budget went down. It might have been sensible to consider cutting the salaries of senior officers on such occasions. When public money is involved, that is not an unreasonable proposition.

In the end, it may well be that in the most egregious cases the criminal law should be involved, but not for the charge of corporate manslaughter, which is directed only at the organisation, so not properly at the controlling mind. I have always thought that was a weakness in such a proposition, because we need those who are in control and make decisions to concentrate on what needs to be done. Certainly, the investigation into RBH needs to take place. We then need to think about right and proper controls on the controlling mind. In the end, the structure of RBH is simply not up to it. It cannot be in anybody’s interests to have a faceless executive board that has no reference to the wider public.

Let me share something with this packed Chamber. When I was about to complete my term as Mayor and police and crime commissioner of Greater Manchester, the chief executive of RBH approached me to see if I would think about taking on the role of chair of the board. Contemplate that: the chief executive instigating the appointment of the chair, who is responsible for discipline, pay and, ultimately, the hiring and firing of the chief executive. It is a very circular and dangerous little route, and I think we have to look at that structure, which is simply not fit and proper for the tenants we represent—the people of Rochdale. We must do better.

There is a good case now for saying that the executive board has had its time and ought to go. Those on the board did not do the job that we expected of them. They did not scrutinise, and after Awaab's death they did not insist on the kind of change that I would have expected. I have asked them for a timeline and have seen what they did, and frankly, it does not give them any cause for credit. In that context, we need to look at the temporary way in which that important housing association, which serves our community, is structured. In the longer run, the local authority has offered to take back control. That is supported not just by Rochdale Council's controlling Labour group, but by the Conservative opposition group, and it certainly has to be looked at. In the end, the advantage of a council is that it has elected people, not faceless bureaucrats, and we can challenge and get rid of elected people.

There has to be something about the tenants' voice. There has to be something that allows tenants to have a voice that is amplified and heard, so that when things are going wrong, they can be dealt with and taken up.

Those are a few semi-lengthy remarks. I could go on at greater length, but I will not. I will finish on this point: in the end, a little boy died. That is a little boy who should have been out playing in the streets, the parks or wherever in Rochdale, or wherever the family next move to live. That little boy should never have died. That little boy died because of an inadequate care of detail, and detail in this case really did matter. We must make sure it never happens again. Whether we call the legislation Awaab's law or not—I hope we might think about doing that—is an open question. What I do know is that the only way we can say to the family that we have really learned the lessons, and not just as the formulaic words “We have learned the lessons”, is to show that we intend to take the actions that will make a permanent change so that this can never happen again.

5.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this incredibly important debate and for his heartfelt contribution. Seeing a case like this has shocked all of us right across the country. To have it happen in his constituency must feel incredibly personal, so I am grateful to him for raising it with the House today.

I know that Members across the House and people right across the country were, and still are, completely horrified by the monumental failings that led to the death of a small boy before he even reached his second birthday. As Members have rightly highlighted, Awaab's parents had repeatedly raised their concerns about the dire state of their home with their landlord, the local housing association Rochdale Boroughwide Housing,

only for those multiple and repeated complaints to fall on deaf ears. Instead of acting on the clear evidence of damp and mould, Awaab's family were given no choice but to raise their young boy in a mould-infested flat. Rochdale Boroughwide Housing's failure to heed the family's pleas—pleas made by Awaab's father as early as 2017—was an awful dereliction of duty. If that failure in itself was not bad enough, the apparent attempts by Rochdale Boroughwide Housing to assign blame for the damp to the actions of Awaab's parents were insensitive and deeply unprofessional.

As was raised by the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), the comments about “lifestyle” were completely unacceptable. The housing ombudsman was absolutely right to squash that assertion, reiterating that damp and mould in rented housing is not a lifestyle issue. Members today have highlighted that prejudice. It is our duty, as Members of this House and as Government Ministers, to call out any behaviour rooted in ignorance and prejudice. I take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to the coroner, Joanne Kearsley, who undertook a vital public service in her meticulous piecing together of the facts behind this devastating incident.

Nothing will bring back the life of Awaab, but this investigation has given us all a chance to deliver some small justice to the parents of this young boy and to enact reforms that help us provide the high-quality social housing that this country desperately needs. I know I speak for everyone when I say that blaming nuances and technicalities will not wash. What took place in Rochdale were monumental, inexcusable failings. As the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities told the House last week, we have acted quickly and decisively off the back of the coroners' findings and are continuing to push for urgent explanations and action from those involved.

First, we demanded answers from the chair and the chief executive of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing. Much of the accountability clearly sits with the leadership of RBH. My right hon. Friend was spot on when he said that it “beggared belief” that the now former chief executive Gareth Swarbrick attempted to stay in post. While it is right that RBH recognised that the chief executive's position was no longer tenable, the housing mutual still has serious questions to answer about the basic condition of its housing stock. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) said that even today he is still discovering new cases of terrible conditions within that housing stock. I would be grateful if he, and other Members with such examples, shared them with us in the Department.

Tony Lloyd: We are very much in the same place on this. What is astonishing is that, two years on from Awaab's death, one would think that mould in these properties would be such a high priority that it would be hard to find. In fact, if the Minister walks around the estate with me or the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, she will see that mould is still there in huge quantities.

Dehenna Davison: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If we can gather further examples of this, it will help us in the Department.

Secondly, we have asked to see what concrete steps RBH is putting in place to immediately improve the living conditions of the tenants for whom they are still

[Dehenna Davison]

responsible. Thirdly, our ministerial team is planning to meet not only Awaab's family but those who live on the Freehold estate to stress the fact that Government are in their corner. Fourthly, the Regulator of Social Housing is considering whether this landlord has systematically failed to meet the standards of service required to provide for its tenants. The hon. Member for Rochdale asked whether this would constitute an inquiry. I would not want to commit another Minister, given that this would fall within their brief, but I will take this away and raise it with them urgently, and I am happy to engage with the hon. Member further on that point.

While our focus is absolutely on delivering justice for Awaab, all of us recognise that this is not an isolated incident; the problem is much bigger than one flat in Rochdale. As we gather here today, thousands of people across the country are stuck in homes that are not fit for human habitation. I believe the coroner spoke for everyone when she said that it was scarcely believable that a child could die from mould in 21st-century Britain. It was a damning statement that reinforced the urgent need for the kinds of reforms we have been working hard to get on to the statute book.

The reforms we are bringing forward—measures designed to hold landlords to account and make sure their tenants are treated with fairness and dignity—can help us make Awaab's death a watershed moment for housing in this country. And we are making progress. A fortnight ago, this House debated the Second Reading of the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, which is designed to learn some of the incredibly painful but necessary lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017—a tragedy that shone a terrifying spotlight on the dreadful experiences of tenants in that tower block ahead of the fire.

Grenfell tenants had spent years lobbying for basic changes to their building to make their homes liveable and safe. Their voices, like those of Awaab's family, were kept on mute before disaster struck, so we set about making sure that that never happens again, with a strengthened housing ombudsman service to empower tenants by making sure their voices are truly heard. As part of that, we changed the law so that residents can now complain directly to the ombudsman, instead of having to wait eight weeks while their case was handled by a local MP or another designated person.

It is one of the main jobs of the housing ombudsman service to make sure that robust complaint processes are in place, so that problems can be resolved as soon as they are flagged. In cases where landlords have clearly mistreated their residents, it can order landlords to pay compensation. If necessary, it can refer cases to the Regulator of Social Housing. Through the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, we are strengthening the powers of the regulator, so that where there is a serious risk to tenants and the landlord has failed to take necessary action, it can issue unlimited fines to rogue landlords, enter properties with only 48 hours' notice and make emergency repairs, with landlords footing the bill. The hon. Member for Rochdale asked about resourcing for the regulator. In this financial year, we have put in an additional £4.6 million to ensure that the regulator can operate, with more funding to come as we go further in designing how it will operate. I hope that provides him with some reassurance.

But all the reforms in the world will be worth nothing if people do not know that they have rights to begin with. Awaab's case, which never went before the ombudsman, shows that we can and must do more as a Government to promote this service and make sure it reaches those who need it. The Government have already run a nationwide "Make Things Right" campaign to raise awareness and tell social housing tenants how they can go about making complaints, and that has now reached millions of social housing tenants. We are working up another targeted, multi-year campaign, so that everyone living in the social housing sector knows their rights and knows how to exercise them. Where some providers have performed poorly in the past, they have been given plenty of opportunities to change their ways and start treating residents with the respect they deserve. I think that we are all in agreement that the time for empty promises has to be brought to an end.

The Department will help to do that by naming and shaming those who have been found by the regulator to have breached consumer standards or who have been found by the ombudsman to have committed severe maladministration. I am sure that many hon. Members will have seen that that work is already well under way, with the Secretary of State writing to all local authorities over the weekend to set out the expectation that they will act quickly to resolve poor housing conditions in their area. He also separately wrote to all providers of social housing and made it abundantly clear that our expectation is that they will take all complaints about damp and mould seriously, act swiftly to rectify them, and be prepared to respond to a request from the Regulator of Social Housing on the extent of damp and mould issues.

Finally, I will touch on standards. Although the pictures of damp and mould in social housing across the country leave us in no doubt that many properties fall well below the standards that we expect social landlords to meet, Awaab's death has made it painfully clear why we must do more to better protect tenants. Our Social Housing (Regulation) Bill will bring in a rigorous new regime that holds such landlords to account for the decency of their homes.

In the months ahead, we all have a chance to upend the appalling status quo and deliver a new deal for social housing tenants in the UK. I want to be clear that this is not about bashing all landlords and tarnishing them with the same brush—we have many fantastic landlords and housing associations in this country that treat tenants with the kindness and respect they deserve. It is about raising standards across the board and ensuring that every tenant has the chance to live in dignity.

I echo the praise of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for the incredible work of the *Manchester Evening News* in raising awareness. As the hon. Member for Rochdale said at the end of his speech, we have to do everything we can to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

Question put and agreed to.

5.16 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 November 2022

[DAME ANGELA EAGLE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Infected Blood Inquiry and Compensation Framework

1.30 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the infected blood inquiry and compensation framework.

It is a great pleasure to serve under you this afternoon, Dame Angela.

I thank the 30 MPs from across all political parties who have supported the call for this important debate, including the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, and the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). It is good to see so many Members here in Westminster Hall this afternoon.

I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on the infected blood inquiry and the report by Sir Robert Francis on the framework for compensation and redress for victims of infected blood. I welcome the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), this afternoon.

It is very disappointing that the Government did not find time for an oral statement in the House earlier this year when they published the report by Sir Robert Francis. I just say to the Minister that it would have been much better to have had a full debate on this matter in Government time rather than MPs having to use the Backbench Business Committee route. One thing that I have learned about campaigning in Parliament on this issue is that we have to fight for every small step forward and the Government usually have to be dragged to Parliament to explain themselves. In recent years, I think we have had more urgent questions on this topic than on almost any other.

Twelve years ago, a man named Glenn Wilkinson walked into my MP's surgery in Hull. What Glenn told me that day would prompt me to join a campaign, which was already decades old, to expose the largest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS and to fight for justice for those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal.

It is very important to remember that this issue is about individuals and the effect this disaster has had on their lives and the lives of their families. During routine dental work, which was conducted in hospital because he was a haemophiliac, Glenn was infected with hepatitis C, which is a virus that can cause serious and life-threatening

damage to the liver. The health service that was supposed to keep Glenn healthy and safe had given him a life-threatening disease.

Glenn was not alone in that respect. We now know that as a result of being given infected blood and blood products by the NHS during the 1970s and 1980s, over 3,000 people have already died. Even today, on average one person still dies every four days and thousands more people live with bloodborne viruses, such as hepatitis or HIV. Of course the haemophilia community was overwhelmingly effected, but many people who received blood transfusions, for example during childbirth or after a car accident, were also infected.

What Glenn sought from that meeting with me in 2010 was simple—it was the truth about what had happened to him and to thousands of other people, and to ensure that such a disaster could never happen again. Also, acknowledging the scale of this disaster would hopefully compel the Government to take responsibility for the ongoing effects: people left bereaved; people living in pain; people requiring care; and people who are unable to work.

Since Glenn and I met in 2010, I have been honoured and humbled to campaign alongside a whole movement of courageous individuals whose lives have been changed by this disaster and alongside many organisations, including Contaminated Blood, Tainted Blood, Factor8, the Haemophilia Society, Haemophilia Scotland, Haemophilia Wales and so many others. I have also been honoured and humbled to work alongside Members of both Houses of Parliament. I will just mention Baron Field of Birkenhead, who is now gravely ill but was there at the start of the fight for justice, and the decades of support from the late Lord Alf Morris.

I would like to say that over the years the response from leaders in the NHS, in the Department of Health and Social Care, and in the Government has been marked by contrition, openness and a fervent desire to support those living with the ongoing consequences of this disaster. Sadly, however, it has not been marked in that way, which is how a disaster became a scandal.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way and I thank her and the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), for securing this debate.

The right hon. Lady said there has not been enough contrition and she is absolutely right about that. I will raise the case of one of my constituents, whose father was a haemophiliac infected by HIV and hepatitis C. The feelings of shame that went with that, even though they were completely unwarranted, were very real at the time. My constituent's father died in 1995, so my constituent has been fighting for years; I will not name them today.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that there has been not only a lack of empathy, but far too many clerical errors along the way, and that it is now time for a formal apology? I welcome the letter I have had from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), which I will forward to my constituent later today, but I think we need to go a little bit further.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very grateful for that intervention and I absolutely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. Some evidence suggests that concerns

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

about the unfolding disaster were covered up at the time. Attempts to retrospectively reveal the truth via an independent inquiry were repeatedly resisted by successive Governments. It is only now, five decades after it began and after a very long-fought campaign, that we have the public inquiry underway, under the distinguished leadership of Sir Brian Langstaff. I was very pleased that, in advance of Sir Brian's inquiry concluding, the former Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), commissioned a study from Sir Robert Francis KC on a framework for compensation and redress for victims of infected blood to ensure that no time will be lost when Sir Brian publishes his final report in readiness for, as seems highly likely, his recommendation that compensation be paid.

Unfortunately, although the study results were sent to the Cabinet Office in March, the Government refused to publish it at that time. Instead, they promised to publish it alongside a full Government response, but the study was leaked to the press and the Government were then forced to publish the report in June. However, there is still no official response to Sir Robert's study. Five months on, we are still waiting for that full Government response. We very much look forward to what the Minister has to say today about Sir Robert's study, as the Government have now had a total of eight months to review the findings of the study. I hope the Minister will be able to provide a detailed response and firm commitments. Just to remind the Minister again, time is of the essence with this group. The inquiry will already have been running for six years when it concludes next year. Too many lives have been lost. Too much suffering has been caused. The victims of the contaminated blood scandal must not be made to wait any longer, either for answers or for action. What comes next from the Government should be marked by openness and a full commitment to deliver justice to everyone affected by this scandal.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way and for securing this debate. I have also heard from constituents who are extremely concerned about the amount of time it has been taking to achieve justice. Nobody is getting any younger waiting for the compensation that they deserve, whether they are immediately affected or part of a family that has been affected. Does she share my concern that justice increasingly delayed risks becoming justice denied?

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in saying that.

I now turn to the three things I seek from the Minister in his remarks. First, I want him to pledge today that the Government will implement the infected blood inquiry recommendations in full. That would clearly demonstrate the Government's commitment to deliver justice to the victims and their families. I also want him to confirm the date of the publication of the Government's full response to Sir Robert's study.

My second ask is for preparation. I want the Government—now—to prepare a full compensation framework. Please do not wait months to start this vital process and delay access to redress. Payments need to be made in a timely way and the process needs to be expeditious. We

need a clear timetable of action from the Government. Specifically, how will infected and affected people be involved in the establishment and operation of the compensation framework, just as they have been at the heart of Sir Brian Langstaff's inquiry? I want to echo the mantra: nothing about us without us. Can the Minister also confirm that work has already started on the setting up of the compensation framework in anticipation of Sir Brian's final recommendations? What resources have the Government allocated to the setting-up costs and the operation of the compensation framework? When will the process of registering bereaved parents, carers, children and dependants, to ensure that they receive compensation, begin? How will the Government address the needs of people affected by the infected blood scandal who fall through the gaps of the restricted frameworks for financial assistance available today—particularly for those whose medical records were lost or destroyed?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the medical records. There is also the case of individuals who were caring for people as well. They too must be compensated, because they went through years caring for people—perhaps a family member.

Dame Diana Johnson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Do the Government have plans and a timetable for introducing legislation to prevent compensation payments being reduced via taxation? Currently, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is merely asked to exercise its discretion. That must be looked at. I will also write to the Minister regarding a few other specific issues that have been raised with me, which I think will need further consideration by the Government.

My third ask is around payments. I would like the Minister to commit to paying fair compensation to all. So far, interim payments have been restricted to people infected and bereaved partners. While those payments are of course welcome, bereaved parents, children, and, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West has just said, carers, have not received any financial support for their loss. Those people must be included in the compensation framework, as Sir Robert set out clearly in his findings.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend rightly says, the interim compensation payments made to those infected and bereaved partners have huge holes in them, with too many people unable to access that support, including constituents of mine whose parents were killed by infected blood or blood products. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government must compensate both infected and affected victims of infected blood and blood products, and that the compensation arm's length body should be able to begin accepting compensation claims as soon as the inquiry reports?

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. We are not alone in saying that, because Sir Robert also says it very clearly in his findings.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: Yes, but I will then conclude, because I know that so many other people want to speak.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the right hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene, and for calling this important debate. At the beginning of her speech, she rightly mentioned all of the organisations that have campaigned to try to get justice for not only the victims but the families, particularly relating to compensation. I would also like to specifically thank the chair of Haemophilia Wales, Lynne Kelly, and her team, who have been relentless in their determination to get justice for all of those affected across Wales.

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. I echo those comments as well. To conclude, what I am looking for from the Minister is, “Pledge, prepare, and pay.” Those points are the criteria that the Government will be judged on, and how they can best bring this scandal to an end and ensure that survivors and affected families can finally access justice and receive compensation for the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, because there are a lot of Members who want to speak, I will suggest a voluntary time limit of around four minutes. That will ensure that everybody gets in.

1.44 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Thank you, Dame Angela. I first want to take a sombre moment to reflect on just how long people have been waiting for justice. It is now 40 years since information on the danger of contracting AIDS from contaminated blood products was first published. Those who received contaminated blood, and their families, have been waiting far, far too long. Many have passed away in the meantime. It is even six years since the inquiry was set up. I pay tribute to all those who have campaigned tirelessly, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), and Nigel Miller from my constituency.

Nigel reiterates the point made by my right hon. Friend that the Government should publish their response to Sir Robert’s study as soon as possible. He draws attention in particular to the need for compensation for the parents of the 300-plus children who died of AIDS, who should receive payments. Children also lost parents, often both parents, because the person who was infected was not told and so infected their partner. They too should receive compensation. Nigel also asks that I mention that interim compensation payments should be made urgently to the estates of those who have died, so that all those who were infected are recognised and some help can be given to those who continue to receive none. I hope the Minister will be able to respond on that point today.

I am not going to use up time in this serious debate to make cheap political points, but we all know about the websites that crash, the phonelines that go unanswered, and the utter frustration of waiting months and months. With only six months until the end of the inquiry, I urge the Minister to make absolutely sure that there are no further delays—to get everything up and running and ready to go, ready to receive the final detail when the

study is fully concluded and reported on. The Government need to have people ready; whether they are appointed or seconded from other Departments, they need to be fully trained. All the IT systems need to be in place, and all the work on the important question of how people can be contacted, with their details verified, needs to be done in advance. In that way, as soon as the final details are available, everything will be ready to run and nobody will face any further delays.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): Order. It has been drawn to my attention that there is a journalist in the Public Gallery using a recording device. With the best will in the world, that is not allowed. These proceedings are recorded and made publicly available. I ask that person to turn that device off. If you do not, I will have to ask the officials to escort you out. I do not want to do that. Please turn it off and get the publicly available feed. Could you do that, sir? Thank you.

1.47 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on all the work she has done and the partnership she has built with the infected blood groups, and on her work with the Haemophilia Society that supports the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, which would not have existed or been effective without her. I thank her very much.

When I was at university between 1963 to 1966, I read some of the monographs by the Institute of Economic Affairs. Some were interesting; some, I thought, were right. One that came after that time, in 1968, was wrong. It was called “The price of blood” and argued that a commercial market in blood markets could be useful in some cases. Richard Titmuss, the founding professor of social administration and then of social policy at the London School of Economics, where both my mother and my wife studied, wrote “The Gift Relationship”, which was published in 1970. I recommend the medical classics review published in the *BMJ* 2011;342;d2078—I apologise for giving a reference—where Parita Mukta gives a retrospective review of that work. Richard Titmuss considered how the altruism of the gift of blood—one person the donor and one the receiver, each not knowing the other but knowing how the system worked—did an immense amount of good.

My mother was the first person in our family to have an HIV test, because she had had a blood donation during an operation. She suspected that some of her children and grandchildren used her toothbrush, so she wondered if she was going to infect them. In 1975, my wife received eight units of blood after a medical emergency. That type of exposure is something that we are aware of, but what kindled my interest was when a close friend, a haemophiliac, received factor 8 when everyone thought it was a good prophylactic. It was backed by the Haemophilia Society and others, but it turned out to be disastrous, for reasons that the inquiry is going into—I will not get involved in that.

We have each had constituents affected by infected blood. Some, if they are lucky, are still alive, but others have died. During the time that people have been ill, they have suffered all kinds of indignities. The worst that has been described to me by constituents is that every time they go into hospital, there is a clinician they

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

do not know and they are asked how much alcohol they consume, because liver disease can be an indication of infection or of heavy drinking. I have argued that people ought to be able to have a flag to say, “Don’t ask these questions of this person, because they have to answer them several times a year and it is deeply wrong.” People ought to be able to say, “Look at these three or four paragraphs to know who I am and what my condition is. Now treat the thing I’m bringing to you. Don’t start suspecting me, as others have, of drinking excessive amounts of alcohol.”

I believe that the Government are beginning to respond in the right way. I have often had disagreements, even with my family, about drawing a distinction between people affected by infected or contaminated blood and those affected by normal procedures going wrong. On a scale that is now being recognised, we owe a debt to the judge and his helpers, we owe a debt to Sir Robert Francis, and we owe a debt to the families, who with dignity and persistence brought this debate to the House. What the Minister says today will not be the end of it, but I hope it will be a good step along the way. I am grateful to him for being here. If we need to have another debate, I will put my name to it again.

1.52 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela.

I will open by paying tribute to the people affected by this disaster: the people infected and their families, those who have campaigned for years, either as infected people or in support of them, and all those who have simply had their lives changed. It takes a great deal of energy to campaign for 50 years and still not have received the limited justice that financial compensation can bring. The victims have faced stigma and lost opportunities to work, to have a family and to have insurance. We have heard about all those things in detail and cannot hear about them today, because the debate is simply going to be too short.

It is important that we remember the 2017 debate, in which I spoke. I had been a surgeon for over 30 years before I came to this place. The scandal began to leak out in the ’80s, and I remember the impact that it had on me. I was shocked at the idea that, having trusted something that was signed off by a Government or agency as safe, I might have transfused someone—we were pretty profuse with blood at that time—to save their life or simply to deal with post-surgical anaemia, and I might have destroyed their life. That had a big impact on me. It changed my practice: I stopped using a scalpel and started using argon-assisted diathermy. My theatre staff would moan about how obsessional I was about not having to transfuse patients by not losing blood in the first place. All patients gained from that, but a clinician who is dealing with someone who has been in a big car accident, or who has been stabbed or shot, does not have that luxury. Blood transfusion is not something that clinicians can avoid, and I am depressed about the fact that, five years on from the 2017 debate that led to the inquiry, we are still only at this point. We thought that we would be able to resolve the issue by now.

Absolutely everyone in this Chamber will welcome the completion of the evidence sessions, the interim report and especially the delivery of interim payments to the people infected or their bereaved partners. However, as has already been pointed out, bereaved parents and children are not included; nor are those who may have been unpaid family carers, who may not fall into one of those groups but who cared for years for someone who is now deceased and who will not even in the short term be eligible for care payments through an infected person.

I am merely repeating what the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) said in asking: when will the registration of all those affected begin? What work is being done on establishing the full compensation framework so it is ready to go the moment the decision is made? When will the Government publish their full response to the report by Sir Robert Francis? At the moment, we are talking as if all those recommendations are accepted, and the community is trusting they are all accepted, but we do not actually know that.

I would like to have had a proper debate in the main Chamber. It warranted the full time so we could explore the detail. It is important that we remember that in 2017, it was not what any of us said in the debate that achieved the inquiry. That was agreed to in the morning, because the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) realised it would have been the first time the Government lost a vote because of the cross-party strength of feeling. It is therefore important that all MPs in this Chamber and all the supporters of this campaign in the House continue to work cross-party, as we are seeing here, to make sure the Government do not drag their feet and deliver the justice that is long past time.

1.56 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Dame Angela. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing the debate and thank them for all their work on this important issue. I pay tribute to everyone campaigning on this too.

As we know, during the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of UK patients contracted HIV, the hepatitis virus, or both from contaminated blood or blood products. I want to raise the case of one of my constituents, who was one of those patients. She has now been recognised officially as a victim of the contaminated blood scandal, but getting there has been, in her words, “a long, upsetting and depressing process”, both in an administrative sense and in terms of her health. For many years, she was denied any recognition or support due to lost medical records. She said there were times when she decided it was best for her to just admit she was beaten and move on. Thankfully, she persisted and is now rightly recognised as a victim. Despite being cured of hepatitis C several years ago, she has been left with a number of other extremely serious health issues. She still suffers today, not only medically but emotionally, due in part to the stigma attached to hepatitis C and blood-borne viruses. There can be no place for stigma in relation to health in a supportive and understanding society.

Over the years, the strain on my constituent and her family, including her children, has been enormous and their lives have been profoundly affected. She told me she often wonders how different her life would have been if she had not required a blood transfusion at birth. I am sure that she, like everyone else affected by this, just wants conclusion and closure. The Government's written response of 5 September notes Sir Robert Francis KC's independent study, with options for a workable and fair framework of compensation for those infected and affected by the tragedy. It also notes the recommendations by Sir Robert and Sir Brian Langstaff, chair of the infected blood inquiry, of making interim payments of no less than £100,000 to all those infected and all bereaved partners currently registered on UK infected blood support schemes, as well as those who register between now and the inception of any future scheme.

The Government have confirmed that infected individuals and bereaved partners who are registered with any of the four UK infected blood support schemes received their payments by 28 October. However, as the Hepatitis C Trust has pointed out, those are only interim payments, and this is just the start of the process of setting up the full compensation scheme.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady also support the notion of the interim scheme being extended to families and carers, such as my constituent Justine Gordon-Smith, who cared for her father, Randolph? She has experienced considerable personal trauma, and the same must be true for hundreds and hundreds of families throughout the UK. Does she agree that they deserve to have their problems and the issues they have experienced acknowledged by the Government too?

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Lady makes really important points on behalf of her constituent.

Furthermore, the Government have still not responded in full to Sir Robert Francis's report on the compensation framework. Will the Minister say today when that response will be published? The infected blood inquiry is ongoing and is due to report in mid-2023. It is vital that the Government act as swiftly as possible when the inquiry's final report is published. That is the very least that victims such as my constituents deserve.

2 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing this important debate. The breadth of representation here today shows that this scandal affects all corners of the United Kingdom and continues to damage many innocent lives.

I know from conversations with my affected constituents the truly devastating impact the scandal has had on their lives. I am glad that while we wait for the publication of the infected blood inquiry's findings, scheduled for summer 2023, we have started to pay interim compensation payments to those directly affected. The publication in June of Sir Robert Francis's recommendations for a framework for the compensation and redress for victims laid out the benefit of such payments, and it was backed up by Sir Brian Langstaff's report on interim payments

the next month. It is welcome that, following those reports, the Government rightly announced in August that an interim compensation payment of £100,000 will be made to registered infected individuals and bereaved partners. Those are all steps in the right direction. Many of us in this Chamber have been pushing for them on behalf of our constituents for many years.

I echo other Members' sentiments: there is still so much more that we can do. Sir Robert Francis published 19 recommendations, yet so far the Government have adopted just one, on interim compensation payments. An issue of primary importance that is directly affecting some of my constituents in Southport is eligibility for the payments. One particularly heartrending case involves a constituent of mine who lost both his boys when they were young. No amount of money can ever right the loss of one's child. We must remember that, at best, the payments can seek to right in a legal sense the wrong done. The moral argument for making such a payment is clear, yet no payment has been made. My constituent has been through unimaginable grief.

Charlotte Nichols: I want to support the hon. Gentleman's point by raising a case from my constituency. I too know from conversations with those affected the profound and lasting consequences for the children of those affected, who had to deal not only with their bereavement but with being bullied at school during the most brutal period of AIDS stigma. It is appalling to me and any right-minded person looking at the interim payments that have been made so far that the children of those affected are not yet eligible for financial support. Will the hon. Gentleman join me and others in ensuring that the Government include the children of those infected as a matter of urgency?

Damien Moore: I agree with the hon. Lady. Many years later, my constituent is still going through a terrible time with the trauma. The psychological effects do not leave people. He is still ineligible for compensation for the death of his children. It is unacceptable.

Why are the Government yet to adopt Sir Robert's fifth recommendation, which would extend eligibility and would include my constituent and many others? They are yet to give an emphatic statement in support of the recommendation, and have merely stated in a written answer that they fully expect Sir Robert's wider recommendations to inform the inquiry's final report. They need not wait for the final report; they could simply adopt Sir Robert's first recommendation. Regardless of the inquiry's findings, there is a strong moral case for a publicly funded scheme to compensate the victims.

It is good news that the first payments for those who are eligible have landed in their bank accounts. The Government are making good progress on redress, but there is still more that we can do. I support all 19 of the recommendations and I urge the Government to adopt them at the earliest opportunity. We all continue to stand up for payments for our constituents, because they have suffered in this scandal and they need to be justly compensated. We will continue to fight until we feel that justice has been done. These are real people who are suffering across all our constituencies, and we have a moral duty to do all we can to right these wrongs.

2.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is indeed the personal stories that bring home the full horror of this scandal. I pay tribute to my constituent John Prior, a severe haemophiliac who was infected with hepatitis C through contaminated blood products at Yorkhill Children's Hospital. His own mother injected him with the products until he was able to do so himself at the age of 11. Of the 35 children treated with contaminated products at the hospital alongside my constituent, 19 were also infected with HIV. It was only aged 20 that he discovered the truth of what had happened via his employer, who had known a full year before he did.

The consequences for John have included advanced liver fibrosis and significant mental health issues. At one point, he received letters four times in 10 years to say that he may have had variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease. He suffered from the severe side effects of treatments that were helping only a small number of patients. He has described how he and his fellow victims feel that they have been used as guinea pigs, and have been living on death row since they were infected. My constituent is a similar age to me, but has already lived significantly longer than many of his peers who did not survive the impact of the scandal.

John's asks, and mine, are exactly as set out so ably by the all-party group chairs, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), whose fantastic work I pay tribute to and thank them for. As the right hon. Member said, the asks can be neatly encapsulated in the three Ps: pledge, prepare and pay. This is about fixing the interim compensation scheme, which is welcome but which must be extended to the groups who are excluded unfairly. It is about publishing the full response to Sir Robert Francis's report and committing to its full implementation, and accepting responsibility for what happened. It is about ensuring that the compensation is administered by an independent body, and that the work to administer it gets under way now so that it can be up and running as soon as possible. It is about making good on the commitments on non-taxation, and heeding Sir Robert's remarks on increasing support payments as soon as possible.

There are so many things that the Government can and should be doing, as others have set out. I simply ask the Government to be as nimble and generous as possible as they proceed, and to ensure that they do not inflict any needless bureaucracy on people who have already experienced the worst type of state negligence and recklessness over several decades. John's story is a personal tragedy for him and his family. The collective story of these amazingly brave and dignified campaigners is a national disgrace. We cannot undo the appalling harm that was done, but by building on the excellent work of Robert Francis and Brian Langstaff we can deliver some sort of justice, and we must.

2.7 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. It is fantastic that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) has secured such an important debate. I will try to bring

some human context to it. Plenty of facts and figures have been mentioned, which are 100% correct, but the victims, families and carers are furious. This happened almost half a century ago and onwards. They have every right to be not just frustrated but appalled and disgusted about the way they have all been treated and about what has been described as a cover-up.

This is not just a scandal and a tragedy but the biggest cover-up in the history of the NHS, and it is yet to be recognised by the Government. Lord Robert Winston described the scandal as the

“worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS.”

Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major said that in the eyes of the Conservative Government, those affected by the scandal simply had “bad luck”. Still, one person dies every four days in this nation as a result of this cover-up. That is not bad luck. Fancy telling somebody who has lost their parents, or somebody else in their family, that it was bad luck. What an absolute disgrace.

We have had the recent inquiries. The infected blood inquiry was called in 2017—five years ago—and it is certainly far from over. Of course, most Members have brought up the many things that are required. This is not just about those who suffered; it is about their families, the carers—everyone who has been affected. For example, what consideration have the Government given to the lifelong effect of infected blood on child development, as well as life expectancy? It is so damaging, but we hear very little about it.

A number of questions have been raised, but in the time that I have left, I will talk about the time when Sean Cavens, who is 41, came to see me. He was furious. I was unaware of the scale of the issue, and ignorant of the contaminated blood situation. He explained how difficult it had been. He gave me a tie—black for the dead, red for HIV victims and yellow for hepatitis C victims. Many of us have the ribbon on our lapel. Since then, I have been privileged to be part of the campaign and part of the APPG, seeking justice. This is an absolute outrage—it really is. We have to start making the feelings of the individuals heard—the feelings of the people who have died because of contaminated blood, who cannot speak for themselves. I hope that, in the very near future, we can come up with the answers to all the questions that my hon. Friends and colleagues have mentioned, and that we get these people sorted out as soon as possible.

2.11 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for securing this debate, and for the time that she has spent in her parliamentary life on this issue; it would be well spent on this issue alone, I feel. I also pay tribute to all the campaign groups out there—Tainted Blood, the Contaminated Blood Campaign, Haemophilia Wales, which has been mentioned, and others—which have not just kept the campaign on the parliamentary agenda, but have given help, support and advice to people going through this. That point was made to me again last week by my constituents. Those organisations have been a lifeline, and I thank them on behalf of my constituents.

I urge the Minister in as strong terms as I can to extend interim payments to bereaved parents and families. We are all relieved that some people have interim payments,

but all who have suffered must get them, because they are still living with this every day. I, too, want the Department to get on with setting up the systems up now, so that final compensation, once the inquiry is complete, can be paid as fast as possible, with no further delays.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): On the issue of the enhanced payment for patients with hepatitis C, stage 1, that scheme is backdated to 2019 in Northern Ireland, but in the rest of the UK it is backdated to 2017. The British Government today have begun acting in the devolved space around budgets, because we do not have a Government, of course, in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Member agree with me that the British Government should urgently backdate the payments in Northern Ireland to 2017, which is what everybody else has?

Jessica Morden: I thank the hon. Member very much for that intervention, and hope that the Minister will address it in his closing remarks.

Like other hon. Members, I want to speak about my constituents. I will base my remarks on the Smiths from Newport, who lost their wonderful son Colin in 1990 after he received infected blood products from a prison in Arkansas. Colin was one of 380 children who were infected with HIV. Colin's mum and dad were among the youngest parents who lost children to this scandal, and they are in an ever diminishing group of bereaved parents who are still alive; many waited for compensation and justice that never came. Over my years as an MP, it has been one of the greatest privileges to get to know the Smith family. Every time I meet them—I met them last week—I am taken aback by their fortitude, dignity and bravery in the face of the disgraceful injustice that they have lived with over all these years. I watched their evidence to the inquiry again last week, and I just do not know how they did it. It is shameful that, other than payments through the Skipton fund, they have never been properly compensated for the loss of their son. It is not about the money; it is about the acknowledgement of a life. Colin may not have been a breadwinner, but he could have been. Like other bereaved parents, they were excluded from the interim payments scheme. Although they themselves were not directly infected by toxic blood products, there is no metric under which the Smiths and others like them could not be considered victims of this scandal.

I do not have time to go through the multitude of indignities suffered by these families, which other hon. Members have alluded to. People painted graffiti saying "AIDS dead" on the side of the Smiths' house, and they had to move home. Mr Smith lost his job and was not able to get proper employment because he was the father of a child with HIV. The family also suffered financial strain, accruing debt as a result of visiting Colin in hospital, arranging transport and so on. There has been no formal acknowledgement of the indignities that Colin suffered, and he never lived to receive a formal apology or compensation.

The campaign will always fall short because no money can compensate the families, but compensation is still crucial if we are to acknowledge the depth of the failure of the British state. These families were let down in the worst possible way. The Smiths are now in their 70s.

Although it is not about the money for them, I want them to live in comfort and to be able to support their surviving children in the years that they have left. That is not too much to ask. We cannot wait more years for this. It is vital that the Government prepare for further recommendations, so that there are no additional waits. The drawn-out process of contacting the solicitors of core participants to gather information for the compensation framework should be undertaken as soon as possible.

My ask for the Minister on behalf of the Smith family is simple. Do not make us call more debates. Please do not make us bring these families to London again and again. Please do not make us tell these deeply painful stories about our constituents again and again. No more warm words from Front Benchers. Please do as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said: pledge, prepare and pay. There is no time, and families have waited far too long already.

2.17 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair and to serve under your chairpersonship, Dame Angela.

As others have, I pay tribute to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. It is a privilege to be the vice-chair, but the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) has led the group superbly, as has the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). The Minister should be under no illusion: they have been relentless, and there are Members of this House who will join them in relentlessly campaigning on behalf of the victims of this scandal until justice is delivered. This tragedy continues to devastate lives, and we will continue to work cross-party to press the UK Government to pay fair and timely compensation to the bereaved families of the victims.

As others have said, it was campaigning, political pressure, legal pressure and media pressure that secured the infected blood inquiry in the first place. It was not handed to us; it had to be campaigned for relentlessly—I will continue to use that word—before the inquiry was given. The evidence from it is completely and utterly shocking. Andy Burnham, the former Health Secretary, called the scandal "a colossal failure", saying in his evidence that there

"may even be a case for asking the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to consider charges of corporate manslaughter",

and before then, in his last speech in Parliament—the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) referred to this—Andy Burnham called the scandal a

"criminal cover-up on an industrial scale."—[*Official Report*, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1072.]

I was there; it was a Backbench Business debate called by the APPG on haemophilia and contaminated blood.

I pay tribute to all those affected by the infected blood scandal, and all the campaigners who have done a tremendous amount over the years to bring the issue forward. Two constituents came to my surgery on Saturday: Cathy Young, who lost her husband Davie, and Cathy's daughter, Nicola Stewart. Nicola has asked me to read the following words, which sum up the situation when she was growing up:

[Chris Stephens]

“So growing up with a dad with haemophilia who contracted through no fault of his own was a massive secret. My sister and I were not made aware of dad’s infection as dad and mum didn’t want anyone knowing. I now know this was down to the stigma of the infection. I just knew something wasn’t right with dad’s blood so his toothbrushes and razors were all kept away.

Then I hit my teens and things became a lot clearer as dad was going through treatments. After two rounds of attempts to clear it, it failed. My dad didn’t fail; he gave it his all. He was so ill through it and mentally struggled through his treatments. After the second time it failed, this is when I believe we lost dad. He was never the same man again. He went into total self-destruct. It was so painful, as we just couldn’t help him. He didn’t want the help. It isn’t until now that I understand why he hit the self-destruct button. It was horrendous. At a time when I was going through my exams, it was terribly hard to concentrate on my future at school when so much was going on at home.

Mum and dad’s relationship fell apart. Dad moved out and Mum tried her best to continue to pay the mortgage. I was working part-time at this point as I was still at school. I worked as much as I could and gave Mum every penny I earned to help pay the mortgage, as did my older sister. It was a lot for only being 17. We couldn’t keep up, so we lost our home.

Dad died when I was only 23. Far too early to be losing a parent. He has been gone 13 years now and I still cannot speak about him or what happened without crying—as you witnessed yourself on Saturday. I always explain it like I’m stuck in the grief process...I can’t get past the acceptance stage as he died through no fault of his own and no one has been held accountable for it. It is a cruel form of grieving when the answers are out there but no one has been interested in looking or even listening.

My dad has missed out on so much. Myself and my sister both walked down the aisle without my dad by our side. I have two children who never met their grandad but know of him as the grandad that lives in heaven. My dad didn’t see me graduate when I finally went back to education in my 30s. All the big things that your dad is supposed to be there for. He didn’t get to do it through no fault of his own.”

That is one family’s situation, and the daughter of a victim explaining what they went through. That is why we will continue to be relentless until justice is delivered. I pay tribute to Nicola for sharing those words with me. It takes a lot for a constituent to write to a Member of Parliament. I know we are not all scary—I certainly do not believe that I am scary—but people are sometimes scared to write such words.

We urge the Government to allow all those affected by contaminated blood to register with the support schemes, and to ensure that payments are available to bereaved partners, parents, children and carers. I hope the Minister will confirm today that the issue of carers will be looked at and respected, because so many people have cared for years for people going through this.

The UK Government must publish a response to Sir Robert’s study immediately, and must ensure that the arm’s length body can begin accepting compensation claims as soon as any inquiry reports. I hope the Minister will confirm today that the Government intend to respond to the study; it is important that they do. It is frustrating; a response to the study was promised, but we are still waiting for it.

As the former Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), said in a written statement,

“This analysis cannot be completed hurriedly but officials across government are focussing on this so that the government can be ready to respond quickly to the Inquiry’s recommendations”.

As far as I am concerned, we have waited far too long, and I think many hon. Members agree. The other recommendation was that an arm’s length body should be set up to administer the compensation scheme. Will the Minister give us an update on that? Again, that is important.

I am conscious that I must leave time for other Front-Bench spokespeople, and for the Minister to answer the questions. However, I want to make it clear to my constituents, and to all Members of this House, that I will join the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and the Father of the House in relentlessly pursuing this issue until justice is delivered.

2.25 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I too pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), for securing this vital debate, and for fighting for justice for those affected by the contaminated blood scandal. All the Members who have made important contributions today campaign tirelessly to get affected constituents the justice that they deserve. I pay tribute to them all, and to Members who could not join us today, for keeping the pressure on the Government and delivering for the victims of the scandal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) highlighted that many people have been waiting for decades, and that over 300 children have died of AIDS. We must look at how we can help those children who are still living with the condition. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) highlighted her medical experience. The treatments that we have seen over the years, and being able to spot contaminated blood, are vital, but what about the people who were contaminated before those medical breakthroughs?

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) highlighted her constituent’s case, and said that this is a long, upsetting and depressing process. We have to remember that people are still living with this mentally. They are suffering daily. Think about the toll that lockdown will have had on the mental health of these people. Every day that compensation is delayed is another day that they suffer.

The hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore), and a number of other hon. Members, said that we must think about the carers: the people who cared for their family members and loved ones. Where is their voice, and where is the justice for them? No amount of money will change the fact that many people had to bury their children. We have to remember the children. That was highlighted eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who passionately reminded us that, for all the statistics around the scandal, we are talking about people. We are talking about real lives, which continue to be impacted daily.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) highlighted her work, and that of fantastic voluntary and charity groups that support the many families affected. Even within their financial constraints, they still do a fantastic job supporting many families up and down the country. I also pay tribute to those organisations and groups. The Haemophilia Society, the Hepatitis B Positive Trust, the Hepatitis C Trust, the Sickle Cell Society and the families of thousands of

people up and down the country continue to raise awareness. They contributed to this inquiry, and have fought for justice over the past years and decades.

This is the first debate in which I have represented the Opposition Front Bench in this Chamber, but this is a topic in which I take a deep personal interest. My late mother suffered from sickle cell anaemia, and I am a sickle carrier. As a result of the disease, my mum required regular blood transfusions, which were vital to her. Without them, her life would have ended a lot earlier—she died when she was 60. The transfusions helped to ease her sickle pain, and ensured that she was able to see me and my sisters grow up, see her first grandchild, and live her life.

Today, vitally, all blood is screened to avoid the risk of the transmission of serious infection. I am pleased that that has helped more people come forward to give vital blood. Every so often, I get a ping from NHS Blood and Transplant—a call-out for people to come forward and give blood. It is vital that people give blood and know that that blood will be safe.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady is making an important point. It reminds me that it was only two weeks ago that, in the Jubilee Room around the corner, there was a plea for people, especially from ethnic minorities, to register to donate blood and, potentially, organs, as many do not need them all. I agree that it is critical that people be aware of the importance of being donors, and of the gift of donations.

Florence Eshalomi: I totally agree with the Father of the House; that is so important. As I say, every so often, we get the ping from NHS Blood. At that NHS blood donation event, we called for a bus in Parliament, so that we could get more people here, including parliamentarians, to give blood.

Thorough screening of blood has come alongside the emergence of synthetic clotting factors for haemophilia sufferers, which eliminates the risk of contaminants from important treatments. Together, these treatments have significantly improved the safety of blood treatments in the UK, and patients now have a low risk of contracting serious diseases such as hepatitis or HIV from blood. Sadly, treatments in the '70s and '80s put patients at unacceptable risk of contracting serious and life-threatening diseases. In the '70s, people with bleeding disorders had transfusion treatment replaced with the new product factor concentrate, which was then produced by pooling and concentrating tens of thousands of donors' blood. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire highlighted, just one sample was enough to contaminate the entire batch, and could risk infecting thousands of people; that caused significant concern.

The tragic result was that thousands with blood and bleeding disorders were infected with deadly diseases, which had and continue to have a significant impact on their lives. Without modern, effective treatment, diseases such as HIV were acutely fatal and came with horrific consequences. Heartbreakingly, many of those infected have not lived to see today's debate and the prospect of proper justice at the end of this inquiry. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North highlighted that more than 3,000 people have died, and statistics from the Terrence Higgins Trust show that between the start of the inquiry in July 2017 and

February 2022, some 419 infected people have died. While we await the conclusion of this report and inquiry, one person dies every four days. This is about the human element of the inquiry; every day that we delay this compensation is justice denied to those people.

The impact of the scandal goes beyond the immediate medical concerns. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) highlighted the stigma. We must remember the stigma that those with HIV and AIDS suffered during the '80s and '90s. Disgraceful racist and homophobic stereotypes were widely perpetuated, and victims were persecuted and shunned for suffering from this horrific disease.

Diseases associated with contaminated blood often impact not just the immediate victim, but their families and friends. As the primary carer for my late mother, I remember some of the challenges in the late '90s in making sure my mum got the right treatment when she was suffering. Many of the loved ones of the victims will have gone through similar challenges in trying to get the right treatment, and victims are often misunderstood and continue to be stigmatised for having a disease.

The inquiry is finally coming to a close, and interim payments have begun to be made. It would be remiss of me to pre-empt the recommendations of the inquiry. However, I hope that the Minister has heard loudly the concerns raised by a number of Members this afternoon, and those concerns raised in other debates. I hope that he can fully address some of those clear asks when he responds. As Dame Elizabeth Anionwu—the first ever sickle cell nurse—pointed out, it can be very hard for people suffering with infectious disease, including blood contamination, to come forward because of the stigma.

Sir Robert's report was published on 7 June 2022 and made 19 clear recommendations. It is frankly disgraceful that only one of those recommendations has been followed up. Sir Brian acknowledged that there is a moral case for the interim payments to be made. I ask the Minister to respond to a number of those claims and ensure that the victims get the payments they deserve. We cannot ignore the impact on the families and friends of victims, who fought alongside them for this justice. Can the Minister provide assurances that those groups will not be ignored when the Government finally respond to the inquiry?

The contaminated blood scandal had a life-changing impact on tens of thousands of victims who were promised the hope of effective treatment. It can only be right that they see the justice they deserve as soon as possible.

2.34 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this extremely important debate, Dame Angela. I say to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who speaks from the Labour Front Bench, that the Government absolutely hear loud and clear what has been said today. Although I am just a few weeks into the job, I have been enormously struck by the sheer weight of grief and experience that has led us to this point today and will lead us to our final destination, hopefully next year.

As so many others have, I pay tribute to the family members, the sufferers, the carers and friends of the people who were involved in this awful incident so many years ago. I also congratulate the APPG. I have listened

[Alex Burghart]

to the debate, and this is Parliament at its best. A tragedy that affected all parts of our United Kingdom has seen very personal stories reflected by Members of Parliament, and has brought parties from different sides of the political divide together to represent their constituents and seek justice. I pay tribute to right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken up for their constituents today.

I am confident that Sir Brian Langstaff's infected blood inquiry, whose report we expect in the middle of next year, will deliver the answers that the victims of infected blood have waited so long for, and will make recommendations for compensation and wider recommendations to ensure that such a disaster can never happen again in our country.

The infected blood inquiry has heard first hand of the terrible suffering experienced by the victims of infected blood over many years, and the terrible financial hardship faced by many as a result of their infections and the burden of caring for stricken loved ones. This Government commissioned Sir Robert Francis KC to produce an independent study with options for a workable and fair framework of compensation for those infected and affected by the tragedy. As everyone knows, Sir Robert's study was published in June of this year.

Following Sir Robert's detailed evidence given to the inquiry in July, the chair of the infected blood inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, delivered an interim report to the Government. In his report, Sir Brian made the following recommendations:

"(1) An interim payment should be paid, without delay, to all those infected and all bereaved partners currently registered on UK infected blood support schemes, and those who register between now and the inception of any future scheme;

(2) The amount should be no less than £100,000, as recommended by Sir Robert Francis QC."

On 16 August, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), then Minister for the Cabinet Office, wrote to Sir Brian to confirm that the Government had accepted his recommendations in full and that interim payments of £100,000 would be made by the end of October to all infected beneficiaries and bereaved partners registered with the four national support schemes. I am happy to confirm that those payments were made across the whole of the UK by 28 October. The payments are tax-free and will not affect any financial benefits or support an individual is receiving.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), then the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, said when announcing those interim payments, they are the start and not the end of a process to respond positively and rapidly to the inquiry's likely recommendations about compensation. On the comments made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), we understand that this is limited justice, but we hope to fulfil that limited justice as quickly as possible. I also pay tribute to her for her work as a surgeon.

Although it would be wrong for me to try to second guess the likely recommendations of the independent inquiry, I fully expect Sir Brian to make recommendations about broader final compensation for the many victims of infected blood. In his interim report, Sir Brian referred

specifically to bereaved parents and children and said that the moral case for their compensation was "beyond doubt". He recognised what he called the "greater degree of personal individualisation"

necessary in determining compensation for that group of victims, the complex nature of which made it difficult to include the group of bereaved victims in an interim scheme intended to be introduced as rapidly as possible. There can be little doubt that once he has considered the arguments in closing submissions, Sir Brian's final report will make recommendations about compensation for a wider group of people.

Sir Robert's study was commissioned so that the Government would be ready to address quickly any recommendations on compensation made by the inquiry. Officials are now working together across Government to produce options for compensation that can be quickly matched to the inquiry's recommendations. On the point made by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) at the start of the debate, we have the resource in place across Government to do that work. We are doing it with the intention of being able to respond very swiftly to the inquiry's findings when they come.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am listening carefully to what the Minister is saying, but I just want to be clear. When will we see a response to Sir Robert's review, which the Cabinet Office received in March? We are now eight months on. I know there has been political turmoil for many of those months, but if the civil servants were getting on with that work, on what date will we see the publication of the Government's response to a report they have now had for over eight months?

Alex Burghart: I understand the right hon. Lady's point. Sir Robert's findings have fed into the inquiry. We are now preparing for the inquiry's final findings and we will respond as quickly as possible.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I have perhaps interrupted the Minister as he was about to answer the question I am about to ask, but the Cabinet Office asked for the Robert Francis inquiry, not Brian Langstaff. Robert Francis's report has been received by the Cabinet Office. Sir Brian Langstaff's report is expected in the middle of next year. Are we seriously expected to believe that we will not hear anything more on the Government's reaction to the Sir Robert Francis report before the middle of next year?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend the Father of the House is absolutely right that it was the Cabinet Office that asked Sir Robert to conduct the work. The findings have now been fed into the inquiry and are being considered. I draw his attention to the remarks that Sir Robert made on the BBC's "Today" programme on 17 August. He said that the Government were considering the matter and that it was very complex. He said that they had to wait for Sir Brian's recommendations because his own work was feeding into that inquiry, and he had given options for them to consider.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The Minister fairly quotes Robert Francis. It would be possible for us to text Robert and ask whether he would like to us to say the following, but

if the Minister can give some responses to some of Sir Robert's recommendations before the middle of next year, would he be willing to consider doing that, please?

Alex Burghart: I am very happy to have that conversation. The Minister for the Cabinet Office and I are meeting the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North in the coming weeks, and I am sure that will be a central part of our discussion.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am sorry to press the point, but in March, when the Government were given a copy of Sir Robert's report, they made it very clear that they were going to publish it at the same time as the Government response. They wanted to publish the full response at the same time. Is the Minister now saying that that was not what was intended and that any Minister telling Parliament that that would happen was actually misleading Parliament?

Alex Burghart: I hope that the right hon. Lady will appreciate that I was not the Minister at the time; I have been in post for just a few weeks and I do not want to say anything that is incorrect. However, my understanding is that following the work done by Sir Robert, Sir Brian called Sir Robert to give evidence and then he himself made recommendations about interim payments that the Government immediately responded to. I also hope that the right hon. Lady will bear that in mind when considering the Government's likely response in the future. The Government said that they would respond very swiftly on interim payments and they did so. Before the end of October, as we pledged, the interim payments were all received by those affected. I hope that she will take that as an indication of our desire to move as quickly as possible, in keeping and in line with Sir Brian's ultimate recommendations.

Dr Whitford: I am also a member of the APPG who has been part of the campaign throughout and took part in the tabling of parliamentary questions that were repeated ad nauseam to get a response. What was talked about in the Chamber was a response from the Government to the Sir Robert Francis report that would come at the same time as the publication—the reference was not to Sir Brian Langstaff's call for interim payments nor to Sir Robert's, but to the Sir Robert Francis report. The Minister must surely understand that given the 19 recommendations in the report, victims and their families want to know whether they can trust what is coming down the line. The idea of keeping them waiting for another seven or eight months is just cruel.

Alex Burghart: I understand what the hon. Lady is saying, but it is very important that Sir Brian's findings are the final word on this matter and that the Government can respond to them as quickly as possible. The work that Sir Robert has done has obviously informed an enormous amount of work across Government to make sure that we can respond very quickly when the findings are produced in the middle of next year.

Ian Lavery: I am sure that an enormous amount of work is going on, but if we consider the recent trend of one individual dying every four days since 2007, my calculation is that if we have to wait until the middle of next year, in excess of another 50 people, all victims of

contaminated blood, will pass away before they see even a penny of compensation. As a Minister of the Crown, the Minister cannot accept that that is fair to the victims. What message will he give to them?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman will have heard me pay tribute to everyone who is going through and has been through this awful experience. However, I hope he will appreciate that it is very important to ensure that what the Government might say now does not cut across what Sir Brian intends to say in his final report. Everyone can have confidence that that will be the final word and that the Government will then have the opportunity to respond quickly, to get everyone affected the support that they deserve.

Chris Stephens: Can I gently suggest to the Minister that he needs to be careful here? There is already a significant lack of trust in the Government among those impacted. Sir Robert's study made a number of recommendations, but we have not heard the Government's response to those recommendations, including on the setting up of an arm's length body to administer the compensation scheme. Can he confirm that the Government accept that recommendation?

Alex Burghart: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will know that that is one of the things that Sir Brian is looking at and that we will respond to Sir Brian's findings. We take the matter enormously seriously and we understand the real desire for maximum speed; I know that people have waited for a very long time to get what the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire called limited justice. However, the truth is that I very much hope and believe that we are in sight of that endpoint now.

Chris Stephens: I am trying to be polite, Dame Angela, but significant recommendations from Sir Robert's study were put to the Government. Not all of them are about compensation moneys; some of them are about the administration of any scheme, so that the Government are ready. Can we have some sort of response from the Government about those aspects of that report, please, because that will build confidence and do away with the lack of trust out there?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say that we are working across Government to make sure we are in a position to respond very quickly to what happens with Sir Brian's report in the middle of next year. I understand that there are questions of trust for historic reasons, but I hope that the fact that the Government have been able to respond quickly, promptly and to our own timescales on the delivery of the interim payments will do something to show that the Administration are absolutely committed to doing the right thing.

Dr Whitford: Not all of Sir Robert Francis's recommendations are about the future and a final compensation scheme. Some relate to the support schemes that people are dependent on now. Why should action on those recommendations be delayed until the middle of next year when people face a cost of living crisis now? Surely if the Government responded to the more acute recommendations, saying they want to wait longer, would that not at least be a start?

Alex Burghart: I will say to the hon. Lady what I said to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North a few moments ago: my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and I are meeting the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North in the coming weeks and I would be happy to make sure that that is at the top of the agenda.

Dame Diana Johnson: It is really not acceptable to say that the Minister will meet the APPG as a way of deflecting from the important points that have been raised in the Chamber and the promises that have been made by successive Ministers in the Cabinet Office to this group of people who have suffered for far too long. We were told there would be a Government response to Sir Robert's review. That is what we were told; that is what everybody is expecting. We were never led to believe that we would have to wait until the middle of next year when Sir Brian produces his final recommendations. The Cabinet Office put forward that work to have the review so it is ready to go as soon as Sir Brian makes his recommendations. It is totally unacceptable that the Government are behaving in this way.

Alex Burghart: I hope the right hon. Lady will not see it as deflection that we want to meet her and discuss these matters with her. I am sorry that she is dissatisfied with the response today. She will have a chance to discuss this with the Minister for the Cabinet Office and me in coming weeks, as she knows, because it is in her diary.

Dr Whitford: That will be in private.

Alex Burghart: For the sake of *Hansard*, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said that that meeting will be in private, but I am quite confident that at least one of the people participating will talk about it in public afterwards and that it may be the start of a longer dialogue.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Dame Angela, can we take what the Minister says as a definite maybe?

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): It is probably not a matter for me, but I observe that in here we are on the public record, so the Minister might wish to make some comments that he knows the Public Gallery and anyone who watches our proceedings will hear, rather than relying simply on a private meeting.

Alex Burghart: Thank you, Dame Angela. As I say, this is the continuation of a conversation that I very much look forward to having with the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and the Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Florence Eshalomi: I hope the Minister will appreciate that a number of people who have come today to listen to the proceedings, the people who are watching and those who will watch on playback may not feel reassured that the Government are taking the matter seriously. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned how people do not want to have to travel again to relive and retell what they went through. I hope the Minister will understand that a number of us do not feel that his response has been acceptable.

Alex Burghart: I hear what the hon. Lady is saying, but I want to assure her that we take the matter extremely seriously. That is why the inquiry has been set up, why we have engaged fully with it, why we responded immediately to the call for interim payment, why we paid those payments on time and why we will continue to do what is necessary to see that justice is done.

I will now turn to the point raised by the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) on backdating payments for Northern Ireland. I am afraid I will have to write to him on the issue, because I will need to consult colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Northern Ireland Department of Health. I will write to him as swiftly as I can.

Colum Eastwood: I am grateful for that commitment. Can the Minister bear in mind that we do not have a single Minister in Northern Ireland over any devolved area right now, and that people in Northern Ireland are getting a bad deal as a result of this scheme? The Government today published a budget in the devolved space for Northern Ireland, so what I am asking for is very doable for this Government. Please, please take it seriously.

Alex Burghart: I understand what the hon. Member is saying, and I will write to him as swiftly as I can.

A couple of Members raised the matter of destroyed medical records, and the inquiry is considering that closely. We expect the inquiry to make findings on this important issue, and we will respond to them as soon as we can after the inquiry reports.

To those individuals and others who are out of scope of the interim payments we have already made, I emphasise that the interim payments that the Government have announced are the start of the process, not the end. There is much work still to be done. Sir Robert's compensation framework study has been warmly welcomed by the inquiry, and without prejudicing the findings of the independent inquiry, we fully expect Sir Robert's wider recommendations to inform the inquiry's final report when it is published next year. Until that time, the Government will continue to work in consideration of the broader recommendations of the compensation framework study so that we are ready to respond promptly when the inquiry concludes its work, as was our intention when we commissioned the study.

There is a point I wish to make that bears much repeating. No sum of money can ever compensate for the turmoil that infected people and their loved ones have faced, but I hope that the interim payments and the further work being undertaken by the Government demonstrate that we will do everything in our power to support them.

2.57 pm

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. I think it has been strong and clear in terms of the strength of feeling across political parties in this House about what needs to be done.

I have to say to the Minister that I am deeply, deeply upset by his closing remarks and the fact that we have had to wait eight months to have a Minister in front of MPs to answer our questions about Sir Robert's work. We all welcomed that piece of work, and we welcomed the fact that the Cabinet Office was looking to get a

compensation framework in place and ready to go for when Sir Brian makes his recommendations next year. We absolutely support that, but the fact is that we were told very clearly that we would have a Government response to that review so we could see what the Government's thinking was and know what direction they were going in, ready for next summer. To be told that we have to wait until next summer to find out the Government's view of the compensation framework that Sir Robert has put forward is absolutely—I am speechless, actually. I am so upset by this.

We fought tooth and nail to get a public inquiry. We fought tooth and nail to ensure that compensation was ready to go for next year, and now we are being told this by the Government. It is absolutely outrageous. I will not leave this here. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) made it clear that we will relentlessly pursue the matter. I am sure that every Member in this Chamber will relentlessly pursue the Government to do the right thing. The way the Government are behaving with this group of people is not right. It is outrageous, and we will not leave it at this.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the infected blood inquiry and compensation framework.

Social Care

[RUSHANARA ALI *in the Chair*]

3.1 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of social care within local communities.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me this debate, and it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Ali. I am particularly pleased to see the Minister back in her rightful place, although she will know that now she has taken on responsibility for care, she will have me on her back for as far ahead as the eye can see while she is doing this job.

Much of what I want to say will be unusually positive about what social care offers communities. I am conscious that the social care debate is often surrounded by crisis and difficulty—quite rightly—but there are so many positive aspects to it that I want to touch on. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care, I am struck by how underrated the positive effects of good care can be, not least economically. Given the recent decision to delay the introduction of the payment cap, as recommended in the Dilnot report, I should also take the opportunity to urge the Government to take wider action. I hope they take the chance to conduct a full review of the whole system, not just funding. I welcome the extra money committed by the Chancellor, but it is clearly yet another temporary solution to try to tide local authorities over. I hope Ministers can be creative in finding a stable and sustainable way of increasing the money available to the care sector. I have my own ideas, but this is not the time for them.

Funding is one key issue, but I emphasise to the Minister that it is not the only one. I will identify four other areas where we need new thinking if we are going to “fix” social care, to go back to the phrase used by the last Prime Minister but one. The first is the workforce. It needs to be bigger, by more than 100,000, eventually. To achieve that, it needs to be better paid and have a higher status. I would like to see, for example, nurses in the care sector on the same “Agenda for Change” pay scales as nurses in the NHS. Otherwise, we will continue to lose nurses from the care sector to the NHS.

The second area is the voice of care within the new integrated care boards. This change is a chance to improve the integration of health and care systems without creating another massive bureaucracy, which is too often the effect of integration. At the moment, I fear that the new ICB system is settling down with the voice of care providers being relatively unheard. Local authorities are clearly key players in the system, but so are other providers.

The third issue I hope Ministers can concentrate on is the use of technology, both for sharing information between different parts of the system and for giving those in receipt of care more control over their daily lives. We are not exploiting widely available technology anything like enough, and the prize for getting it right is that more people will be able to stay in their own homes for longer. That is much better for them—it is what the vast majority of people want—and of course for the taxpayer. Given both those imperatives, I think it ought

[*Damian Green*]

to be a high priority. It is particularly important for people living with dementia, which is a subject worthy of its own debate.

The fourth issue that I want to bring to the Minister's attention, which expands on the idea of people being able to stay in their own homes for longer, is the provision of housing. I have written to the Minister and the Housing Minister about how we are failing to build anything like enough supported housing for older people, particularly in the form of retirement villages. Our provision is something like 10 times smaller than that of comparable countries. That is another issue that is worth a debate in itself, so I will refrain from going down that rabbit hole, but it could be a hugely important contributor to improving our care system.

The Minister will be aware that the current problems facing the NHS would be greatly reduced if there were a proper plan for social care. Each month, there are 400,000 delayed discharges from hospitals because of a lack of social care support. That has knock-on effects on NHS capacity and on ambulance delays. Something like 13,000 patients should be receiving care in the community but are blocked in hospital beds. At the end of April, some 540,000 patients were waiting for assessments, care packages, direct payments or reviews, so fixing social care will take some of the strain off the NHS and free up capacity for others. In that regard, I am delighted that the Minister is responsible both for care and for hospital discharges. Having those responsibilities in the same ministerial portfolio is an outbreak of sanity and common sense in Whitehall that we should all welcome.

I promised to be more positive than is usual in social care debates, so I want to spend a few minutes highlighting the value of social care to local communities. First, it has a big economic value to local communities. Skills for Care found that it contributes £51.5 billion in added value to the economy of England every year. Although half comes from the wages of social care staff, a large proportion of the economic value comes through harnessing local business to support the provision of social care through access to transport, maintenance, activities and equipment. That creates a cycle of local spending, benefiting local industries and communities.

I am not just talking about professional care. Carers UK estimates that unpaid care provision saves the economy £132 billion a year, which would otherwise be a cost to the state. In other words, it saves an amount approaching what we spend on the NHS every year. The thought of that money being added to taxpayer-funded provision is unthinkable.

Care provides economic value by supporting people to live independent lives. It gives people the ability to control their own finances and in many cases gets them back into employment. Of course, it contributes to overall economic provision. That in turn reduces the number of people relying on benefits, which reduces the welfare budget.

Interestingly, Skills for Care's figure of £51.5 billion contrasts with the amount that local authorities spend on care, which was £21.4 billion in 2021-22—less than half the economic value. That is instructive, because the wider public perception is always that social care is a drain on public finances, but it is not. It actually has a net economic benefit.

As I said, the care workforce is one of the key areas where we need investment—not just in the recruitment of staff, which is often the focus of these debates, but in the retention of staff. Social care is about much more than having to fix a broken system or act as a bed-clearing service for the NHS. It is about ensuring that there is support to enable older and disabled people to lead the best lives they can, and with as much control over their own lives as possible. The social care workforce is key to enabling that.

Some 1.79 million people work in social care in England, in something like 39,000 different establishments. The problem of recruitment and retention is evident, because we have 165,000 vacant posts in social care, which is the highest number on record and has increased by more than 50% in recent years. The word "crisis" is overused, but it can be legitimately applied in this case, not least because the number of posts filled has dropped by 50,000—the first drop ever in the number of social care workers.

Average vacancy rates across the sector are nearly 11%, which is twice the national average, at a time when we are finding it difficult to fill posts in many areas of the economy. The reasons are not hard to find. A care worker with five years' experience is paid 7p per hour more than a care worker with less than one year's experience, and the average care worker pay is £1 less per hour than that of healthcare assistants in the NHS who are new to their roles. It is not surprising that people in the social care workforce are turning to employers who offer more attractive pay rates.

Because of the issue with pay, the providers of social care increasingly have to rely on short-term agency staff. That has an impact on the standard and continuity of care, but it also has a high cost. A market report by Cordis Bright estimates that there will be a 157% rise in agency costs, which will increase from £56 million in 2021-22 to £144 million in 2022-23. If the trend continues, agency staff costs are likely to increase by between £175 million and £220 million by 2023-24. I suspect that the huge cost will result in services being handed back to local councils by providers, which simply cannot cope with such staffing prices.

A report by Public Policy Projects, which I chaired, recommends a number of things that would help the situation, including raising the minimum wage for social care workers, mirroring the NHS "Agenda for Change" pay scales, and positively promoting social care as a technically skilled and fulfilling career. I would support something similar to the Teach First scheme in order to get some of our brightest and best young people into social care and to raise its status, so that people can see that it is fulfilling work and will provide not just a job, but a career. In the coming months, I hope I can persuade Ministers to commit to bringing forward a full workforce plan for social care, with pay progression in line with the NHS, better terms and conditions, training and other structures.

Apart from that, the sector needs support through long-term funding. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have understood the importance of a long-term strategy and funding base for the sustainability of social care.

It is always a pleasure when Ministers move straight out of Select Committees into ministerial jobs, because there is a public record of everything they think about individual issues. That is particularly helpful with the

Chancellor: while he was Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, it produced numerous reports setting out the need for an additional £7 billion a year for social care. That is why I have high hopes in this policy area.

I welcome the fact that the Government have outlined their intention to provide £500 million in discharge funding from the NHS to social care. I hope we receive more detail on that and about when, where and how that funding will be made available.

Just like every other sector, social care is suffering from inflation. According to a cost of living survey by Methodist Homes, 94% of its community schemes had heard members or residents express concerns about the rising costs of living, while some 49% of respondents said that increased transport costs were a significant issue among their members.

Social care providers expect their energy costs to increase up to sixfold next year. There is a real danger that rising energy costs could significantly reduce the number of services available and will have an immediate impact on discharges from hospitals into the community.

The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services has reported that nearly half of all directors of social care services are not sure that unpaid carers will be able to cope financially with the inflation problem. That could lead to more demand for professional social care services. I urge the Government to guarantee that adult social care providers are defined as a vulnerable sector in respect of the energy bill relief scheme after April 2023.

An analysis by the County Councils Network found that inflation could cost councils £3.7 billion in extra costs if they keep social care services running. I fear that is not sustainable and the quality of care will decrease. That is just one example of why it is unfair to rely on local council tax payers to fund so much of social care. The pressure should be taken off local budgets and social care should be funded through national taxation. That would be both fairer among different areas of the country with different tax bases and, in the long run, much more sustainable.

The Government made a number of welcome commitments in their “People at the Heart of Care” White Paper, but that was published nearly a year ago. Many of us are eagerly waiting for those commitments to be put into practice. As I have said, the care sector is not only a completely essential service in a civilised society but a positive economic and social force in local communities throughout the country. We need a coherent plan to address the many problems of the sector, but we should never forget that those who need care are often the most vulnerable among us, and those who provide the care are often the best of us. They deserve the best we can offer them.

3.18 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) on securing this debate.

It is about time that we celebrated the huge value and potential of social care, and about time that we see the fact that we are an ageing society, and all living for longer, as something that we should be excited about, proud of and look forward to, not something that is

simply a problem and a drain. However, we must also be realistic about how we get from where we are to fulfilling the full potential of social care.

I shall make three broad points today about the value of social care, first, to those who draw on it, secondly, to the communities they live in, and thirdly, to the wider economy—a point the right hon. Member for Ashford rightly touched on.

At its best, social care is about ensuring that every older and disabled person can live the life they choose, in the place they call home, with the people they love, doing the things that matter to them most, as Social Care Future has so powerfully argued. Put simply, social care is—or should be—about ensuring that every older and disabled person can live an equal life to everybody else. That is its intrinsic value.

I would go further. We all benefit when we have a decent social care system, not just because we may all end up using it or relying on it because of having to care for and support our own parents, but because we ourselves may live to require social care. This is not going to happen to somebody else: it is going to happen to us all, so we had better get it right.

I also argue that our communities massively benefit when we have a decent system of social care. We lose out when older and disabled people cannot make their full contribution in the workplace, in our voluntary and community organisations, and in being part of our lives, like everybody else. It is a tragedy that so many older and disabled people feel shut away and shut off from the rest of their communities. They lose, and we lose too.

I am optimistic about social care. I believe that in the 21st century—the century of ageing—social care is an essential part of a modernised welfare state and our economic infrastructure. But I am also realistic about the challenges we face. The truth is that social care is in a worse situation than it has ever been, after a decade of cuts, the pressures of covid and now the cost of living crisis.

I recently heard directly from members of the Care & Support Alliance about the quite frankly awful choices facing users and their families: disabled people trapped in their own homes because they cannot afford fuel to go out, and their care packages are being cut; older people skipping meals or only eating cold food because they do not want to use their gas and electricity; tens of thousands of people waiting for care assessments, seeing their health worsen day by day; thousands more trapped in hospital, where neither they nor their families want them to be; and families having to spend even more money on care, or cutting back support and giving up their own jobs because they cannot afford the help they need for their loved ones.

As the right hon. Member for Ashford said, at the heart of it all is the absolute crisis in the care workforce. Vacancy rates are up by more than 50% in the past year. There are a record 165,000 vacant posts. Employers are simply unable to recruit or retain the staff they need, especially when people can earn more in hospitality and retail. The Government have still failed to produce a proper, long-term workforce plan. I was very interested in the right hon. Gentleman’s comments—I agree with them—about how we could look at how the care workforce might link up with “Agenda for Change” so that we can get a decent workforce system and plan across health and social care.

[Liz Kendall]

Recently, we finally heard details of how the £500 million social care discharge fund will work. I understand that £300 million is going to the integrated care boards and £200 million to local authorities. How much of that will go directly on paying more for the workforce? We cannot do the discharges without the staff. We may need beds, but it is really about the staff. Will the Minister say more about that, because it is an absolutely essential point?

Alongside what I call the intrinsically moral case for care is the increasingly strong economic case. I believe that our care system is, like the NHS, the bedrock of our national prosperity. If the care sector is struggling, other parts of the economy will begin to break down, as those who need care see their own health suffer and the demands on families and friends mount. Having more and better paid care workers in every village, town and city will probably make the biggest contribution to levelling up the economy and getting growth into every part of the country, because we know that care workers do not save their money but spend it locally. Not every rural village can have a solar factory, but every village, town and city needs decently paid care workers. That would make a huge contribution to women's equality too. We know that the workforce is predominantly female, often from black and minority ethnic communities, and always low paid.

First, then, having more and better paid staff could help to boost jobs and growth. Secondly, it is about helping the rest of us stay in work. Almost 5 million people are already juggling work and care. That is one in seven of all workers. Half have to give up work because they cannot get the support they need to look after their loved ones. Families lose their incomes. Businesses lose their talents. The Government lose their taxes. We would not accept half of all new parents completely exiting the workforce, so why do we accept it for family carers?

The truth is that in modern Britain social care and, I would argue, childcare are as much a part of our economic infrastructure as the roads and the railways. They should be at the heart of our economic policy and strategy for growth. That is why Labour has made improving care one of the four missions of our industrial strategy. We understand its centrality to the workforce and economic growth. We are calling for a 10-year plan of investment and reform, and a new deal for care workers to ensure they get the pay, terms and conditions, training and career progression they need. We need to improve access to care early on, because the quicker people get help, the more likely it is they will stay living independently for longer.

Thirdly, although we will always need care homes, we need a fundamental shift toward prevention and early intervention, with a new principle of "home first"—putting the home first every time. That includes greater housing options, home adaptations, technology to help people to stay living independently and, critically, work with local voluntary and community groups to do things such as tackle loneliness and isolation. People do not always need to turn to the state for the help and support they need.

Fourthly, for disabled people, who are all too often completely cut out of this debate, social care is not all about helping them to get up, washed and dressed—vital

though that is. It is about them living independently, having fulfilling lives and having the same sort of access to friends and work that everybody else takes for granted. We need to ensure that working-age adults with disabilities have greater choice and control over their support and personal budgets. We need to make direct payments really work and give people the power to change services, as they know what is best.

Finally, I want to talk about unpaid carers—an issue that has been going on for years and years. Carers say they have to battle their way around the system, telling their story time and again. They need joined-up services; one point of contact, information and advice; proper breaks; and flexibility at work. I think the family friendly and flexible working agenda for the future is absolutely about people in their '50s and beyond, and I am not just saying that from a selfish perspective.

In conclusion, in the 21st century and in one of the richest countries in the world, the goal of ensuring that all old and disabled people live the life they choose should not be regarded as extraordinary. It is the missing part of the jigsaw of the welfare state. It was never part of it when it was created, because back then life expectancy was 65 and women stayed at home. We need to change our thinking so that social care is at the heart of the modernised welfare state and an essential part of our economic infrastructure. We cannot do it all at once, but with a 10-year plan of investment and reform we can achieve it.

I have to say that it beggared belief that the Chancellor, when Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, said that his greatest regret as Health Secretary was not putting in place a long-term plan for reform, but then put the final nail in the coffin of reform in his autumn statement. I urge the Minister to make the case again. Yes, we need to tackle the immediate challenges, but we need a long-term vision to be implemented. I look forward to her comments.

3.29 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Helen Whately): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) on securing this debate. I thank him for all the work he does as Chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care and for his long-standing dedication to the social care sector—not least by calling debates such as these. I look forward to more. I thank him for his words earlier. I took away from what he said a phrase that sounded very similar to him saying, "I've got your back when it comes to social care." His dedication to social care is with good reason. Social care is too often overlooked, yet it is so important. It is important to people across the country, important to those who need care to live and vitally important to their families. Social care employs around 1.5 million people across the country and it is a significant part of the economy.

I agree with so much of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford has said this afternoon. I agree with him on the importance of the social care workforce, including the important point about status. I agree with him on the importance of the voice of social care within integrated care systems, not just with regard to local authorities but care providers too. I agree with him about the potential of technology, particularly to help people stay in their own homes, and on housing for

older people and those of working age who need care. That in itself would be worth another debate. Indeed, I have recently spoken to our colleague the Housing Minister about that and I know she is interested in taking the matter further. He also rightly talked about the economic value of social care and the importance of unpaid carers, as did the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) today and on other occasions.

I will pick up on some of those points and talk about what we in Government and I as Social Care Minister are doing, starting with what social care does and what it is for. Social care starts with the person who needs care and, closely alongside that, those who may care for them unpaid—usually a family member. Our ambition in Government is to make sure that all those who need care get it and get it in a way that works for them, meeting their own needs and circumstances to a standard that we would rightly expect in our society.

Care should enable people to live their lives to the full, with the greatest possible independence, while recognising that caring can also place great demands on unpaid carers. We need to be able to support carers themselves to live their own lives, alongside caring for those they love. While we are on the subject, it is also worth mentioning the significance of social care for working-age adults and remembering that social care is not just about older people living in residential care homes. That is often what people think about but it is far from it. It is about helping many thousands of people earlier in their lives to live life to the full. Many of us will only really consider social care when we or a loved one need to draw on that support—often in a time of crisis. However, we should not wait until that point to realise how important social care is to all our lives.

The scale of the social care workforce stands at around 1.5 million people and the size of social care in our economy is valued at around £50 billion per annum. We all know that health and social care are intrinsically linked. While I am always determined to talk about the value of social care in its own right, we also know that one of the reasons we have around 13,000 patients in hospital at the moment who could and should be somewhere else, usually their own home, is because of the pressures on our social care system.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford mentioned funding. I will say to him and the hon. Member for Leicester West that last week's autumn statement showed that the Government recognise the importance of social care. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) announced up to £2.8 billion of additional funding in 2023-24 and up to £4.7 billion in 2024-25, specifically for social care and also discharge from hospital into social care. That was the biggest funding increase that social care has ever had and that is despite the difficult decisions that had to be made in the autumn statement to ensure broader economic stability.

In the run-up to that statement, the Government had listened to the concerns of local government and took the difficult decision to delay the planned adult social care charging reform from October next year to October 2025. Crucially, the funding that was in place for that reform over that period will be retained in local authority budgets to help them meet some of the current pressures in social care.

The substantial funding settlement that social care received in the autumn statement will do three things. First, it will help social care afford the extra costs the system faces, which I have heard loud and clear from local authorities and care providers. Secondly, it will ensure that more people can be discharged from hospital when they are ready to leave, and that they get the social care and recovery support they need. That builds on the £500 million adult social care discharge fund, which will go to local care systems this winter. Thirdly, and importantly, it means we can proceed with ambitious reforms to the social care system. That involves investing in the workforce, better data and technology, and increasing the oversight of the social care system. That will improve access and quality. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford urged us to take wider action, and I assure him that we are doing that.

Our 10-year vision for reform was set out in the "People at the Heart of Care" White Paper, and we are already acting on that. In fact, some of the work I kicked off last time I was social care Minister has already made great strides. For instance, the introduction of social care assurance at local authority level, led by the Care Quality Commission, will be launched next year, giving local authorities, the public, hon. Members and the Government much more insight into the vital part that local authorities play in commissioning and overseeing the provision of social care in their areas. The next steps for us are to set out in more detail the plan for some of the other areas of reform—most notably the workforce, data and care records, technology and, with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, housing.

I assure hon. Members that our reforms are ambitious and will lay the foundations for generations to come. Our wider reforms to social care will go hand in hand with the establishment and development of our integrated care systems. Forty-two ICSs across the country bring together NHS organisations, integrated care boards, local authorities and, importantly, care providers in integrated care partnerships. We are ambitious about doing that crucial thing that many hon. Members have talked about—joining up social care and the health services more effectively.

In the work that I am doing as Minister with oversight of hospital discharge—I see myself as important in joining up the two systems at the level I am at—I am already looking to integrated care systems and their leaders to be the lynchpins in joining up the NHS with social care more effectively than ever before, so that people are cared for in the best place for their needs. That is often not hospital. In turn, that ensures that hospitals have space for those who really need to be cared for there.

I want to spend a moment talking about the workforce in the near term. Our passionate, compassionate, skilled and dedicated social care workforce, including local authority social workers and occupational therapists, makes such an important contribution to our communities. I truly want social care to be a rewarding career with clear opportunities for progression, where people are rightly recognised for the important work they do. In our reforms, I want to address some of the problems that my right hon. Friend raised for those working in social care—for instance, career progression.

Right now, in recognition of the shortages in the workforce and the vacancies, we are working hard with the Department for Work and Pensions to promote

[Helen Whately]

adult social care careers to jobseekers. Earlier this month, we launched a new domestic national recruitment campaign. Anyone who has been watching “I’m a Celebrity”—some colleagues may have been—will have seen some of those very effective adverts. I look forward to them helping more people go into social care in the short term. We are also doing some work to support international recruitment to help with some of the near-term pressures on the workforce.

I want to talk a bit more about carers, because for most people care begins at home with their families. Many millions of people across the country care for loved ones, and I recognise what that commitment means for them and their own lives. In fact, today is Carers Rights Day, and I am therefore glad that the Health and Care Act 2022 gave carers new rights. They include new duties on NHS England and the new integrated care boards to involve carers in their public engagement; new provisions on the integrated care boards to involve carers in relation to some of the services that they oversee, such as prevention services and the diagnosis, care and treatment of the person for whom the carer cares; and responsibilities for NHS trusts to involve patients and carers, including young carers, at the earliest opportunity in discharge planning for people who may need care and support as outpatients. Discharge is a moment when there can be a real worry of significantly greater burdens on carers, so involving carers in those decisions is important. I should also flag the importance of respite and support for unpaid carers, which is recognised by the nearly £300 million of funding this year for respite services through the better care fund.

I thank all hon. Members for their well-informed and thoughtful contributions to the debate. We are deeply committed to supporting adult social care, the millions of people who rely on it for themselves and their families, and those who work in it. I am committed to supporting social care, reforming social care and making sure that, as a society, we recognise social care for what it is: essential, important and truly valued. Finally, I thank everyone providing care on the frontline—people who go the extra mile, day in and day out. I thank them for what they do.

3.41 pm

Damian Green: I will cheer everyone up by not taking the opportunity, which I think would be available to me, of winding up for the next 45 minutes; I will simply

make two brief points that have come out of the debate. I am very grateful for the commitment made by the Minister.

The first is the degree of consensus that underlies this difficult subject. Frankly, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said almost nothing I disagreed with, and I suspect that I said almost nothing that she disagreed with—and, of course, I agreed, definitionally, with everything that the Minister said. We all know what the problems are and what we need to do to solve them. It is a matter of political will and drive.

That is the other, less cheerful, point. I have personal reasons for my interest in the issue. My father died of dementia, and therefore spent the last few years of his life in the care system, which inspired a deep personal interest, as it does in many other people. However, I was responsible for this matter when I was First Secretary of State. That was five years ago now, and five years later we are still going round the same course again.

Having arrived at the end of the previous debate, on the contaminated blood scandal, I was struck that colleagues across the House were complaining that things were moving very slowly. I set up that inquiry in Government. That problem obviously goes back a long way, but the solution started five years ago, and it clearly has not got there yet. When we have such intractable problems, too often the whole machinery of government—this is not remotely an attack on Ministers—moves incredibly slowly, even when there is large-scale political consensus on what we need to do.

Finally, Godspeed and good luck to the Minister and her ministerial colleagues, because this issue needs to be driven by Ministers. Across the House and within the political parties, we do not particularly disagree about the solutions, but the issue needs the active pursuit of energetic Ministers if the necessary changes are to be made. Those changes are desperately deserved, both by those who provide care and by those who receive it. I wish all the best to the Minister in dealing with this.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of social care within local communities.

3.45 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 24 November 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Postmaster Suspension Pay

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): The Bates et al v. Post Office Ltd common issues judgment in March 2019 found that clauses in postmaster contracts allowing Post Office to withhold remuneration during any period of suspension were unreasonable under the Unfair Contract Terms Act. Post Office was not entitled to rely on them.

Before March 2019, postmasters were not remunerated during the period of any contract suspension. Post Office has subsequently changed this policy, resulting in postmasters continuing to receive remuneration during a period of suspension.

As part of its efforts to address historical operational issues and implement improvements to its company culture, Post Office is setting up a compensation scheme to provide compensation to postmasters who did not receive remuneration during a suspension period. Post Office will write out to current and previous postmasters to offer them compensation based on the remuneration they were not paid and any associated consequential losses they may have suffered.

The Government will provide funding to Post Office to cover compensation to postmasters for unpaid suspension remuneration and any associated consequential loss. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will provide oversight to ensure that this compensation is delivered quickly and effectively to affected postmasters.

The Government continue to support Post Office in its efforts to review company practices and ensure that historical operational errors are not repeated.

[HCWS384]

CABINET OFFICE

Security Update on Surveillance Equipment

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden): The Government keep the security of our personnel, information, assets, and estate under constant review. In this context, the Government Security Group has undertaken a review of the current and future possible security risks associated with the installation of visual surveillance systems on the Government estate. The review has concluded that, in the light of the threat to the UK and the increasing capability and connectivity of these systems, additional controls are required.

Departments have therefore been instructed to cease deployment of such equipment on to sensitive sites, where it is produced by companies subject to the national

intelligence law of the People's Republic of China. Since security considerations are always paramount around these sites, we are taking action now to prevent any security risks materialising.

Additionally, Departments have been advised that no such equipment should be connected to departmental core networks and that they should consider whether they should remove and replace such equipment where it is deployed on sensitive sites rather than awaiting any scheduled upgrades. Departments have also been advised to consider whether there are sites outside the definition of sensitive sites to which they would wish to extend the same risk mitigation.

Government will continue to keep this risk under review and will take further steps if and when they become necessary.

[HCWS386]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Finances 2022-23

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): On Monday I introduced the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill, which allows six weeks, and potentially a further six weeks, for a Northern Ireland Executive to form. In line with the intent of that Bill, I firmly believe that the best way forward for Northern Ireland is for the political parties to come together and form an Executive.

However, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly, there has been no Executive budget set for the financial year 2022-23. Departments have therefore not had clear totals against which to manage their finances.

Not only did the former Executive fail to agree a budget, but the Ministers, who remained in their posts during the six months from May to October 2022, left Northern Ireland's public finances with a black hole of some £660 million.

I am extremely disappointed that this situation has come to pass. It remains my belief that for Northern Ireland to be a great place for people to live and work, there must be a locally elected, stable and accountable devolved Government that continually prioritise the things that matter in everyday life for the majority of local people.

I believe that it is right to give the parties another opportunity to form an Executive, which the Bill I introduced on Monday will do.

In the meantime, I recognise that the people of Northern Ireland must be protected in future by bringing the public finances under control today. Difficult choices cannot be deferred any longer without continuing the lamentable trend of storing up ever deeper trouble. I am therefore setting a Northern Ireland budget for 2022-23 today. I will bring forward legislation for this budget in a Bill in due course.

It should be noted that the spending review 2021 set the largest annual block grant in real terms since the devolution Act in 1998. This provides around 21% more funding per head than equivalent UK Government

spending in other parts of the UK. Yet, NI Ministers have failed to protect the public finances and secure the delivery of public services. This is a failure of their responsibility to the public, typically those most in need, which worsens the impact of the reductions that must now be delivered. If the necessary diligence over Northern Ireland's public finances had been applied by NI Ministers during the last six months, these measures would not be needed now.

Action needs to be taken now to protect the current and future health of Northern Ireland's public services.

External factors impacting this budget

Energy

The budget position I am setting out today recognises the challenges that face all of us in the UK over the cost of energy. Through the Energy Prices Act 2022, the UK Government are taking positive measures to ensure Northern Ireland citizens receive the support they need in the absence of an Executive. However, I do expect the Northern Ireland Departments, as some of the largest users of energy in the region, to be pragmatic in their approach to their energy bills by ensuring they are getting the best, most cost-effective deals possible. This will reduce pressures on the Northern Ireland budget and in turn help protect funding to serve the public.

Public sector pay and public service transformation

This budget recognises the cost of living challenges that our frontline workers are facing by increasing public sector pay and ensuring the living wage threshold is met. I appreciate that these pay awards will not go as far as many workers would wish. Until there is the right level of income to Northern Ireland Departments, this position on public sector pay is the most that can be afforded within the budget available and without cutting into important frontline services. A future Executive need to get to grips with a sustainable approach to public sector pay alongside the work needed to transform public services. The Executive need to reform as this work should not be further delayed.

Northern Ireland Ministers have long failed to demonstrate prudent fiscal management. Almost 10 years on from the commitments made in the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements to put Northern Ireland's public finances on a sustainable footing, long-promised public service transformation and fiscal sustainability have not been delivered.

2022-23 budget allocations

I set out below the resource and capital allocations that I consider to be an appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments.

In deciding on these allocations, I have engaged intensively with the Northern Ireland civil service to understand the needs of Departments, the various views on budget priorities and the savings needed to balance the budget. I am grateful to them for their engagement. I have also met with Sir Robert Chote, the chair of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, and received a range of representations from public groups and individuals.

Non-ring-fenced resource funding

On the resource side, this budget position delivers:

For health, this budget provides £7.28 billion in funding; an increase of £228 million above 2021-22 spending, which included significant covid-19 funding, or £786 million if we compare with last year's funding excluding the

one-off covid-19 funding. This will protect spending to address the critical health pressures in Northern Ireland. It also ring-fences funding for abortion services, as ensuring the availability of services is a statutory duty on me as Secretary of State.

For education, this budget provides £2.6 billion in funding, which is an additional £286 million on top of last year's spending—after excluding accounting for one-off covid support in 2021-22. This will protect spending for programmes such as free school meals, home to school transport, and the extended schools and Sure Start programmes, all of which support those who need it most. However, even this level of increase will require significant reductions in current spending trajectory levels to live within budgetary control totals. This will affect funding for high-spend areas such as the Education Authority's block grant and the aggregated schools budget. As some costs are demand driven, this will have impacts. However, these are unavoidable given the scale of the overspend risk facing the Department. The required action to curtail expenditure must be taken by all education spending areas in order to live within budget.

This budget protects funding for the most vulnerable by protecting spending levels in the Department for Communities at current levels and ensuring that programmes such as the discretionary support grant can continue. It also increases resources for Northern Ireland's critical infrastructure networks with a 4.4% increase in the Department for infrastructure resource spending—after excluding one-off covid support in 2021-22. This increase will sustain vital infrastructure support that is so important to the Northern Ireland Economy. We recognise that steps will also need to be taken to improve Translink's sustainability through uprating Translink fares. This will help to reduce the budget pressure, whilst ensuring that the increase remains below the level of inflation.

Elsewhere, the level of protections and increased spending afforded to health and education, with lesser increases also afforded to infrastructure and justice, means some reductions in the Department for the Economy, while Departments including the Executive Office, the Department of Finance and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, remain broadly at similar levels as last year.

Capital departmental expenditure limits

For capital, this budget provides continuing investment and enables key flagship projects to progress, including the York Street interchange and A5 and A6 road schemes. It also ensures sufficient funding to meet departmental capital commitments that can progress in the absence of an Executive.

Budget 2023-24

As I set out in the opening to this statement, the need for action to put Northern Ireland's public finances on a sustainable footing can no longer be put off. Steps need to be taken now to address the systemic issues that are facing public services and address the long-term sustainability of Northern Ireland's finances.

Importantly, I remain firmly of the view that the right people to be taking such decisions for future budgets and public services are locally elected and accountable Ministers sitting in a fully functioning devolved Government.

I will continue to work towards the restoration of an Executive, but I recognise that consideration needs to be given to a sustainable and strategic budget outlook for 2023-24.

If the Executive have been restored in time for a budget for 2023-4, the UK Government will continue to work constructively with Executive Ministers, including on a sustainable budget that works for the people of Northern Ireland and supports economic growth.

However, in the absence of an Executive, the Government's priorities for next year's budget will be to deliver a fair outcome for all taxpayers and citizens in Northern Ireland. We will work to put Northern Ireland's finances on a sustainable, long-term footing. That means we will need to consider wide-ranging options for revenue-raising and review all spending.

My Department will continue to work closely with Northern Ireland's Department of Finance ahead of the next financial year to identify what steps could be taken. Among the options we will examine will be water charges and/or increasing income from regional rates, to ensure that citizens in Northern Ireland and all taxpayers are treated fairly and the 2023-24 budget is balanced from the outset of the year.

I must repeat that I am only bringing forward this budget legislation because the Northern Ireland parties have failed to display the necessary political leadership for which they were elected. I look forward to the Executive getting back to work and taking these decisions in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

[HCWS385]

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