

**Wednesday
8 February 2023**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 8 February 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF PREVENT

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of

(a) the Report, entitled Independent Review of Prevent, dated 8 February 2023.

(b) the Report, entitled The Response to the Independent Review of Prevent, dated 8 February 2023.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade in the UK

1. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help businesses in Northern Ireland trade with the rest of the UK. [903463]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government have committed to ensuring unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the rest of the UK market. Since the advent of the Northern Ireland protocol, by the end of last year, among other support, we will have spent £340 million helping traders process 2.3 million customs declarations through the trader support service for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. However, that only reduces the burden on NI purchasers and GB suppliers rather than removing it, which is why we are trying to deliver a sustainable solution on the protocol.

Mrs Murray: The Supreme Court website states:

“We are the final court of appeal in the UK for civil cases, and for criminal cases from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.”

Will this continue to be the case for Northern Ireland business?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The Supreme Court continues to be the final court of appeal for Northern Ireland. The European Court of Justice has a role in certain areas under the Northern Ireland protocol. We believe it is inappropriate for the European Court of Justice to be the final arbiter of disputes between the United Kingdom and the European Union under the protocol, and the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill would ensure that UK and Northern Ireland courts have the final say over all laws that affect

citizens in those nations, should we not be able to achieve the same or a similar outcome from our negotiations with the European Union.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Trade barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain were not even on the horizon before Brexit and they are solely a consequence of Brexit. With 54% of people in the UK and even more in Northern Ireland now in favour of rejoining the EU, why are the UK Government refusing to consider the only option that will fully end trade barriers for Northern Ireland in the UK?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She should be very careful in citing polling about former referendums.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the DUP.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Secretary of State listed the support that the Government are giving to Northern Ireland businesses in relation to the operation of the protocol, and mentioned many millions of pounds that are being expended for that purpose. However, does the Secretary of State not understand that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, that it should not be for this Government to have to give out millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to help businesses trade within their own country, and that what we really need is not a trader support scheme but the end of barriers to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I genuinely do understand the point that he makes, and I completely agree with him. We need to get to a position through negotiation, or maybe through the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill if negotiation does not work, so he knows that his constituents can receive goods east-west in the way they used to.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. He will be aware that this morning in the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom the Court has issued a judgment in relation to the constitutional implications of the protocol. That judgment has brought great clarity to the reality that the protocol has altered Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom by virtue of subjugating article 6 of the Act of Union, which gives us the right to trade freely within the United Kingdom. It also changes a key principle at the heart of the Good Friday or Belfast agreement, which is the need for cross-community consent on matters of import to the people of Northern Ireland, and the Court confirmed that that has been changed without the support or consent of the people of Northern Ireland. These are the things that need to be addressed in UK law to restore our place within the United Kingdom.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his points. Our immediate priority is preserving the political stability in Northern Ireland, and getting the Belfast/Good Friday institutions restored. The situation as it currently stands is undermining the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and power-sharing. Everybody in the Chamber and in Northern Ireland, and our interlocutors

in the European Union, understand that the protocol has caused real problems. Those include trade disruption and diversion, significant costs and bureaucracy for traders, and areas where people in Northern Ireland have not been able to access the same range of goods. The right hon. Gentleman knows the arguments as well as I do. We are well aware, and he is right: things need to change.

Cost of Living

2. **Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the effect of increases in the cost of living on people in Northern Ireland.

[903464]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): Many households have already received a £600 payment to support energy bills, with the roll-out of those payments continuing. That is in addition to the energy price guarantee that has reduced the unit cost of electricity and gas this winter. The Government have provided this support in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive whose responsibility it would ordinarily fall to. That is in addition to separate support for low-income households, disadvantaged pensioners, and those living with disabilities. We have delivered all that because, of course, we are agreed that the situation is serious.

Dave Doogan: Many people in Northern Ireland—a very high proportion—are off-grid heating oil users. They, like oil users in my Angus constituency, had to wait a long time, after they had paid hugely inflated oil prices, to get support from the UK Government. That was bad enough, but is the Minister concerned about price gouging in the biomass market, with people paying grossly inflated prices for wood pellets? I think he will agree that the price of trees has not gone up at the same rate as the price of oil and gas.

Mr Baker: I am not aware of evidence of the phenomenon that the hon. Gentleman refers to. If he would please write to me, I will be grateful for the opportunity to look into it.

Retained EU Law

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill on Northern Ireland.

[903467]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Government recognise the unique challenges that Northern Ireland Departments are facing in the absence of the Executive and Assembly, and we are working closely with the Executive Office to develop an approach that accounts for the political situation in Northern Ireland. Of course, UK Government Departments will assess impacts, where required, of any changes that they make on Northern Ireland, as with other devolved Administrations, when in the process of reviewing retained EU law.

Kerry McCarthy: It seems that the only certainty we have with this bonfire Bill is uncertainty. We do not know how many laws will be affected by it, although we know it will be in the thousands. We do not know how it

will work with the existing Northern Ireland protocol, or with whatever revised protocol may exist in a few months' time. With this legislative chaos hanging over the heads of Northern Ireland businesses, how are they expected to make plans for the future?

Mr Baker: The Government are well aware of the need for people to have regulatory certainty to make plans for the future. The hon. Lady can be assured that we will ensure that we meet all our international obligations, including under the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement, the protocol, and the withdrawal agreement.

Clean Air Initiatives

4. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to encourage clean air initiatives in Northern Ireland.

[903468]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The objectives of clean air initiatives in all parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, are unchallengeable. The hon. Gentleman will know that the measures to deliver such initiatives are of course a devolved matter in Northern Ireland.

Mr Sheerman: I had the privilege to be in Northern Ireland and to speak in the Titanic centre, and I was thinking of the Minister while I was there—obviously, I do not know why, but I was thinking of him. While there I listened to the great progress that Northern Ireland has made in switching to hydrogen-based buses and waste vehicles. Is there not a real problem, because there is no supply of hydrogen in Northern Ireland and all of it has to be imported? Why does the Minister not get behind Northern Ireland business to ensure that it can produce its own hydrogen?

Mr Baker: I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman's speech at the Titanic centre went down well. The Government are committed to our hydrogen strategy, and we very much hope that the Executive will return and play their part in delivering it.

North-west of Northern Ireland: Investment

5. **Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase investment in the north-west of Northern Ireland.

[903469]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): This is an active morning, Mr Speaker. The Government are committed to supporting all areas of Northern Ireland, and are delivering significant investment in the north-west through several funding streams.

Colum Eastwood: The Minister will know that the people of Derry have been waiting five and a half decades for a full-scale university to be built in the city. Given that we have no Government at Stormont, are this Government ever going to do anything about that?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman knows that progress is continuing on the Derry and Strabane city deal following the signing of the heads of terms in February 2021. The deal includes 10 project proposals in the

areas of innovation, digital and health and regeneration, tourism and renewal. We continue to provide £55 million for the inclusive future fund; I would try the patience of the House if I listed all the various funding streams coming. The hon. Gentleman is undoubtedly a fine champion of his area and I am sure he will continue to hold us to account on all these matters.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Last week, I was fortunate enough to visit Coleraine football club, which recently found out that it was unsuccessful in its levelling-up bid. The priority index was not applied in Northern Ireland, meaning that it is difficult to establish whether levelling up has achieved its purpose. With a Government committed to pitting communities against each other for funding, will the Minister assure me that groups across Northern Ireland will have equitable access to the levelling-up process for future bids, or will they be left at a disadvantage and as an after-thought?

Mr Baker: Once again, if we were to list all the funding streams for Northern Ireland, hon. Members would see—*[Interruption.]* A disgrace, Labour Members shout. The idea that there is any kind of pitting of communities against one another is really quite ridiculous. If a Labour Government came to power, we would certainly seek to hold them to account in the same terms. The reality is that we are working extremely hard to improve life in Northern Ireland for everyone, and right across the whole UK.

Public Services

6. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help support public services in Northern Ireland. [903470]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Government are providing the largest funding settlement to the Northern Ireland Executive since devolution through the £15 billion block grant. In the absence of an Executive, we have stepped in to set a Budget. We are also providing millions of pounds for the much needed transformation of public services through the New Decade, New Approach package. Of course, what Northern Ireland needs is strong and effective devolved government.

Alex Cunningham: That may sound all very grand, but the Police Service of Northern Ireland has announced that it will cut police officer numbers by 309, thereby reducing the force to its smallest size since its formation. Does the Minister agree that that represents a failure to uphold the NDNA commitment to

“continue to ensure that PSNI and others are appropriately resourced to deal with terrorism and paramilitary activity”?

Mr Baker: This is a most serious issue. Policing is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, and the PSNI main budget is allocated by the Department of Justice from the Northern Ireland block grant. The recent budget that the Secretary of State set for Northern Ireland provides the Northern Ireland Department of Justice with a 3.1% uplift on its 2021-22 budget, with a total allocation of £1.18 billion.

The UK Government also provide PSNI with the additional security funding that it needs to ensure that it has the resources to tackle the substantial threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism. That additional security funding ensures PSNI's ability to tackle the terrorist threat, while ensuring day-to-day policing is not compromised. The contribution for the financial year 2022-23 is £32 million. The Secretary of State and I, the Northern Ireland Office and the whole of the Northern Ireland civil service take this matter extremely seriously, and will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The European convention on human rights has a unique role in the policing of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will do nothing to disrupt that relationship?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that there is a commitment to the convention in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and we remain steadfastly committed to that agreement.

Peter Kyle: I thank the Minister for his answer, but he knows full well that several of his Cabinet colleagues have pledged to withdraw from the convention on human rights. Will he tell the House once and for all that doing so would break the terms of the Good Friday agreement?

Mr Baker: The Secretary of State and I are of course in touch with our right hon. and hon. Friends across Government, as appropriate, on this issue. We remain committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, but the hon. Gentleman will know that it is imperative that we deal with the humanitarian crisis of boats coming across the channel, with people putting their lives at risk. We are going to have to find a way through that problem. That is a particularly tricky issue on which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will lead.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): To date, the UK Government have failed to make any additional resources available to meet NHS pay negotiation demands, despite the fact they are the only tier of government on these islands with the ability to do so. What representations has the Minister made, or will he make, to colleagues to unlock that resource, so that pay settlements for the NHS might be reached sooner rather than later in Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: We have set a budget for Northern Ireland and we have issued guidance to permanent secretaries to cover the governance gap. We are looking for the Northern Ireland Executive to return and rise to the challenge presented by a budget in which there is a £660 million funding gap. I will say once again that Northern Ireland is getting on average £15 billion a year through the block grant provided by the Government—a record settlement—in addition to the many other funding streams we provide.

Northern Ireland Protocol

7. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the progress of negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol. [903471]

10. **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the progress of negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol. [903474]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I have very regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on Northern Ireland matters, including and especially the protocol.

Jeff Smith: It has been widely briefed that the negotiations are finished and the deal is waiting with the Prime Minister. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether that is true and whether he has seen the deal himself yet?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is false.

Dame Nia Griffith: The Foreign Secretary is leading on negotiations that will affect all communities in Northern Ireland, but on his last visit to Belfast he froze out nationalist parties. Will the Secretary of State make sure that that does not happen again?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which goes to a bit of a dilemma. We are negotiating at this point in time on the protocol with the European Union, and Sinn Féin are a one-Ireland party. It was a representative from an EU member state who had been receiving a briefing about what the negotiations were looking like at that point in time, which would possibly have not been the best form in a negotiation.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, one point regularly made to us is that there is much scope for further co-operation on EU programmes such as Horizon and in other important areas. Is that something my right hon. Friend's colleagues say to him when he talks to them in Cabinet? Should that not be pointed out strongly to the European Commission? Our not being part of its research programme means that it is missing out on some of the best scientists in Europe, and on energy co-operation—a vital interest—we need to do better?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question and for the work he does in chairing the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. He is absolutely right to point out that the Horizon programme, which we are unable to access at this point in time, is unbelievably valuable across the piece in the way that he states. Yes, I think everybody knows it is vital and that we need to come to a solution on the protocol that allows for discussions on our access to that programme and others to be back on the table.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I appreciate that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is the lead on this matter, but can the Secretary of State give us any idea of the timescale for when he might expect to conclude discussions with the European Union, and at which point he might consider getting the Northern Ireland protocol through Parliament?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The one thing we are being quite steadfast on, as well as trying to get a negotiated solution to this particular issue, is not commenting on timelines. My hon. Friend will have noticed that the smallest amount of progress was communicated to the world through a joint communiqué four or five weeks ago. Our illustrious friends in the media then wrote up what that might be, what the detail of the deal might be and that there was a deal. Elements of the media then went on to decapitate said deal. I am afraid that, until we get to the end of the negotiations and until we get somewhere—we are not there yet—we will not comment on timelines.

Troubles-related Crime

8. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support people affected by troubles-related crimes. [903472]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The UK Government are committed to delivering better outcomes for those most affected by the troubles, while helping society in general to look forward. The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which is continuing its passage through Parliament, will establish an independent body to conduct reviews into troubles-related deaths and serious injuries, with the primary objective of providing information to families and to victims and survivors.

Jack Lopresti: My right hon. Friend has always been clear that he will engage constructively with victims' groups and listen to concerns that they may have about the Bill. What unresolved issues will be addressed as the Bill proceeds through Parliament?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend correctly highlights the significant engagement of the whole of my ministerial team, myself included, with many interested parties. We have listened to the concerns raised by victims, families and survivors of the troubles. As a result, the Government have tabled amendments to address a number of key concerns, including on ECHR compliance, on strengthening the commission's independence, on sanctions for individuals found guilty of knowingly or wilfully misleading the commission, on creating stronger incentives for individuals to engage with the commission, and on a whole host of other areas. We remain open to constructive dialogue with all interested parties on unresolved issues.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In the light of the announcement about the Omagh bombing public inquiry, will the same focus be put on getting justice for those people who constructed, planned and planted, as opposed to a witch hunt against those who have potentially had a dereliction of duty?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Everybody in this House knows that it was dissident republican terrorists who planted that bomb that killed so many people. That is where justice needs to be found. However, there was a court ruling that found that the Government were lacking in four particular areas, and we now have a public inquiry to look into those.

NHS Waiting Times

9. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Northern Ireland Department of Health of the adequacy of resources for tackling NHS waiting times in Northern Ireland. [903473]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The situation is very serious in the NHS in Northern Ireland. Having a fully functioning devolved Government is the right way to deliver the necessary reforms to transform healthcare and cut waiting lists. That is why the Government are doing all we can to restore the Executive as soon as possible. In the meantime, the Secretary of State has introduced appropriate measures to protect the delivery of all public services, and my officials continue to engage regularly with the Northern Ireland civil service.

Liz Twist: Last week, a poll in the *Belfast Telegraph* found that people in Northern Ireland think that the Tory Government are most to blame for the problems that the health service is facing. Does the Secretary of State accept that? Will he meet the unions to discuss their concerns?

Mr Baker: Of course we share their concerns, but the reality is that health is devolved in Northern Ireland, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows. It is also the reality that health in Northern Ireland has not had the systemic transformation that it needs, despite our making appropriate funds available. What is needed is for the Executive to go back, to serve everyone in Northern Ireland by dealing with the systemic transformation that is needed in the health service, and indeed in education, to make things work for everyone.

Governance

11. **Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure good governance in Northern Ireland. [903475]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): Northern Ireland is best governed through locally elected and accountable Ministers operating in the devolved institutions. In their absence, we introduced the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act and published guidance to provide Northern Ireland Departments with the support that they need to make limited but necessary decisions to maintain the delivery of public services that operate in the public interest.

Stephen Farry: The Secretary of State recently met the family of Dáithí Mac Gabhann. The Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 is one of the casualties of the absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. There is a groundswell of

opinion across Northern Ireland MPs and other stakeholders that the Secretary of State should act, through Westminster, to make the Act effective in Northern Ireland. Will he listen to those voices?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I was honoured to meet Dáithí and his family last week. I obviously understand the position in which the family find themselves. There is a piece of secondary legislation that should have been passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The easiest route for this to happen—the quickest route by which Dáithí can get the result he requires, through the passage of that secondary legislation—is via the Assembly coming back and passing it, but we are looking at all options. I have asked officials in my Department to see what we can do.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I have a short announcement to make. The Clerk of the House, Sir John Benger, has informed me that he has indicated to His Majesty the King that he intends to surrender his patent as Clerk of the House in the autumn, to allow him to take up the role of Master of St Catharine's College, Cambridge. There will be an opportunity much nearer to the time for Members to pay tribute to the outgoing Clerk, and I shall want to place on record Sir John's reflections on his time as Clerk on that occasion, but it is a little time away. I will ensure that arrangements are made to appoint his successor in plenty of time to allow a smooth handover.

Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, let me point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of the proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [903548] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 February.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I am delighted that President Zelensky is here in the United Kingdom today. It is testimony to the unbreakable friendship between our two countries, and I am proud that we are expanding the training for Ukrainian forces to include jet pilots and marines, and ensure that Ukraine has a military able to defend its interests today and into the future.

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

Mr Hollobone: Slava Ukraini! President Zelensky, we salute you.

This year a start will be made on the rebuilding of Kettering General Hospital; the strength of Northamptonshire police will reach 1,500 officers, the highest number in its history; and Kettering is set to become one of the best-connected towns for ultrafast broadband in the country, thanks to CityFibre's investment. Given those developments and given the Prime Minister's

pledge to halve inflation and tackle the NHS backlogs, is it not time also to tackle head-on the doom and gloom peddled by those who want this country to fail, and to be far more optimistic about the many good things that are happening in Kettering and across the country?

The Prime Minister: I am glad to hear of all the successes in my hon. Friend's constituency, especially the redevelopment of Kettering General Hospital, for which I know he has been campaigning tirelessly for years. He is absolutely right: this Government will continue to focus on delivering the country's priorities.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): More than 11,000 people have died as a result of the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria, and the number is sadly rising. I know that many families here in the UK will be anxiously awaiting news. I am sure I speak for the whole House in saying that our hearts go out to each and every victim and their families, and we must do all we can to support the rescue and recovery effort.

The House is honoured to be addressed today by President Zelensky. From the outset of the war he has symbolised the heroism, the resolve, and the bravery of his people. The Prime Minister and I joined the House together in 2015, and we have lived through important moments in our domestic and international politics, but none of those experiences compares to the pain and suffering of the people of Ukraine. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital for all of us, throughout the House, to continue to stand together in full support of Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: Let me first join the hon. Member in paying our respects and conveying our thoughts to the people of Turkey and Syria, particularly those affected by the earthquake, and to the first responders who are doing such a valiant job. The House will be reassured to know that we are in touch with the Turkish and Syrian authorities and are providing all the assistance that they have required of us, including the 77 search and rescue responders who arrived yesterday and have already begun work. I spoke to the President yesterday to ensure that we are in close communication.

Let me also thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments on Ukraine. Not only the whole country but the entire House can be proud that we came together to stand by Ukraine when the moment mattered, and that we will continue to stand with it, united as one Parliament and one United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: Just for the record, he is the right honourable.

Keir Starmer: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. Every time Putin has been appeased, he has been back for more. Does the Prime Minister agree that, across this House, we must speak with one voice and say that this terrible conflict must end with the defeat of Putin in Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: Our objective remains to ensure a Ukrainian victory in this conflict. Vladimir Putin's aggression cannot be seen in any way to have been successful. That is why we have accelerated and increased

our military support for Ukraine this year—a decision that I took as Prime Minister. Today we are going even further, not just having provided Challenger tanks and being one of the first countries to do so, which catalysed the provision of tanks from other nations, but moving to start training Ukrainian marines in the advanced capabilities that they will need to mount further offensives, and to train their pilots in advanced combat aircraft. The House can be reassured that we will continue to support Ukraine to ensure decisive military victory on the battlefield this year.

Keir Starmer: I welcome the additional support that the Prime Minister has outlined today. I have had the privilege, as I am sure he has, of seeing at first hand the brilliant work our military is doing in Salisbury to train Ukrainians in defending themselves. We all support this work and the UK's role in the international drive to ensure that Ukraine has the weapons and the technology required to defend herself. Does the Prime Minister agree that continuing this international effort is the only way to ensure Putin's defeat?

The Prime Minister: The House may not be aware that we have continued to train Ukrainian soldiers, which is something we have done for years, before the conflict started, and something that we should be very proud of. Obviously, we have intensified those efforts. Last year we trained 10,000 Ukrainian soldiers through Operation Interflex. The Defence Secretary has announced that we will train 20,000 Ukrainian soldiers this year, in addition to the marines and air force pilots that I mentioned earlier.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to highlight that this has been an international effort. A mark of UK leadership in this area is that around a dozen other countries have all come to the UK to take part in our training programmes to support Ukrainian soldiers. Many Members of this House will have visited that effort in their constituencies. It is making an incredible difference on the ground, and is something I know President Zelensky is incredibly grateful for.

Keir Starmer: I think the whole House would like to thank those involved in the incredible training that is going on.

Before I entered this House, I had responsibility for fighting for justice in The Hague for victims of Serbian aggression. Does the Prime Minister agree that when the war in Ukraine is over, Putin and all his cronies must stand at The Hague and face justice?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right that we must hold them to account for the horrific crimes that they have committed. I am proud that the United Kingdom has, again, played a leadership role in this regard, being one of the first countries to provide financial and technical support, putting investigators on the ground. We are shortly to host a conference together with the Dutch. Also, one of the things I discussed with President Zelensky this morning is our support for the work of the International Criminal Court, where, thanks to the efforts of UK members, I am hopeful we will see the first indictments very shortly.

Keir Starmer: Across this House we do not just hope for Ukraine's victory; we believe in it. Part of that victory must be Ukraine's reconstruction. Does the Prime Minister agree that Russia should pay for the destruction it has caused through the wealth lying dormant in blocked Russian Government assets?

The Prime Minister: We are the third largest humanitarian and economic donor to Ukraine, having provided £1.4 billion of support through direct grant assistance and guarantees at multilateral lending organisations. Again, the House will remember that we took a lead in imposing economic sanctions on Russian entities, including individuals and state-sanctioned assets. We have ensured that the provision of funds here will be put in a foundation for reconstruction in Ukraine, and we are currently working with international partners, through the legal process, to use those assets to fund Ukrainian reconstruction. That is of course something that we all want to see, and we are working with partners to achieve that.

Keir Starmer: As a country, we have always been at our best when we stand up to tyrannical aggressors threatening their neighbours and peace on our continent. That is why the Labour party helped to found NATO and why our commitment to NATO is as unshakeable today as it was back then. Does the Prime Minister agree that whatever differences we may have and no matter what difficulties we face as a country, we in this House have a duty to stand on the shoulders of the giants who came before us and support Ukraine's fight for freedom, liberty and victory?

The Prime Minister: We remain the leading European ally in NATO, as we always have done. We continue to increase funding in our armed forces, by £24 billion at the last spending review, to ensure not only that we maintain our NATO obligation to spend 2% of our GDP on defence but that we participate in every NATO operation and remain the leading nation when it comes to contributions to NATO's rapid response force and the NATO readiness initiative. I join the right hon. and learned Gentleman in saying that this House and this country will stand united with Ukraine until we ensure the defeat of Vladimir Putin's unprovoked, unsanctioned aggression and that we will ensure not only that Ukraine is victorious but that we bring peace to its people.

Q8. [903555] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): The global combat air programme, including Team Tempest, is vital for UK national security and for the world-class aerospace cluster we have in Lancashire, with many businesses in Burnley and Padiham. This aircraft will protect the UK skies, give the RAF the tools it needs for the future and deepen our relationship with allies such as Japan and Italy. Can I ask the Prime Minister, with a refresh of the integrated review taking place, to commit not only to the design and development of this aircraft but to its production in Lancashire too, providing skilled jobs for generations to come for my constituents and residents all across the county of Lancashire?

The Prime Minister: I was delighted to announce this landmark international partnership with Japan and Italy in December. Team Tempest partners already employ

2,500 people in the UK with more than 1,200 in the north-west, and as we are making more progress, we will continue to invest in skills and technology at the BAE Systems factory of the future in Lancashire.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Scottish National party.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): On behalf of my party I would like to send our condolences to all those impacted by the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria. I also welcome the exchange between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister in respect of Ukraine. We in this House are all united our condemnation of Vladimir Putin and in our hope for a better future for Ukraine. It will be an honour for all of us to listen to President Zelensky this afternoon.

In recent days, the former Prime Minister said that she did not regret her time in office. Does the Prime Minister regret her time in office?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to all my predecessors for the contribution that they make to public life, and I join the hon. Gentleman in saying that I know the whole House will be looking forward to hearing from President Zelensky at the conclusion of PMQs.

Stephen Flynn: Hold on a minute; let us reflect on the damage that was caused: £30 billion wiped off the UK economy, pension funds brought to the brink of collapse, the pound reaching parity with the dollar and interest rates for mortgage holders right across these isles soaring. The former Prime Minister will not apologise for the damage that she has caused, so on behalf of the Tory party, will the right hon. Gentleman apologise for her?

The Prime Minister: On the first day that I took office, I said that mistakes had been made, but what we have done is to ensure that right now the pound is at a multi-month high, borrowing costs are restored back to where they should be, the economy has stabilised and there is a clear plan to halve inflation and grow the economy. That is what the Conservatives are delivering in government and we continue to deliver it as well for the people of Scotland.

Q14. [903561] **Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Burghley House in my constituency is bidding to host the world eventing championships in 2026. This event is one of the pinnacles of the sport and, if we are successful in our bid, it will provide a massive boost to the local economy and massive coverage for the UK on the global scene. Burghley has a formidable track record of success, having previously hosted two world championships and six European championships. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Burghley would make a fantastic venue, and will he lend us his support so that we can be successful with our bid?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to building on our fantastic track record of hosting events such as the Commonwealth games, the women's Euros and the rugby league world cup. I understand that the relevant UK sporting authorities are looking at the location, and I am sure they will be considering Burghley, in my right hon. Friend's constituency, in the near future.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate my party with the comments on the unfolding human tragedy in Turkey and Syria and with the warm words to welcome our ally President Zelensky. He will know that this country and this House totally support Ukraine's resistance to Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion, and it is a source of great pride that the British people have stood firm, united and unwavering in supporting the brave heroes of Ukraine.

When President Zelensky addressed this House last year, he asked that we treat Russia as a terrorist state. Since then, the Liberal Democrats have urged the Government to fulfil that request by proscribing the mercenary Wagner Group, which is doing Putin's bidding and carrying out atrocities against Ukrainians daily. On this symbolic day, will the Prime Minister finally commit to proscribing the Wagner Group, which would be a crucial part of treating Russia as the rogue state it is?

The Prime Minister: We have taken a lead from the beginning of this conflict in sanctioning and taking action against those entities connected with the war effort in Russia and beyond. The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have already sanctioned the Wagner Group in its entirety, as well as taking specific action against particular leaders. Proscriptions are not something on which we routinely comment in public, but rest assured that we continue to keep all our proscriptions under review.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Twenty-two years ago this month, a good friend of mine died from AIDS. Had he been tested for HIV, I am confident that, with the medical advances we have made, he would still be alive today. As my right hon. Friend will know, this week is HIV Testing Week. I welcome the Government's ambition to end new infections by 2030. Will he thank the Terrence Higgins Trust for its incredible work? And will he look to extend opt-out HIV testing to more areas of high prevalence so that we can help to discover more undiagnosed cases?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his incredibly thoughtful question, express my sympathies to him on the loss of his friend and join him in paying tribute to the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust, as I know the whole House will. The Terrence Higgins Trust does fantastic work and I look forward to talking to my hon. Friend about what more we can do to spread HIV testing and prevent more people from needlessly suffering.

Q2. [903549] **Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): The UK Government's fiscally illiterate electricity generator levy will choke off billions from future investments in the kind of renewable energy projects that my Angus constituency excels at delivering. This investment will find its way to more favourable jurisdictions, putting thousands of green jobs in Scotland and our energy transition at risk. Will the Prime Minister commit to scrapping this environmentally and economically damaging tax, or will he instead confirm that he and the latest Chancellor know the price of everything and the value of nothing?

The Prime Minister: I do not think it is right that, when energy companies are making windfall profits because of a war, those profits should go untaxed. This is what our levy does: it is right that we recover energy

companies' excess profits that result from the war and give the money back to the country in the form of support for energy bills. What is economically damaging for Scotland is the SNP's refusal to acknowledge the need for a transition to support the North sea oil and gas industry, which we are proud to do.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Human trafficking is when people are moved legally from one place to another, often with the promise of a job, and are then forced into prostitution or labour exploitation. It has nothing to do with people who come illegally here on small boats. That is smuggling. A third of all human trafficking in the United Kingdom occurs wholly within its borders. When I was chairman of the all-party group against human trafficking, we campaigned for an independent commissioner. One was appointed in 2014, but since April last year we have not had one. That is unacceptable. Will the Prime Minister use his good offices to get one appointed urgently?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work in this important area and I am happy to look into the particular position that he mentions. I know he is proud, as I am, of our modern slavery legislation, which is world leading, thanks to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). We are an example in how to tackle this, but I will make sure that we have someone in place to do the job.

Q3. [903550] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): We now have more than 50% more social care staff vacancies than last year. People are stuck in hospital beds with nowhere to go. In my constituency, the Liberal Democrat council and our local hospital, the Royal United Hospital, are trying their level best and trying innovative solutions to tackle the social care backlog, but the Prime Minister knows that this is a workforce crisis. We must recruit and retain social care staff. So I ask him: will he support the Liberal Democrat proposal to pay a higher minimum wage to social care workers to tackle the social care shortages that underpin the NHS crisis?

The Prime Minister: We recently announced £14 billion more for health and social care. Part of that money will go to a new discharge fund to speed the discharge of people from hospital back into their homes and communities. That money is already making a difference on the ground. We can see the numbers of people unnecessarily in hospitals are already reducing, easing the burdens in our accident and emergency departments. That comes on top of the money we have invested to improve the training, recruitment and development of our valued social care staff, and that will make sure that we can reduce vacancy rates, increase retention and get the workforce that we know we need.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Last month, together with fellow north Staffordshire MPs, I hosted an event, a tea party, to welcome Ukrainian refugees living in north Staffordshire. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking the sponsors, particularly Alton Towers, which hosted the event, the host families and all the people of north Staffordshire, who have made our Ukrainian friends so very welcome?

The Prime Minister: I join my right hon. Friend in thanking Alton Towers, the other sponsors and all the families involved in putting on that tea party. I know that many Members from across the House will have done something similar; it is a wonderful way to show our support for the families who have come here. Again, the President mentioned to me this morning how grateful he is to the United Kingdom that we have opened up our hearts and our homes to help those in his country who need our security and sanctuary.

Q5. [903552] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): Big Brother Watch recently released a report on unaccountable government bodies such as the Counter Disinformation Unit, the Rapid Response Unit and the British Army's 77th Brigade. Huge swathes of public money are being spent on recording political dissent on social media, under the guise of tackling misinformation. Politicians, including myself and the Leader of the Opposition, academics, activists, journalists and even members of the public have been subjected to monitoring by Whitehall officials. This is happening at the same time as we await the report of the Pitchford inquiry into the questionable state surveillance of campaigns such as the Stephen Lawrence campaign. So can the Prime Minister tell us how much public money is spent on these units and whether he thinks spending public money in this manner is a justifiable thing to do in our democracy? Could he also update the House on the progress of the Pitchford inquiry?

The Prime Minister: I will have to get back to the hon. Lady on the Pitchford inquiry and give her an exact figure. However, in general, certainly I and those on this side of the House believe very strongly in free speech and will make sure that we continue to protect it wherever we can.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Friday 24 February will mark one year of Russia's barbaric war in Ukraine. Thousands of people have been killed. More than 1,000 children have been killed or injured. So will my right hon. Friend call for a national minute of silence on that day, so that all across the United Kingdom the people here can show their unending support for the people of Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work she has done in her previous roles to ensure that we provide appropriate support to those in Ukraine. I thank her very much for her suggestion. I am sure it is something we are considering as we speak, and there will be many other ways in which we can mark that moment, not least as an international community continuing to show united condemnation and isolation of Russia.

Q6. [903553] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): This week is Children's Mental Health Week. We know that adverse childhood experiences—whether that be growing up in poverty in the UK, or, indeed, living through the horrors of war in Ukraine—can have a lifelong impact on mental health. With the number of children in mental health crisis increasing year on year in the UK, does the Prime Minister believe that he is doing enough to address the causes of childhood trauma?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for her question. We are doing more to make sure that the extra money that we are putting into tackling mental health is particularly focused on young people. We have seen a startling increase in the number of young people presenting with mental health conditions, which we would all like to arrest and reduce. That is why we are putting more mental health community support into schools and colleges across the country—that is being rolled out as we speak. Just the other week, we announced more money for crisis centres and urgent treatment centres in the mental health space in 100 different communities around the country, which will make a difference.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This country's military and diplomatic support for Ukraine is strong and has strong support across the country. Less well known is a programme that has gone on for a decade led by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to support the Verkhovna Rada, or Ukrainian Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, should this country host a reconstruction conference with the Ukrainians to discuss how Ukraine can win the peace, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and other bodies can come together to see how we can help President Zelensky in the next stage of his country's development?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As we look forward to hosting the reconstruction conference for Ukraine later this year, I shall make sure to take up his suggestion and involve all those organisations that can provide support to us and, ultimately, make sure that we can rebuild Ukraine in the way that it deserves.

Q7. [903554] **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Government will want to help to maintain popular backing in the UK for our support to Ukraine, including by helping people with their energy bills. More than 40,000 people across Devon live in homes that are off the gas grid; they are on the rural equivalent of pre-payment meters. They need the money upfront to pay for their heating oil and alternative fuels. The Government announced an alternative fuel payment last September, but people in Devon are still waiting. What will the Prime Minister say to people who are off the gas grid and waiting for their alternative fuel payment five months later?

The Prime Minister: We specifically considered people who are off the gas grid when designing the energy support schemes that we have put in place, which is why the bulk of the support was delivered to those who had electricity meters to ensure that it reached people such as those the hon. Member mentioned, including many of my own rural constituents as well. That money should be getting to them. I shall make sure that it moves as quickly as possible. We also put in place the local household support fund to provide discretionary funding that local councils can give to those households most in need.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): There is no doubt that the NHS is under enormous pressure across the UK and, despite record numbers of nurses and doctors, the workforce remains a challenge. So I welcome the fact that, for the first time, the NHS will get an independently verified workforce plan. But we have to think long term on buildings, too. In that regard, can

the Prime Minister look closely at proposals to rebuild Leighton Hospital, which is a campaign that has the support of thousands of residents in south Cheshire?

The Prime Minister: I know that Leighton Hospital has been allocated more than £44 million to address some of the immediate issues at that site. I also know that my hon. Friend is keen to ensure continued investment in his local hospital. The Department for Health and Social Care is looking at more hospitals to join the new hospital programme, and I am sure that it will have heard what he said and, indeed, the voices of his constituents, too.

Q9. [903556] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Bus services are vital to our communities for work, for health, for school and for socialising but, in a matter of days, the buses that millions depend on will face another crisis with the ending of the bus recovery grant, and predicted cuts of 15% to 20% in mileage will be devastating for people across my constituency and others. Will the Prime Minister commit to extending the bus recovery grant so that communities in my constituency and many others are not left isolated? Will he ask the Transport Secretary to meet me to discuss this issue?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the vital importance of buses in our local communities, which is why we are well on the way to fulfilling our commitment to invest £3 billion over this Parliament in our bus transformation. That includes funding for local councils to subsidise unprofitable routes through the bus services' operators grant and recent money to help cap operator fares at £2 through the spring. We always continue to see how we can support bus services in the long term.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that apprenticeships such as those offered by the excellent South Essex College in Leigh-on-Sea, which I visited on Monday for National Apprenticeship Week, are a great pathway into work?

The Prime Minister: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and pay tribute to her local college, particularly in National Apprenticeship Week—something that we discussed in Cabinet just yesterday. We also have the country's first Education Secretary who was an apprentice herself and that is something we are proud of.

Q10. [903557] **Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in their condolences to the victims of the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria. I reiterate my thanks to the Foreign Secretary for the speed of the UK's initial response. But as we enter the third day of the earthquake, the bitter cold and unforgiving weather mean that pulling more survivors from the rubble becomes less and less likely, and the immediate humanitarian impact is devastating. When can we expect an announcement on what further aid the Prime Minister's Government will commit to relief efforts? What discussions is he having with his international counterparts to ensure our response meets the scale of the crisis?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and join her in paying tribute to the Foreign Secretary for the work he is doing. I spoke to President Erdoğan yesterday to reiterate our commitment to provide Turkey with what support it needs. Right now, that is search and rescue. She is right that we are in that vital window at the beginning of a situation like this, which is why our search and rescue teams are on the ground providing that assistance. The Foreign Secretary is also speaking to his counterpart at the United Nations to ensure that the humanitarian support that we can provide is well targeted, including in Syria, where we fund the White Helmets, which are on the ground doing work. We continue to be in touch with everyone that we need to be, and I assure the hon. Lady that we will continue to provide all the support that is asked of us.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to announce, as Members will be aware, that President Zelensky will be addressing both Houses in Westminster Hall imminently. That will require me to suspend the House's business in a moment. Members attending the address should go directly to the hall, following the Doorkeepers' directions. The House is expected to resume its sitting at approximately 2 o'clock. The Division bells will be sounded five minutes before the resumption.

12.32 pm

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Prevent: Independent Review

2 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Before I start, I put on record my thanks to Mr Speaker for hosting President Zelensky just now in Parliament; I am sure we all agree that his address was both moving and powerful. Having visited Ukraine last year as Attorney General, I know that this Government are as committed as ever to fighting with our friends in Ukraine.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the independent review of Prevent. The United Kingdom is an extraordinary place to live. Our history, our culture, our institutions, our liberties and, crucially, our values make it so: democracy, the rule of law, sexual equality, freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of inquiry.

Those freedoms are not enjoyed universally. We are reminded of that every day in Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine, in Iran's brutal repression of protest, and in China's horrific treatment of the Uyghur people and its draconian laws limiting free expression in Hong Kong. The United Kingdom is extraordinary because of the rights and freedoms our citizens enjoy. That is why so many people want to follow in my parents' footsteps and leave their home to make a new life here.

Those rights and freedoms are underpinned by our shared values. We cannot be timid when it comes to those values. If we do not argue for them, if we do not defend them, there is no guarantee that they will endure, because there are those who seek to undermine them through extremist and even terrorist activity.

Recent attacks provide a tragic and sobering reminder of that threat. The 2017 Westminster attack, the Manchester Arena bombing, London Bridge, Finsbury Park, Fishmongers' Hall, Forbury Gardens and the murders of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP have all taken lives from us in the name of extremist ideology.

Terrorist attacks are not random acts of violence. They are inherently and necessarily ideological. The very freedoms and values we cherish are the things terrorists want to destroy. Terrorists come from a much wider pool of extremists. That is why we must ensure we address the whole problem, not just the sharpest, most violent end of the extremist-terrorist spectrum.

My first duty as Home Secretary is to keep the British public safe. The UK's counter-terrorism strategy, Contest, is centred around four Ps: prevent, pursue, protect and prepare. Each of those four pillars is vital, but I am here to talk about how we can better prevent people from becoming radicalised into ideologies that inspire terrorism. I am here to talk about Prevent.

Prevent is an early intervention programme. Its mission is to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. It relies on frontline sectors across society, including healthcare, education, local authorities and the police. William Shawcross has led a superb independent review of Prevent, for which I am very grateful. The review is unflinching: Prevent needs major reform. It needs to better understand the threats that we face and the ideology underpinning them.

Eighty per cent. of the counter-terrorism police network's live investigations are on Islamist terrorism. MI5 is clear that that remains our predominant threat, accounting

[*Suella Braverman*]

for 75% of its caseload. Yet only 16% of Prevent referrals in 2021-22 were Islamist. Prevent has shown cultural timidity and an institutional hesitancy to tackle Islamism for fear of charges of Islamophobia. Those are false charges that spread fear and misinformation in communities.

As the former Prime Minister David Cameron said in 2015:

“Islam is a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people. Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority. At the furthest end are those who back terrorism to promote their ultimate goal: an entire Islamist realm, governed by an interpretation of Sharia. Move along the spectrum, and you find people who may reject violence, but who accept various parts of the extremist worldview, including real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values.”

I thank Mr Cameron for his leadership on this issue, and I stand by his words.

The truth is that there is nothing anti-Muslim about tackling Islamism, and we must continue to work closely with Muslim communities if we are to do so effectively. In fact, William Shawcross rightly commended the excellent, brave work to challenge Islamism in local communities. I share his outrage that those working to do so—many of whom are Muslim—often face intimidation, including death threats, from extremists. Prevent must do more to support them.

While obscuring the Islamist threat, Prevent has defined the extreme right wing too broadly, encompassing the respectable right and centre-right. The threat from the extreme right wing must not be minimised. It is serious and it is growing; it must be robustly addressed. But it is not the same, either in nature or in scale, as the threat from Islamism.

Prevent is a security service, not a social service. Too often, the role of ideology in terrorism is minimised, with violence attributed instead to vulnerabilities such as mental health or poverty. “Protective factors” do not absolve ideological fervour or individual responsibility. We must be more nuanced in our approach.

I will swiftly implement all the review’s recommendations, and will report on my progress a year from now. Prevent’s focus must be solely on security, not on political correctness. Prevent’s first objective will be to tackle the ideological causes of terrorism. It must counteract the narratives of extremists, undermine their propaganda, and take on their warped ideologies. Prevent staff, and others under the Prevent duty, will have better training and guidance, improving their understanding of the ideological nature of terrorism. There will be a proportionate and consistent threshold for defining all ideological threats. A new security threat check process will ensure that Prevent decision making always considers the present terrorist threat.

The review establishes that Prevent has funded—using taxpayer money in the name of counter-extremism—those legitimising extremism. That ends on my watch. I will strengthen the oversight of our work with civil society organisations, and ensure that Prevent funding goes only towards Prevent’s objectives.

In too many aspects of British life, hatred directed at Jewish people has been tolerated, normalised, and accepted. Racism that would rightly be called out and enforced against were it directed at another minority group is too often ignored when directed at Jews. The review makes

clear that that double standard must change, so Prevent will do more to recognise and combat the prevalence of antisemitism in extremist ideology and narratives.

Finally, I will look to the Commission for Countering Extremism, led by Robin Simcox, for independent scrutiny and expertise as we deliver on the review’s recommendations.

Britain has succeeded because we are a pluralist, open society, enhanced by our differences and bound together by our values. This country can be proud of who we are—proud of our freedoms and proud of our values. We should say so, loudly and often. I am deeply grateful to all those who work hard to counter extremism and keep us safe. A reformed Prevent is critical to that goal. That is why I commend this statement to the House.

2.10 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. May I also say how much all of us welcome and pay tribute to the words of President Zelensky, who spoke in Westminster Hall earlier?

This is a moment to pay tribute to the work of the security and intelligence services, the counter-terror police and all those who work on preventing and countering extremism and terror threats. The work that they do is difficult, but it saves lives and we owe them thanks. Extremism is a stain on our society. Perpetrated in the name of one ideology or another, it feeds on fear. Its purpose is to tap into vulnerabilities, exploit people and drive us apart; to force us to hate rather than love; and to divide us rather than recognise what we share in common—from the appalling Manchester attack on children at a concert, to the attack on Fishmongers’ Hall on London Bridge, to the murder of some of our own colleagues: David Amess by an Islamist extremist, and Jo Cox by a far right extremist. Most recently, there was also the bomb attempt against the Dover border centre.

We should condemn terrorist and extremist activity wherever it comes from. Fighting against it is a core part of our national security and of defending our democracy. The resilience that we build against extremists is about standing up for what we have in common and always challenging hatred and extremism wherever we might find it.

The Prevent programme, which we are discussing today, is extremely important. Its purpose is early intervention to prevent radicalisation and extremism, and ultimately to prevent terror threats to all of us. That is why we support it and want always to see the work on the prevention of terrorism and extremism improved, updated and scrutinised. But the review should have been a great opportunity, and that opportunity has been missed. Instead of being a way to build consensus, it has been mishandled.

Prevent is—or should be—just one aspect of a wider counter-extremism and counter-terrorism strategy; it works only if it is located within those. The focus on it today, as if there were only the one aspect, is too narrow and means that it fails to tackle the pressures that we face. Prevent is about voluntary engagement to tackle radicalisation, but it needs to be part of the wider counter-extremism strategy. However, the Home Secretary and the Government have not updated their counter-extremism strategy since 2015.

The situation is likewise on the elements of the Contest strategy—the wider counter-terror strategy, of which Prevent is a part. On the “pursue” element, we know that since control orders were abolished there has been very little use of terrorism prevention and investigation measures; only two are in force today. On “prepare”, the Manchester bombing inquiry found serious weaknesses, and on “protect” there has been very limited progress on Martyn’s law, which is so important. The Prevent strategy should be part of that wider updated counter-terror strategy and also of an updated counter-extremism strategy that we do not have today.

The review and its conclusions, and the Home Secretary’s response to them, feel confused. At one point she said that the focus should be narrower and on those most likely to pose a terrorist threat, but at the same time, that the focus needs to be more on wider non-violent extremism. It will be unclear to practitioners what it is that they are expected to do. She says that there has been a problem—that Prevent has supported extremist groups in the past and that she will end that—but I say to her that when her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), did her own Prevent review, she said exactly the same thing and said, “We will not make these mistakes again. This will not happen.” After 13 years in government, it is unclear what they have been doing.

The Home Secretary has said there needs to be proper scrutiny and oversight, but the Prevent oversight board has not met since 2018. The review says that mental health services have huge gaps and Prevent is picking up the strain. We agree there is a serious problem with mental health services having huge gaps and not being able to address early intervention, but where is the response to that? Labour has called for mental health practitioners in all secondary schools to provide support, but again that is missing.

The review does not seem to address the big increase and the record numbers of teenagers who have been arrested for terrorist offences. The Home Secretary talks about Islamist and far-right extremism, and it is clear that Prevent and the wider counter-extremism strategy need to tackle both, and both are changing fast. Islamist extremism often now is about single actors and lone actors, not just the organised groups that we saw some years ago. With far-right extremism, likewise we have seen many changes in how those threats take place, and we have seen the rise of new kinds of ideologies and extremist threats, including incels. There should be no hierarchy of extremism. The counter-terror police and the experts need to go wherever the evidence takes them. There should be no political sensitivities and no cultural sensitivities at all in any of their work, and we should back them in the work they do and not try to set in this House what those priorities should be. They need to focus on the evidence.

This is an immensely important area, but will the Home Secretary now agree to a much wider review of the counter-extremism strategy and come forward with a proper counter-extremism strategy that can tackle hateful extremism much more widely? Will she recognise that the Government have failed by not updating the strategy? Will she also tell us whether she really thinks that her approach will build consensus, because consensus around a voluntary engagement programme is crucial? That is where it feels that the Home Secretary and this review have badly let the country down.

Suella Braverman: I welcome the challenge and the response from the shadow Home Secretary on the Labour Front Bench. It is obviously the responsibility of the Government and everyone in this House to choose their words carefully, recognising the sensitivity of this subject, but ultimately to uphold the aim of Prevent, which is to prevent people from becoming radicalised and engaging in terrorism. We cannot do that alone. The communities of individuals who are of interest to Prevent are an essential part of helping us to identify radicalism and to deal with it effectively, and we must work together, collectively, for that common goal.

The shadow Home Secretary does not seem to understand the main point, or one of the main points, made by William Shawcross, which is that we cannot ignore the seriousness of non-violent extremism and groups that purport to be operating in the name of community cohesion and in the name of Islam, but are actually propagating mendacious and malicious campaigns to discredit Prevent as anti-Muslim and to undermine community cohesion. Let us be clear, just as the independent review is. CAGE, for example, is an Islamist group. It has excused and legitimised violence by Islamist terrorists. Muslim Engagement and Development is an anti-Prevent group, with a history of partnering with actors of extremist concern. Prevent has been routinely smeared by such groups as a vehicle for spying on Muslims. They have slandered those who work with Prevent to combat Islamist extremism as disloyal, sinful or “native” informants—derogatory terms that are entirely unacceptable in our free and liberal society. We must combat those pernicious fallacies and be courageous and muscular in combating that misinformation.

I will just say that I find the lecture from the Labour party on how to prevent extremism rather rich. That is a Labour party that, sadly, was investigated by the Metropolitan police for antisemitic hate crimes. That is a Labour party that was found by the Equality and Human Rights Commission to have serious failings in addressing antisemitism. That is a Labour party that campaigned to make Jeremy Corbyn Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Home Secretary knows that she should not refer to hon. Members by name directly.

Suella Braverman: That is a Labour party that campaigned to make the right hon. Member for Islington North Prime Minister.

In this field, I prefer to take my advice and cues from the great British public. They did the cause of fighting extremism an immense service when they voted overwhelmingly to ensure that the Labour party, under the leadership of the right hon. Member for Islington North, would have nothing to do with leading this country.

William Shawcross has exposed a real problem: a cultural timidity, a blind eye being turned to extremism, a fraternisation with those who would do us harm, and a hesitancy to confront head on and bravely the threat of Islamist extremist ideology. That problem, it seems, runs deep in the Labour party, too. I commend the statement and encourage all colleagues to work with the Home Office to make this work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am slightly sorry about the lack of consensus in the Chamber, although that illustrates the point that when views are strongly held, reaching consensus may be an ideal goal that is not always realisable. However, drawing on the shadow Home Secretary's comments, may I ask my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary to focus on the voluntary aspect of the Prevent programme? Although one can understand that it will always have to operate in a fairly gentle and very carefully worded way to encourage people voluntarily to engage with it, does that mean that there is a gap in the system whereby people espousing extreme views who would benefit from a course on the Prevent programme are, by simply refusing it, allowed to proceed without any attempt at all to encourage them or deter them from an extreme position in the future?

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. Although Prevent is predominantly about security and safety and must be heavily informed by the security assessments, there is a very strong community element. That is why work with local authorities and agencies in healthcare and education is vital. That is one element of the Channel programme, which is covered extensively in William Shawcross's report. There is moving evidence of how that multi-agency intervention has saved lives. Let me be clear that, for every Prevent failure that is exposed in the media or otherwise publicly, there are many stories—which the public will never read about—of lives turned around and harm averted, thanks to the great work done by multi-agency partners in the way to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): After months of delay, some caused by repeated changes of Prime Minister, as well as reported concerns among Ministers that some organisations named in the report could sue for libel, it is welcome that the report has now been published. This area is critically important, and I think we would all agree on the value that we place on those who work so hard to keep us all safe, but questions remain about the focus. For instance, we need to see this report in the context of the Met's head of counter-terrorism pointing out that three in four advanced terror plots disrupted in 2021 actually involved right-wing extremists, and 41% of counter-terrorism arrests in 2021 were of extreme right-wing suspects. Does the Home Secretary agree that whatever steps are taken in response to the report, it would be wrong and indeed damaging to stigmatise or marginalise Muslim communities, and that the risks posed by ideologies such as right-wing extremism and antisemitism, as well as Islamic extremism, must all remain central to any UK counter-terror strategy?

Does the Home Secretary feel that any shift in focus is needed to take into account more recent forms of extremism that have emerged since the report was commissioned, such as the QAnon ideology imported from the United States, incels or the anti-vax movement that sprung up during the pandemic? I note that, in the draft review, Mr Shawcross indicated that money from the Prevent budget in some cases went to organisations promoting extremist narratives. What changes does she intend to make to ensure that that comes to an end, and

can she tell us how much money she thinks has been sent to such organisations? Can she also tell us if the refreshed strategy will be accompanied by any increase in Prevent's budget?

Finally, the Home Secretary will know that Scotland takes its own approach to Prevent, with our focus on strong links between the community and the police, leading to positive relationships and grassroots-based initiatives aimed at countering extremism. Can she tell us how she will protect that specific approach in relation to recommendation 14, and whether she will be guided by Scotland's experience in her own application of the Prevent strategy?

Suella Braverman: I do not agree with the hon. Lady's characterisation that this is unfairly stigmatising Muslims. I have been clear that the vast majority of Muslims are peaceful and law-abiding. What we are talking about here is a minority of Islamist extremists, and we must not shy away from calling out their unacceptable behaviour. William Shawcross goes into a lot of detail, building on accounts by many other experts, notably Mr Justice Haddon-Cave in the case of Shakeel Begg, in which he talks authoritatively and exhaustively about the narratives that are characteristic of kinds of non-violent extremist practices—preaching jihad, encouraging religious violence, a world view of us versus them and urging destruction of disbelievers in the name of Islam. Activity such as that is what constitutes extremist ideology, and ideology is at the root of the behaviour that can lead to terror and destruction.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will the Home Secretary, whom I congratulate on this statement by the way, recognise that the Prevent duty, which I introduced as Security Minister, has led to an unfortunate outcome? That is that the Islamist threat she described has been defined and interpreted too narrowly, whereas some of the other threats, which are less significant, as she said, in scale and character, have none the less been defined too widely. The truth of the matter is that Prevent is now out of kilter both with the subjects of interest to the police and the intelligence services and with the active inquiries of those services, and it has to be brought back into line to play its proper part in the Contest strategy.

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend deserves huge credit for the work he led when he was Security Minister introducing, as he said, the Prevent duty, which obliges relevant authorities to take action when they identify evidence of radicalisation within the public realm. He is absolutely right: 80% of the counter-terrorism police network's live investigations are Islamist. MI5 is clear that Islamist terrorism remains our predominant security threat, accounting for 75% of its case load. Yet, judging by the referrals made by Prevent, that is entirely inconsistent with the work being done on the ground. That is why I am committed to ensuring there is a security threat check, so that the work carried out on the ground and within communities is consistent with the actual and real security threat that we face.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that the issue is about working with a smaller organisation, but that has not been a problem for a long time. As I have said for ever

and a day, until we get this issue out into the mainstream community and get the main Muslim community on board, Prevent will have detractors, as it continually does. Will she listen to the shadow Secretary of State when she says that the terrorism strategy has to be updated and that the previous commissioner's report still has not been implemented? All those issues need to be put together, not just the Prevent review, to ensure that the area works holistically. Finally, saying words about the Labour party in the way that the Home Secretary does, does not help any of us to move forward, which I think is a little unwise.

Suella Braverman: The reality is that yes, we are going for a refresh of our Contest counter-terrorism strategy. This is a vital element of that, and we will be setting out broader plans and strategy in the future. The hon. Gentleman points to an important issue, and we need to work with communities, community leaders, and those in the Muslim community who support this work and recognise the benefit of preventing radicalisation and terrorism. The caricature of Prevent as an authoritarian and thinly veiled means of persecuting British Muslims is not only untrue, but a grotesque insult to all those who work in the Prevent network and within communities, doing such diligent work to stop terrorism. We as a community need to be much more muscular in defending them.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome this review and the call, as I see it, for a rebalancing of institutional effort and emphasis over the whole Prevent programme. On the issue of extreme right-wing threats and terrorism, while the numbers are small, does the Home Secretary share my concern about the number of teenagers and the age profile, particularly young men who are being radicalised online and are attracted to extreme right-wing ideology, with potentially some of those—small numbers—leading to terrorist activity? What more can we do as a Government to prevent that online?

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend is right to talk about the threat from extreme right-wing ideology, which is growing fast and quickly within the Prevent caseload. We must not ignore it; we must take steps to intervene and prevent that from spreading into violent behaviour. Indeed, we have seen successful prosecutions of individuals who have espoused those disgraceful views. Mechanisms will be in place, and the Online Safety Bill will be a vital tool in the fight against extremism. I look forward to that being delivered and helping us with that objective.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, but I fear that in her attempt to construct a hierarchy of terrorism threats, she will play into the hands of those in the Islamic community who want to damage Prevent. She said in her statement that Prevent defined the extreme right wing too broadly, encompassing the respectable right wing and the right of centre, but last year's report by the Intelligence and Security Committee, if she cares to read it, states that that is just not the case. She also has to look at the numbers. As the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) said, there is a growing threat online of young people—white men—who Prevent would help by stopping them being radicalised. She said

that she has listened to the British public, but may I suggest that she listens to the security services, counter-terrorism police and MI5, which certainly do not want a situation in which Prevent is used as a political football, as she is trying to do, between two threats, both of which are extremely dangerous to our society?

Suella Braverman: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman, as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, will be aware, as I am, that the security threat assessment cannot be ignored. When we hear from agencies that are on the frontline, combating activities across the country, and looking at their caseload and at the numbers of subjects of interest they monitor, it is undeniable that by far the greatest security threat that this country faces is that posed by Islamist extremism. That is not reflected by our on-the-ground Prevent programme. That means it is not working. As William Shawcross sets out extensively, that is because of a misapplication of thresholds and assessments of the nature and scale of the different threats. It is a bogus equivalence to equate the threat of extreme right-wing terrorism and the threat of Islamist extremism, and that is what we all need to be honest about.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I warmly welcome this statement, and the tributes and sad reminders from both sides of the House that my brilliant predecessor, Sir David Amess, was brutally murdered by an evil man pursuing an Islamic terrorist agenda. Given that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has just confirmed that the greatest security threat still facing the UK is that of Islamic terrorism, according to the security threat assessment, will she commit to ensuring that the Prevent programme is overwhelmingly focused on tackling the threat posed by terrorist ideology, so that no other constituency has to endure what mine endured in 2021?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend reminds us powerfully and poignantly of the tragic implications when we cannot prevent, and our authorities fail to prevent, terrorism. The House was united in its grief in the aftermath of the horrific murder of our dear friend and colleague, Sir David Amess MP.

It is absolutely vital, not just for the victims of terrorism but for all the families who have been bereaved and all those who have been directly affected by the grotesquely evil acts of terrorists, that we take robust action, that we are candid about the shortfalls and shortcomings of the Prevent programme, and that we act rapidly to remedy them, so that we present a meaningful and robust approach to preventing terrorism and extremism in Britain.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I would like to think that everybody, on both sides of the House, is united in wanting to tackle extremism and terrorism, whichever faith groups, or those of no faith at all, are targeted, so I deeply regret the tone of some of the Home Secretary's remarks today.

I welcome the fact that the review of the Prevent strategy has finally been published; in the past, the strategy has been undermined by suspicion and tension. Does the Home Secretary agree that in order to combat violent extremism, we must engage with marginalised communities, and that by demonising one community in particular, which her language has sought to do today, we are doing precisely the opposite?

Suella Braverman: We all need to be intellectually honest about the situation and we must not shy away from speaking the truth, however uncomfortable that may be. I have not sought, and nor do I ever seek, to demonise any particular community in this country. It is frankly disgusting to see politicians here repeating the smears that have been thrown at the Prevent programme for far too long. Too many groups have been attacking Prevent for far too long, in a campaign to undermine its objectives, smearing it as unfairly targeting Muslims, and suggesting that it is spying on Muslims. All of that is totally untrue. As leading politicians, we should collectively combat that misinformation so that we are all keeping the British people safe.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It is evident from the Home Secretary's robust statement that Prevent has been dragged badly off course as a consequence of political correctness and misplaced cultural sensitivities. Our response to the threat from terrorism must be based on the level of risk. Islamist terrorism remains the greatest security risk to the UK, yet last year only 16% of referrals were associated with that ideology. Does she agree with me that that fact demonstrates how badly Prevent has failed the communities of this country and how much it needs urgent reform?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not just about focusing on the sharp end of violent activity; this is about ensuring there is wider understanding of non-violent extremism within the wider Islamist movement that promotes grievance narratives and propagates a wider ideological movement that is undermining of western values and liberal democracies. We must not shy away from taking action against those groups. They may fall just below the threshold of terrorism, but they none the less foster ideologies and narratives that may lead to very deadly and destructive behaviour. We must take a strong response to that.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for referring to the horrific incident that happened in Finsbury Park in 2017, when a far-right extremist, Darren Osborne, killed Makram Ali, a local Muslim person. Would she acknowledge that within our community in Finsbury Park, the Jewish community, the Muslim community, the Christian community, imams and many other religious leaders have done a great deal to try to bring the community together and promote community understanding and cohesion, and that it is important we bring people together and do not demonise any particular community or allow racism in any form to thrive in our society?

Has the Home Secretary had the opportunity to look at the response by Zara Mohammed from the Muslim Council of Britain to the trailing of this statement? Will she arrange to have a discussion with the MCB on its concerns that the statement will, in fact, not deal with the issue of far-right extremism, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) pointed out, but will actually continue the demonisation of one community over another? I am sure that is not what she wants to achieve, but it is important to bring all communities together.

Suella Braverman: It is absolutely important to bring all communities together. I have to say that advice from the right hon. Gentleman is pretty tin-eared, given his

particular oversight and leadership of the Labour party, which was found by the Equality and Human Rights Commission to have serious failings relating to antisemitism. I also say that the Labour party recently gave an award, via Labour-controlled Lewisham Council, to the Lewisham Islamic Centre, whose head imam, the notorious Shakeel Begg, was found by the court to have espoused extremist Islamic positions and promoted or encouraged religious violence. So I very gently say, please hold the mirror up to one's own party before lecturing the Government on how to deal with this problem.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent has suffered from both far-right extremism and Islamic extremism, yet the Home Office is proposing to remove our Prevent funding and remove what small amount of funding Stoke-on-Trent City Council receives, which has a massive impact. Will the Home Office please look urgently to review that and consider restoring that funding from the end of the financial year?

Suella Braverman: For Prevent to operate effectively within local communities, funding is essential. This is why it is absolutely essential that the Home Office works in conjunction with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, so that the right resources are put on the frontline and the multi-agency partnership approach can be effective.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): When the Government appointed William Shawcross to lead the review of Prevent, more than 450 Muslim organisations and leading human rights organisations such as Amnesty International boycotted it. Shawcross's anti-Muslim attitude is well known. He said, for example, that

"Europe and Islam is one of the...most terrifying problems of our future."

[*Interruption.*] Yes, he said that. Human rights groups said that this attitude meant the review's supposed objectivity was a farce, warning that it would ignore Prevent's discriminatory impact and its undermining of democratic freedoms. That warning has been borne out today. Human rights organisation Liberty has previously called Prevent the biggest threat to free speech on campuses and highlighted its anti-Muslim impact. Why does the Home Secretary think that perspective is absent from the review?

Suella Braverman: I have nothing but gratitude for William Shawcross and the very firm and robust work that he has carried out to assess the operations of Prevent. He has brought with him a wealth of experience from previous roles, and I thank him for delivering such an important and high-quality report.

I say very gently that there is quite a long list of instances in which councillors who have been or are members of the Labour party are supporting or working with extremist Islamist groups. That is a shameful track record on the part of the Labour party that should be sorted out imminently.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prevent programme will work only if we bring communities along with us, and that the Government must continue to work sensibly with them to tackle radicalisation?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to work with grassroots organisations and work with members of all communities if we are to get this right. I pay tribute to members of all communities, of all faiths and none, who are working day in, day out to make sure that Prevent works and that the threat from terrorism is reduced.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The review appears to be suggesting that there should be less emphasis on far-right terrorism. Given the terrorist attack at a migrant centre by an individual who wanted to “obliterate Muslim children”, and given the statistics that show how there are more referrals to Prevent and more Channel interventions for the far-right than for Islamist cases, is that really the right thing to do?

Suella Braverman: I am going by the data and by the facts. Counter-terrorism police make it clear that Islamist cases make up 80% of their investigations; MI5 says that they account for 75% of its caseloads. Those are the facts, and we cannot look behind those facts, but in the past year the proportion of referrals to Prevent was not consistent with that security threat. Yes, the threat from the extreme right wing is growing and serious and we must never shy away from fighting it, but overwhelmingly the greatest security threat that this country is facing is from Islamist extremists. Prevent must be oriented to meet that threat.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I pay tribute to Luton in Harmony, which does great work on community cohesion in Luton. Any effective deradicalisation programme has to carry the confidence of local communities. Given the Home Secretary’s statement today, what steps is she taking to ensure that that happens, so I can reassure my Luton South constituents?

Suella Braverman: When it comes to the Muslim community, the Government are clear that we will not tolerate any anti-Muslim hatred, in any form, and that we will seek to stamp it out wherever it occurs. We have some of the strongest legislation in the world to tackle hate crime. We have supported organisations such as Tell MAMA with nearly £5 million between 2016 and 2023 to monitor and combat anti-Muslim hatred. That, as well as many other provisions and resources led by this Government, is a reflection of our commitment to protecting those communities who feel vulnerable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. Welsh universities play a vital role in the Prevent strategy in Wales, and their work is monitored by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. Higher education is devolved, so what discussions will the Home Secretary have with Welsh Ministers about the proposed reforms? What input did Welsh Ministers have into the review?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman mentioned universities. An important feature of William Shawcross’s report is what he says about the extent of anti-Prevent activity on university campuses. Indeed, some of the tragic cases that he describes involve instances in which terrorists who have brought terror and destruction to innocent victims in the UK have been effectively radicalised on campuses. It is vital that we take meaningful steps to ensure that there is no platform for these campaigns within universities, and that misrepresentations of Prevent are deterred.

Points of Order

2.50 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In her reply to me, the Home Secretary did not answer the specific question that I put to her, which was whether or not she was prepared to meet Zara Mohammed from the Muslim Council of Britain to discuss her statement. It is normal for a Member who asks a question of a Minister following a statement to be given an answer. It may not be the answer that the Member wants, but at least it will be an answer. The Home Secretary made no attempt whatsoever to answer my question, and I should like that to be placed on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The right hon. Gentleman has obviously placed his view on the record. I am not, of course, responsible for the replies of Ministers, but he has been heard.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 16 January Mr Speaker circulated an update on David Carrick, a former Metropolitan police officer who had worked in the parliamentary and diplomatic protection command here in Parliament. Carrick had pleaded guilty to 85 serious offences, including 48 charges of rape against women, and yesterday he was sentenced to a minimum term of 30 years in prison.

As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police said that many of Carrick's crimes took place in Hertfordshire, where he lived. She also said that victims of this former officer might have felt unable to come forward sooner because he had told them that they would not be believed. Do you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that every Member of this House should praise the courage of the survivors who came forward, and join me in amplifying the cause of Hertfordshire constabulary in its appeal for any further survivors to come forward as well, knowing that they will—they absolutely will—be believed?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure that all Members would encourage anyone to come forward in the circumstances described by the hon. Lady. I am also sure that she appreciates that this is not really a matter for the Chair, but she has put her view on the record and it will have been heard.

Disposable Electronic Cigarettes (Prohibition of Sale)

2.52 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the sale of disposable electronic cigarettes; and for connected purposes.

E-cigarettes were billed as a health revolution—as something that could be held like a cigarette and puffed on like a cigarette, and would provide a nicotine hit in the same way as a cigarette, but without containing the tar and the other carcinogenic compounds that are known to cause cancer. In theory at least, they were designed as a quitting aid, like nicotine gum, to wean smokers off cigarettes, but sadly they have attracted a far wider following. The Office for National Statistics estimates that in 2021 there were more than 4 million vapers in the UK, and the number is likely to have risen since then.

This would, perhaps, be OK if we knew that each of those people had formerly had a “20 a day” cigarette habit, but that is not the case. Most worryingly, an NHS survey published last year found that, among 15-year-old children in the UK, 18%—nearly one in five—considered themselves to be e-cigarette users. Those who defend vaping often focus on the relative lack of health complications compared with smoking. On the use by children, some have even suggested that it is better for them to be vaping than smoking. As a doctor, those arguments concern me. E-cigarettes are very new, and some Members of this House may recall that there was once a time when cigarettes themselves were considered safe. E-cigarettes contain known carcinogens, cytotoxins and genotoxins. Studies from Harvard University and Boston University have linked vaping to the sort of constrictive bronchitis and cardiovascular effects similar to those experienced by cigarette smokers.

It is hardly surprising that a recent freedom of information request found that vaping-related hospital admissions almost doubled last year. Of those cases, 32 were in children. I spoke yesterday with Professor Andrew Bush, who described the adverse health effects in children and how there have been cases of young people requiring intensive care for severe complications from vaping.

Then, there is the issue of nicotine. The average Elf Bar, the most popular disposable vape sold in the UK, contains 20 mg of this highly addictive substance—roughly equal to between 40 and 50 cigarettes. Elf Bars are available at most retailers for £5 each, though I was able to find other brands online going for just £1.99. A recent investigation by the *Daily Mail* showed that Elf Bars were being sold with e-liquid volumes more than 50% over the legal limit. Chronic nicotine use is linked with a range of diseases affecting the heart, blood and nervous system, as well as impairing brain development in young people and increasing the risk of anxiety disorders.

Public health messaging is clear: smoking is bad for you. E-cigarette use is possibly not as bad for you, but we cannot be certain of the long-term effects of the individual flavourings. The best option is neither to vape nor to smoke. It is therefore crucial that while

vapes are used to encourage smokers to quit, we protect children and young people from being lured into a lifetime of addiction.

Vaping manufacturers often insist that their products are intended for adults only but, at the same time, their product design appeals to a far more impressionable audience. They come in a range of bright, attractive colours. Some of the most popular flavours include bubble gum, cotton candy and strawberry ice cream. Their price and disposability makes the habit easier to hide from parents and teachers, who are unlikely to approve.

The slick marketing has been underlined in some cases by more overt flouting of the rules. An investigation by the *Observer* found that Elf Bar products had been promoted to children on TikTok. Similarly, sports teams such as Blackburn Rovers and St Helens rugby club have been sponsored by the vape retailer Totally Wicked. This reminds one of the cigarette marketing campaigns of the past. Like many parliamentarians, I received information last autumn from the UK Vaping Industry Association stating that the industry has more than 3,000 shops and an aggregate turnover of £2.8 billion. The question one must ask is how sustainable all those shops would be if vapes were supplied only to former cigarette users for a temporary period while they are quitting, and not to new teenage nicotine addicts.

Beyond the health effects of the disposable vapes is significant environmental harm. Disposable vapes have become part of the national embarrassment that we see everywhere, every day, littering our streets, our parks and our rivers like confetti. A few weeks ago, I helped local volunteers clean the River Slea and its banks, where several were found. According to a recent study by Material Focus, at least 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week. That is two per second, or around 1,300 while you are listening to this speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

What is a disposable vape made of? Essentially, plastic, some vaping chemical, an electrical circuit and a lithium battery. None of that is good for the environment. Lithium batteries are particularly destructive to the environment. When single-use vapes are disposed of incorrectly—the vast majority are—they leak lithium into the ground when the battery case erodes, causing soil and water pollution. Ten tonnes of lithium are sent to landfill every year in this country as a result of disposable vapes. Lithium is a desperately precious resource, and a vital one in helping us transition away from the use of fossil fuels, but instead of preserving this vital resource we are quite literally throwing it away at enormous cost to the environment, which it pollutes.

Many disposable vape manufacturers claim that their products are recyclable, but the reality is that that is a very difficult task, because the device first has to be

manually deconstructed and the components disposed of individually. One waste disposal website advises extreme caution when doing this, because puncturing the lithium battery during removal risks starting a chemical fire, so safety goggles and gloves are required. Several third-party vape sellers warn that it is not safe to disassemble a disposable vape at home, and there are very few operations that can recycle disposable vapes. Many studies cite the difficulty of recycling them, and a spokesperson for the vape manufacturer Riot admitted on BBC Radio 5 Live that only a fraction of 1% of its products were recycled.

I know that the Government are committed to achieving a smoke-free generation by 2030, but disposable vapes are adding little to reusable ones in this regard. Indeed, their greatest risk is creating a new generation of nicotine addicts. I fear that a new national health crisis is brewing under our noses. I am not the first person to call for restrictions on e-cigarettes. In an open letter to the Government, a number of environmental and health groups including the RSPCA, the Green Alliance and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, of which I am a member, called for a ban on single-use vapes. Many US states have imposed restrictions on them, followed by China, Japan, Brazil and most recently Australia.

The UK has often led the way when it comes to environmental policy. Under the Conservatives, we became the first major economy to make a net-zero commitment. Likewise, the cross-party support for the Online Safety Bill demonstrates this House's commitment to the protection of young people from insidious threats to their mental health. Let us extend those protections to their physical health, too.

I speak as someone who cherishes our natural environment and wants to see it free from harm and ugly pollutants. I also speak as a mother, and I am concerned about the health of our children and the effect on them of these products that we still know so little about. By banning the sale of disposable vapes, we will encourage a more sustainable way of utilising e-cigarettes as quitting aids and make vaping less accessible to children, preventing an epidemic of teenage nicotine addicts and protecting our planet.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dr Caroline Johnson, Sarah Olney, Dan Jarvis, Alberto Costa, Andrea Leadsom, Caroline Lucas, Kirsten Oswald, Lia Nici, Liz Twist, Maggie Throup, Steve Brine and Tonia Antoniazzi present the Bill.

Dr Caroline Johnson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 246).

Police Grant Report

3.3 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2023–24 (HC 1066), which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

I note that, regrettably, the House must debate this report prior to consideration by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments, owing to the need to provide adequate preparatory time for the relevant parties prior to implementation, which was compounded by difficulties with securing time on the Floor of the House due to the February recess and other pressing parliamentary businesses.

I am sure that colleagues on both sides of the House will agree that the police perform a special and unique public service, keeping our constituents, us and our families safe on a daily basis and often putting themselves in the way of danger. While we have seen some recent cases of very bad conduct, which are being addressed, the vast majority of police officers are brave, selfless and hard-working. We owe them our gratitude and I am sure that the whole House will want to convey that sentiment.

This Government have repeatedly shown that we are on the side of the law-abiding majority. We want safer streets and less crime. The police are essential to that mission, which is why overall police funding will go up once again next year by £287 million in total, compared with the previous year. As a result of how we are allocating the funding between police and crime commissioners, who deliver frontline services, and the Home Office, which spends money centrally, the amount of money received by police and crime commissioners will go up by £523 million. The total police funding settlement will stand at £17.2 billion.

I was first elected to this House in 2015, eight years ago. The equivalent figure to that £17.2 billion when I was first elected was £11.9 billion. It has gone up by around £5 billion, or 45%, which is considerably more than inflation in the intervening period.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister says there is extra money for policing, but this year he is again pushing the tax on to local council tax payers. Although he says that local police and crime commissioners have a choice, in many cases, including in Durham, they have no choice but to levy the maximum because of the way in which the formula is funded.

Chris Philp: As I have said, we are preparing to consult in the near future on updating the wider police funding formula. Of course, police and crime commissioners have a choice on where to set the precept; it is for them to decide locally. The overall funding envelope, including the grant from the Home Office, is going up, which is why we have been able to fund extra police officers over the past three years. We set a target of 20,000 new police officers by March 2023 and, as of the end of December 2022, we had delivered 84% of that target. According to the figures I have seen—and we will have this confirmed in a couple of months' time—it is very likely that about two weeks ago we crossed the threshold, and that we now have the most police officers in this country's history.

Mr Kevan Jones: Can the Minister explain to my electors why, even after the 20,000 extra police officers, County Durham will have 144 fewer police officers than we had in 2010?

Chris Philp: In the past, different police and crime commissioners have done different things. As far as the national picture is concerned, by the end of March we will comfortably have more police officers in England and Wales than we have had at any point in this country's history. This Government are very proud of that, and I expect the Opposition will be hearing quite a lot about it in the coming weeks, months and years.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The extra police officers are essentially filling jobs that were previously cut, of course. The money is ringfenced for police officers, and one of the unintended consequences is that police forces are having to reduce back-office staff. My police force, Dyfed-Powys police, has lost 100 jobs, which means many new officers find themselves undertaking administrative roles, rather than public-facing roles.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman suggests that the newly recruited officers are replacing those lost when the coalition Government were fixing the appalling financial mess left behind by the previous Labour Government. By the time we are done with this recruitment programme, we will have approximately 3,000 more officers than there were—[*Interruption.*] The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) shakes his head, but it is true. We will have about 3,000 more officers than we had in 2010. There will be around 148,000, compared with 145,000 in 2010. It will be a record number of officers.

Of the record total of £17.2 billion, £275 million is ringfenced, but it is essentially conditional on forces maintaining their uplift numbers. Provided that police forces maintain the higher number of police officers through the next financial year, they keep the £275 million.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I wanted to expand a little on the point made by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). There will be more police officers overall than we have ever had in our history, but they will not be evenly distributed. In general, the police forces that will have more than they have ever had started from a higher base, and that was the product of decisions made by police and crime commissioners in the previous decade. Although it is not totally the case, it is generally the case that forces that will not have more than ever before had a Labour PCC during that decade. Those that did not, such as London, which had a Conservative Mayor who prioritised police numbers over other staff, who may or may not be unionised, and over buildings and other bits and pieces, are now benefiting from those decisions over the previous decade.

Chris Philp: My right hon. Friend, a former Policing Minister, makes the point extremely well. Labour PCCs have often made bad decisions and, unfortunately, that is continuing. As we speak, Labour's West Midlands PCC is contemplating closing 20 police stations, despite this funding settlement. That is not something I would support or condone at all.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's commitment to looking again at the funding formula. We should have done that a very long time ago, but I have faith in him and the Home Secretary, as he knows. In doing that, it is crucial that rural areas such as Lincolnshire do better. We need fair funding, and that means taking account of sparsity, rurality and distances travelled. Those are critical issues in both delivering public services and maintaining public confidence. That must be done, and done quickly.

Chris Philp: I agree with my right hon. Friend's sentiments. Considerations such as sparsity and rurality, along with things such as prevailing levels of crime, are exactly the kinds of things that the consultation will address.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): On the funding formula, will the Minister meet a group of cross-party MPs from Bedfordshire to discuss the specificity associated with Bedfordshire? We have relied on special grant funding for more than five years to tackle significant organised crime gangs in Bedfordshire, but the funding formula is still yet to be addressed. Will he meet us so that we can set out for him the difficulties we find in Bedfordshire?

Chris Philp: I strongly encourage the hon. Lady to engage with the consultation once it comes forward and outline the points she is making. Of course, I will also be happy to meet her and her colleagues in Bedfordshire, from both sides of the House. I also urge Members on both sides to engage with that consultation fully and enthusiastically.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): In a debate we had last week on crime and policing, I raised the fact that the Wirral MPs and the Merseyside PCC—the group was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle)—have written to the Home Secretary following the tragic murder of a young woman on Christmas eve in Wallasey. That incident was one of a spate of horrific violent crimes in Wirral in recent months. In our letter, we asked for a meeting to discuss the crime situation and for more support for our communities. We sent that letter on 17 January but we are still to have a response. These issues have really shaken the local communities, so will the Minister raise this matter directly with the Home Secretary and impress on her the importance of that meeting?

Chris Philp: Yes, I would be happy to do that. I know that some extra money was given to Merseyside—in the late summer, I believe—in response to some of the terrible tragedies that have occurred there. I believe that the letter the hon. Lady refers to, which was sent a couple of weeks ago, has been passed to me. I will be responding very shortly and I would, of course, be happy to meet to discuss those issues.

We have talked about the choice that the PCCs have in setting where their precepts sit. Although they have the flexibility, and I believe many of them intend to use it, I wish to remind the House and PCCs that before they turn to taxpayers, asking them to increase their contributions, it is important that PCCs and chief constables seek efficiencies and maximise productivity. They should do that before increasing levels of tax.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): The decision in Lancashire, which does have a Conservative PCC, does not appear to be in line with what the Minister is saying. We have seen a fall in the number of police community support officers. If people do not see them on the street, they feel less safe. Crime in Lancashire is going up. The Minister mentioned the amount of money that Lancashire is getting, but in fact only 1.8% of it comes from central Government, while council tax payers are facing a 7.4% increase, so they are getting less service but paying more money, despite what the Minister claims.

Chris Philp: Since March 2015, Lancashire has received an additional 435 police officers. I met the hon. Lady's police and crime commissioner earlier this week, and he explained to me how he has restored dedicated neighbourhood policing teams in Lancashire, which had been scrapped by the previous Labour PCC. He also told me about Operation Warrior in Lancashire, which has seen, I think, 2 kg of drugs being seized a week on average and an average of £55,000 of illicit cash being taken off Lancashire's streets on a weekly basis, so I think that the PCC in Lancashire is doing a pretty good job.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has just said, the picture in Lancashire is very different from what has been described. We have a brilliant Conservative police and crime commissioner who is doing a brilliant job. Our neighbourhood policing team in Burnley and Padiham is growing exponentially, and I have been out with the taskforces. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Conservative PCCs are using their resources more effectively to crack down on county lines, antisocial behaviour and all the other issues that residents raise with us, day in, day out?

Chris Philp: I agree entirely; it is about police and crime commissioners using their resources wisely, as the Conservative PCC in Lancashire is doing. Sadly, that is unlike the Labour PCC in the west midlands, who is contemplating the closure of 20 police stations, despite the fact that the funding settlement is going up.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab) *rose*—

Chris Philp: I will give way one last time and then I must make some progress.

Ms Rimmer: Does the Minister accept that central Government funding has gone down now to 33%, while 67% is raised from the precept? With precepts to be raised by £15, what we are now seeing is a shift from central to local taxation, which puts a disproportionate burden on the low-paid, unemployed and minimum wage workers. Poorer people are constantly being affected by this Government, who are shifting the burden from the centre on to indirect taxation.

Chris Philp: As an average across the country, around two thirds of PCC funding comes from Government and about one third is raised by the precept. I shall give the hon. Lady the precise figures. In 2023-24, Government funding will be £10.9 billion and the precept funding £5.3 billion, so it is about two thirds Government and one third precept.

[Chris Philp]

In some local areas, the council tax base is different. That is one of the components that will be looked at in the funding formula, to make sure that is fully reflected, because it varies from area to area. People on lower incomes will pay lower council tax, or indeed will get council tax benefit. The hon. Lady made a point about supporting people on low incomes. I would just observe in passing that this Government have increased the income tax threshold to £12,500, which means that the first £12,500 is completely tax free, disproportionately benefiting people on low incomes. It is also this Government who have increased the national minimum wage, which is going up to £10.42 an hour in a few months' time, up from a miserly £5.03 under the last Labour Government—a 76% increase. I am, however, veering slightly off the topic of the police grant, to which I probably ought to return.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Chris Philp: I have given way twice to the right hon. Gentleman.

Besides providing all this extra money—more than half a billion pounds extra—to PCCs through the police funding settlement, to spend, I hope, wisely, we are also spending about £1 billion centrally on national priorities, which include critical initiatives to combat serious violence, such as violence reduction units and the Grip hotspot policing programme, both of which are delivering fantastic results around the country, and both of which I intend to continue prioritising. Now would be a good time to pay tribute to my long-serving predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who served in this role for three years and put in train many of these initiatives, which are now bearing such successful fruit.

On the topic of bearing fruit, the objective of all these endeavours is to reduce crime, and the most reliable set of statistics on crime, as we all know, is the crime survey of England and Wales. It is the only set of crime statistics that is endorsed by the Office for National Statistics. Let us take a quick look at what those crime statistics say. Since 2010, overall crime, excluding fraud and computer misuse, which was only counted in the figures more recently, is down by 50%—it was double under the last Labour Government—criminal damage is down by 65%, domestic burglary is down 56%, robbery is down 57%, theft from the person is down 52%, vehicle-related theft is down 39% and violence is down 38%. There is one thing we are cutting, and that is crime.

This settlement recognises the need for continued investment in the criminal justice system, and that is why we are continuing the commitments made through the rape review and why Operation Soteria will be rolled out across the country by June. We are supporting regional organised crime units and funding counter-terrorism policing, which will receive over £1 billion in the next financial year. Efficiency is also important. We are working with Sir Stephen House and others to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burdens placed on policing, including unreasonably high burdens to record non-crime incidents, which frankly should not be recorded. That will allow police to spend their time chasing criminals, not chasing paperwork. I emphasise

that this financial settlement provides a record amount of money—£17.2 billion—for the police and for fighting crime.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: I must conclude.

By March, we will see more police officers in England and Wales than ever in our country's history. Since 2010, we have seen a 50% reduction in crime, according to the crime survey. The report will continue that work, and I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the shadow Minister, I should inform the House that I have been told that the police grant report and the three local government finance reports that will be debated later have now been considered by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, and it has made no report to the House. I call the shadow Minister.

3.22 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I put on the record my gratitude and, I suspect, that of everyone in this place, to the victims who reported David Carrick to the police in Hertfordshire and elsewhere, and who put the case against him together, and to the judge for her sentencing yesterday. Now is not the time for more reviews or for sitting back and thinking the job is done; now is the time for action. I hope the Policing Minister will be lobbying the Home Secretary with some urgency to introduce mandatory standards on vetting and misconduct.

Last year, we stood in this place debating the police grant report in the midst of rising inflation, energy bills, billions lost on fraud and dodgy PPE contracts during covid, and an economy limping under the weight of this Government's hapless policies. It was 10 days after that debate that Russia invaded Ukraine, and none of us could have foreseen that we would be here today with President Zelensky, a year after the start of that war. None of us—apart from perhaps the Policing Minister, who played a key role—could have foreseen the economic collapse following the last Prime Minister's extraordinary crash-and-burn Budget, which cost us tens of billions of pounds.

Chris Philp: I gently remind the hon. Member that in the 2021 calendar year the United Kingdom had the highest GDP growth in the G7, and in the last calendar year—2022—the United Kingdom also had the highest growth in the G7. Hardly an economic collapse, is it?

Sarah Jones: I thank the Policing Minister for that intervention; I think the public will judge what he says and what I say in the next general election, and I suspect they will agree with me.

We come to this year's debate with a perfect storm facing the country and facing policing. Record numbers are leaving the police force, demoralised and worn out. Charge rates are plummeting, arrest rates have halved, there is a gaping hole in neighbourhood policing and the police are in a crisis of resources, results and public confidence. What is the Government's response to this,

in this policing budget? It is to put up local taxes, put up council tax, push the problem on to local forces, shrug their shoulders and tell us everything is fine, when the whole country will tell them it is not.

Inflation is soaring at 10.5%, but rather than deal with this economic crisis properly, Ministers have chosen to heap the burden on to hard-pressed local taxpayers through the precept. Government funding for policing—the PCC grant, counter-terrorism and reallocations—is £62 million less than it was last year. Core Government money for PCCs has gone up £174 million, although that includes the ring-fenced uplift for new officers. In real terms, taking inflation into account, it is a real-terms cut of around £134 million.

The Government have therefore lifted the cap on the local police precepts, so that local PCCs can increase council tax by up to £15. That is how we reach the Minister's figure of a £523 million increase: he assumes that all PCCs in all areas will use their full flexibility to increase the council tax burden on local people. Nearly two thirds of the Government's increase in funding now comes from the council tax precept. There has never been a more important time to invest in policing, yet grant funding this year is down in real terms. The Government's offer to local forces is that, if they want money, they have to raise it locally.

Of course, as has been pointed out, the money is not spread fairly. It is the most deprived communities, with fewest band E properties, that will get the least. In North Yorkshire, the Prime Minister's patch, police can raise £2 million more than in Durham. In Merseyside, even if they maximise the precept, they still have to find over £16 million in savings. There is a lower council tax base in Merseyside, so £15 precept increases will only raise £6.7 million, but inflation has cost Merseyside £4.2 million, so that will swallow up most of the council tax increases.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some serious points. In that vein, perhaps she can answer these questions: would it be her intention to roll back the increases in council taxes that pay for police forces, and where would she find the extra tax moneys to pay for the extra policing? She is probably coming on to state that, but I would be interested to hear her cover that point.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; I know that he and Labour colleagues in his area will be making the case for changing the funding formula, something we have all called for and hoped for for a long time. Indeed, the former Policing Minister, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), said in 2015 that the formula was unfair and needed to be changed, and here we are. I suggest that we press the Government collectively to look at changing the funding formula to make it fairer, because at the moment the cost is falling on those who have the least.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Lady is doing an excellent job of highlighting some of the creative accounting used by the Home Office when it comes to funding the police, but is there not also an issue, from what I understand, when it comes to capital funding? There is not much capital funding for police forces. My own police force and the other south Wales police forces are

building a firearms training centre for the three police forces in south Wales. That is an England and Wales requirement, but there is no capital funding for it, so that is about £58 million that has to come out of their revenue.

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Of course, a lot of the increase is protected for the uplift, which has itself brought challenges, as has already been mentioned. That means that, yes, there is less money for capital spend—he makes a good point. I know that a lot of forces are looking at this and at their property portfolio because the Conservative Government have closed something like 670 police stations across the country. Now, we are looking at whether it is enough and what we can do to fill that gap.

The areas that have fewer band D properties, and that can therefore raise less money locally, are the communities that have the most victims of crime and are most likely to suffer from antisocial behaviour, theft and burglaries. They are the communities that will get the least under this Government's unequal distribution. Levelling up? Don't make me laugh.

The Minister lauds his increase in funding, when two thirds of it is increasing local taxes. To add to his convoluted hypocrisy—[*Interruption.*] Forgive me; I retract that word. To add to his convoluted argument, he said in his statement:

“Local taxation should not be in the place of sound financial management, and therefore I expect PCCs to exhaust all other options to reprioritise their budgets...before looking to local taxpayers for additional funding.”—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 57WS.]

So the headline is that this increased funding assumes that everybody will increase tax by 15%, but the detail tells those local areas that they should not do that because it is against the Government's agenda.

Mr Kevan Jones: I tried to intervene on the Minister when he was talking about efficiency. Durham constabulary is outstanding in terms of efficiency—one of the most outstanding forces in the country—but because of the funding formula, the PCC and the chief constable have no option but to put the precept up to the maximum to plug the funding gap. It is a spurious argument—and one that we have heard from many over the last 13 years—to say that, if forces cut a bit of inefficiency, they will be able to plug the funding gap. That is just not possible.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and having been there and seen it, I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done in his area. Indeed, that force makes good use of the public money that is available to it.

On the one hand, the Government are bragging about letting local areas put up council tax on hard-working people and, on the other, they are telling police and crime commissioners not to. We think that they will all be forced into doing it because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) just said, what else can they do? The truth is that the Government are failing to support a police service that is already overstretched and struggling to deliver justice for victims.

What about the funding formula more broadly? How many times have we stood here and heard Ministers say that there will be a consultation, which is then kicked into the long grass? The Minister's predecessor, the

[Sarah Jones]

right hon. Member for North West Hampshire, said in 2015 that the formula was “manifestly unfair”, and many colleagues from across the House have called for change every single time we debate policing. West Midlands police estimate that it costs them £40 million a year and that, despite the police replacement uplift, they will still have 1,000 fewer officers than in 2010. Merseyside police are still 450 officers short of their 2010 numbers. North Yorkshire will end up with more police officers in 2023 than they had in 2010. Durham will have 144 fewer.

The chair of the Police Federation says that the uplift programme is:

“misleading and fails to recognise reality.”

Of course, forces will be fined for not meeting uplift targets when, at the same time, record numbers are leaving the force. In the year to March 2022, 8,117 police officers left the service—the highest number of leavers since comparable records began. Police chiefs are tied to the Government’s pledge to recruit officers, so they are losing vital civilian and police staff and are forced to backfill them with new officer recruits. The ring-fenced uplift puts huge pressure on forces to make savings without touching officer posts.

Does the Minister agree with his predecessor, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire, that the funding formula is “manifestly unfair”? Will he work at pace to introduce a new funding formula so that we can tackle some of those disparities?

Jamie Stone: I am the only Scot in the Chamber this afternoon; if the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) were here, he would agree with the general point that I am about to make.

Policing in Scotland, which is devolved, is not in a good state. We have fewer policemen in my area of the highlands of Scotland than we have had for five years. Road deaths are up. My point is that if policing north of the border—not in England and Wales—falls back, that in turn impacts on policing in England and Wales. Criminals are no respecters of borders; they can move about.

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes the reasonable point that criminals do not respect borders. Indeed, in the modern age they do not respect physical borders at all. Most crime now is online—fraud that the Government do not even recognise as a proper crime, even though millions of people are defrauded of their savings every year.

The sad truth is that the public have come to expect less from the police since 2010, and that is a big part of the declining trust in policing. Twice as many people as in 2010 say they never see police on the streets. Thousands walk away from court cases, either because of how they have been treated or because of the long waiting times involved in bringing cases to court. It is absolutely true that overall crime levels are falling long term, but 72% of people think that crime has gone up nationally and 42% think it has gone up in their local area. Millions fail to report crime because they have given up on any sense of anything happening about it.

Poorer areas are seven times more likely than wealthier areas to be affected by high rates of antisocial behaviour. Some 1.1 million incidents of antisocial behaviour were

reported to the police in the year to September 2022—more than 21,000 incidents a week or 3,000 incidents every day. Those are the reported incidents; we know that the actual numbers are much higher. Over 10% of people have witnessed drug dealing or drug use. Those on the Government Benches see antisocial behaviour as a low-level crime, but Labour takes it seriously.

We saw today in the papers that just four scam texters have been prosecuted for fraud in the last year, despite the estimated 45 million people who receive them. Four prosecutions in a year, the lowest on record—a pathetic level of enforcement. When will the Government get a grip and stop allowing fraudsters to get away?

Neighbourhood policing has been decimated. Some 6,000 neighbourhood police officers have been cut since 2015 and 8,500 PCSOs since 2010. The Conservatives have got rid of thousands of police staff, vetting officers, staff detectives, call handlers and data analysts. The police are having to pick up the pieces where other services fail. When ambulances or mental health teams do not turn up because of the Tories’ NHS crisis, the police step in. In one force, mental health-related calls are up by over 450% since 2010 because there is simply no one else to pick up the pieces. That leaves fewer officers to deal with burglary or knife crime and all the other crimes that people care about but get no response to.

Kate Hollern: Does my hon. Friend agree that these decisions are having a serious effect on police morale? According to a recent survey from the Police Federation, 94% of respondents from Lancashire’s constabulary say that they do not feel respected by the Government. Some 89% of respondents felt that morale within the force is currently low or very low. Does the shadow Minister agree?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which is absolutely right. Police feel demoralised because of their pay, the way they were treated during covid, and the fact that they cannot get done the job they are so desperate to do. On top of that, there have been the awful cases that have put them into public attention as never before. Yes, police are very demoralised. I thank the Police Federation for its survey, which shows how acute the problem is. That is reflected by the record numbers of people leaving the force.

I have talked to hardworking police officers who are in despair about what is happening. Brave officers who run towards danger when the rest of us run away tell me how little support or leadership they get from the Government to deal with the growing challenges. The Minister’s written statement sets out his national priorities. They include investing in a victim satisfaction survey, but what about bringing forward the Victims’ Bill? Another is prioritising commitments from the rape review, but why not put a rape and serious sexual offences, or RASSO, unit in every police force? Tackling exploitation, abuse and modern slavery is another priority, so why are the Minister’s Government in breach of their own anti-slavery laws by failing to appoint a new Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner? The Minister also mentioned tackling county lines, so why will he not support Labour’s plan to outlaw the grooming and criminal exploitation of children and crack down on criminal gangs?

The Minister is asking forces to save £100 million and he is investing in IT capabilities, but let us look at the emergency services network programme: £5.1 billion of taxpayers' money has been wasted on that botched Home Office project. That is nearly a third of the overall police budget and it is close to the entire precept allocation for this year, if every force uses it in full. How about some efficiency savings from this Minister for the emergency services network project? It is an unthinkable waste of money, and it is incredibly grating for struggling households to know that higher council tax bills might have been avoided if Ministers had not catastrophically messed up the network.

So there we are, that is the context in which this police grant motion is being debated. After 13 years of failure from this Government—13 years of sitting back and leaving it to individual forces and then pushing blame on them when things go wrong—the police grant motion is just another sticking plaster that will not fix the problems our police face. Where the Conservatives push blame to local forces and never take the lead, a Labour Government will fix this mess that the Government have created. The next Labour Government will work with the police, while the Tories turn their backs. We will put neighbourhood police back on our streets, deliver proper local partnerships to prevent crime, respond to mental health crises and crack down on dangerous criminals. A Labour Government means safer streets, safer homes and safer communities.

3.41 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the "Police Grant Report (England and Wales)". I am a veteran of speaking in this debate, because we have an ongoing issue in Bedfordshire that has already been mentioned, which is the gross unfairness of the national police funding formula.

Bedfordshire and a number of other forces are concerned that they simply do not get the amount of money that the national police funding formula says they should get. Many years ago, this was referred to as damping. I remember sitting in meetings with the father of the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) when he was an MP many years ago, so these ancient issues should have been resolved, under her Government and my Government. I am not playing party politics with this, but it is high time that we sort out the national police funding formula. The most welcome part of the Home Secretary's letter of 1 February was the recommitment to doing that in this Parliament. It has taken a very long time, so all speed please, because it simply is not right or fair.

The reason the current funding formula is not fair for Bedfordshire is that it simply does not reflect the complex crime picture we have, with organised criminal gangs, knife and gun crime and county lines being rife across our county. As an example, Bedfordshire was disproportionately affected by the EncroChat investigation. We had more Operation Venetic packages than most of our neighbouring forces put together. We are helped to deal with that by special grants. We have this position in Bedfordshire where we manage to survive financially with our inadequate central grant—thanks to the defective funding formula—through a series of special grants that top us up every year. At the moment, we get

£6.8 million for the Operation Boson and Operation Costello work, and that is critical to the financial stability of Bedfordshire police.

The Government, however, are now starting to taper downwards those special grants. It does not seem fair or right to start doing that before the change to the funding formula. There has been a request from Bedfordshire police and our police and crime commissioner that that taper, if it does have to happen, should not go as low as 65% and should go only to a minimum of 70%. That has been requested by the excellent Festus Akinbusoye, the Bedfordshire police and crime commissioner, and I really hope that the Police Minister can agree to it, because it is very reasonable. The special grants are not "nice to have" for Bedfordshire; they are fundamental to helping us balance the budget.

We have a happier story in Bedfordshire than I have heard is the case in Durham, in that we now have 1,403 police officers, a record number. I am very grateful for that, and I say thank you to each and every one of them for their brave and invaluable service, as well as to the whole police family of PCSOs and police staff who back them up, without whom they could not do their job. They are there to protect us and they would literally lay their lives on the line for us. We owe them a massive debt of gratitude.

On the profile of those 1,403 officers in Bedfordshire, 401 are currently student officers, which means that they are not as present and available across the whole county as we would like them to be. A particular request that I have for my chief constable is that he restores the presence of 24/7 first response officers to my towns of Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable and Houghton Regis, as we had up to October 2012. With modern technology, I think we can do that. I note that he is telling me that that will happen as and when those student officers finish their training. As far as I am concerned, it cannot happen a moment too soon.

I will not go on for much longer, as others want to speak and there is pressure on time. Let me end by referring to what the Minister said about the balance of the precept and the grant. If I heard him correctly, he said that, nationally, two thirds of the funding came as a national grant from the Government and a third was from the precept, so I took a quick canter through some figures in the Home Secretary's letter and observed that the situation is variable across the country. In the west midlands, the contribution from the precept is 21%. In Greater Manchester, it is 25% and, for the Met, the contribution is 27%. For my county, the contribution is 39%, which is quite a lot more than a third, but a bit lower than Hertfordshire, a neighbouring force, at 42% and Cambridgeshire at 45%. There is an unfairness. There are poor people struggling everywhere, in every constituency, and the funding formula needs to address that, because it is not fair. It is great that we have a commitment to sort out the funding formula. That cannot happen a day too soon, and please do not taper down our special grants before the funding formula has been sorted out.

3.47 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by joining others in thanking all the men and women who work in our police forces. In particular, I put on record my thanks to Jo Farrell, the chief constable for Durham constabulary, and her staff—those in uniform,

[Mr Kevan Jones]

the support staff without whom the constabulary could not carry out its duties and the PCSOs. We owe them all a great debt for the work that they do unselfishly on our behalf.

I listened to the Minister, and what can I say? He reminds me a bit of one of those overexcited electric bunnies that people can turn on. No matter what the subject is, and no matter how ill thought out or indefensible something is, he will spout it. I think he needs reprogramming, though, because he clearly went back into his Treasury mode halfway through the contribution from the Opposition Front Bencher, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). I never thought that I would think fondly, “Please bring back the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)”, but I am sorry—despite the ranting that we had from this Minister, when he tried to say that everything in the garden is rosy and that it is a great credit to this wonderful Government that there are no problems, there are severe problems.

The Government are fixated on levelling up Britain, but levelling up for this Government is really about capital projects and things that they can open, put a plaque on and say, “Your local Conservative Member of Parliament got this, and the Government have provided it”. What that does not do is look at other areas. On levelling up for the police, I would say that in the last 13 years the Government have done exactly the opposite by moving resource from areas such as County Durham to areas that are wealthier and have far lower crime levels than in some of the most deprived areas in our country. That has not been done by accident; that is a deliberate Government policy.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) highlighted the issue of the funding formula. Clearly, the Minister does not understand it if he thinks all police authorities are getting two thirds of their funding from central Government. As the hon. Gentleman said, it varies throughout the country.

Chris Philp: I said that, too.

Mr Jones: Well, if the Minister wants to intervene, I am quite happy for him to intervene. Somebody had perhaps turned his switch off, so he had gone to sleep.

I say to the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire that I accept what he says about the funding formula, but if we look at figures, we see that Bedfordshire is still among the top 15 gainers. I think the call for change is needed.

The other argument the Minister put forward was that local PCCs somehow have choice in the matter of whether to put up council tax precepts. Well, they do not have a choice to put up precepts, and I will explain the situation in Durham in a minute. It is also a bit of a false argument to say that, if only they were more efficient and looked at cutting back costs, they would somehow be able to keep council tax precepts down. Durham constabulary is—and this is on record—an outstanding force for efficiency, and there is nothing more it can do to make that force more efficient, so where does such extra money come from? That completely blows a hole in the argument.

Another point about what the Government have done over the last 13 years, which was mentioned earlier, is not only that moving from national to local expenditure has affected some of the poorest communities in our country, but that, as we all know, council tax with the precept is a very regressive tax. Those who can least afford to pay pay more, and that cannot be right in a fair system.

In County Durham, the PCC has decided that, in 2023-24, the precept will go up by the maximum, which is £15, but has she got a choice? I would argue that she has not got a choice, because the way in which the precept is allocated is based on tax council bands, and it is not surprising that the majority of properties in County Durham are in the lowest council tax band—band A. That goes for many communities across the country as well. So the ability to fill the gap, which the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire talked about, is very limited in places such as County Durham, because a 1% precept increase in County Durham will not raise anything like it would in, for example, Surrey or other places where there are larger numbers of higher-band council tax properties.

I hear what the Government are saying, which is that they are going to look at the formula. Well, this has long been going on. I think I have spoken in every single one of these debates every year, and I have heard the same argument that this will be done. The Government say they are going to look at the formula, but we could fix this by just increasing the premium, for those areas such as County Durham that are affected by the premium, with some more central Government funding. That could be fixed today.

If we look at the actual figures for who gains through this system, we see that the average increase in funding for the police this time is 3.6%. I will just read out those that are lowest below the 3.6%: Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, Northumbria, West Yorkshire, Humberside, South Wales, Gwent, Durham, South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, West Midlands, Cleveland and Merseyside. What do all these have in common? Many of them are deprived communities, and they all have in common the problem that County Durham has of having a high number of council tax payers in band A properties. Some of the most deprived communities are getting the least funding, not just this year but every year.

Let us look at the top gainers from this year’s round, which will get up to 4.3%. The top forces are Wiltshire, Essex, Herefordshire, Sussex, Thames Valley, Dorset, Surrey, Hampshire, and Kent. The Government claim that they want to level up Britain and ensure that resources go to deprived areas, but this is doing exactly the opposite. This is restricting the amount of money going to the north-east, and turning that on its head by ensuring that more affluent areas get more. I am not suggesting that those areas do not have crime, but crime is certainly different in inner-city Merseyside, for example, and other places.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Gwent, Merseyside and some other constabularies to support his narrative, but does he agree that those constabularies already receive the highest amount of public money per capita of any forces in the country? The Government are trying to

level up. He mentioned Dorset, and it is important to note that Dorset was right at the bottom of this table when we were having this debate in the House last year. Does he accept that some of the points he makes are not quite right when put in the context of per capita funding?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman talks about per capita funding, but the overall effect is on an area's ability to raise funding. For example, I do not know how many Dorset properties are in band A, but I doubt that it is nearly 60% as it is in County Durham. The Government argue that somehow they are raising extra money for policing, but they are actually forcing local council tax payers in the most deprived areas of the country to pay more. They are then saying to local police and crime commissioners, "It is down to you. You've got to make a decision." Well they have no bloomin' choice about that decision, because without it, some of those police forces would have to make more cuts.

The settlement that has been put forward is more of the same, and I doubt that before the next general election we will get anywhere on the police grants formula at all. As I said earlier, levelling up should be more than just a political slogan—that is clearly what it is, an empty political slogan. As has been said, demands on poorer communities are greater, but we have had this philosophy since 2010 that everywhere in the UK is basically the same and that services can be delivered the same no matter where they are—I will be speaking about that again in the next debate, on local government funding. Well, we know that is not true of the demands on our policing in higher crime areas. The system is fundamentally unfair, yet as I said, it has been going on for 10 years.

The Government set great store by saying that we will get an extra 20,000 police officers. That is another slogan being put out as if it were a great achievement, and as though somehow the Government had nothing to do with the fact that we lost police officers in the first place. If those police were additional to what we had in 2010 that would be great, but they are not. In some cases they are replacing other police officers, but County Durham is actually ending up with fewer police officers than we had in 2010. After this process, we will have 144 fewer police officers on the streets of County Durham than we had in 2010. All I say is that people should look past the slogans.

The other issue—I think the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire referred to this—is that we are not replacing like with like.

The experience lost in many police forces, as well as the historical knowledge of dealing with crime in a local area, cannot be replaced overnight, as has been suggested, by recruiting new police officers. A police officer can be replaced with a new police officer, but experience, built up over many years, will take many years to replace. I suggest people look not only at the number of police officers, but at the effects caused over the last 13 years as experienced police officers have retired and left or been made redundant and gone, taking away their knowledge of policing their area. That will take a long time to replace.

My other concern about the sudden injection of 20,000 new police officers is about the impact on the profile of some police forces, which will not affect them

until a few years hence. There will be a bulge in numbers one year and a drought afterwards, which will affect pensions as well as operational ability. Again, I suggest people should look at that issue.

On efficiency—I have said it already and I will say it again—the Conservative party is not following a new playbook. We had this playbook before, when Eric Pickles, now Lord Pickles, argued that the way to implement cuts was through local efficiencies and that having fewer pot plants in the office or getting rid of one or two offices would somehow plug the gap that had been created by central Government decisions. We know that is a fallacy. I am a strong believer in value for money and efficiency in any public services. Durham constabulary has shown it can make such efficiencies, but there is no more fat to cut to make more to fill the gap.

I am sorry that the Minister is no longer in his place, but all I say to the Government is just to be honest. Just say, "Look, what are you doing?" They should not try to tell people to make efficiencies and then claim credit, as they try to do every year, for the extra money they say is going into policing. It is not extra money; the bulk of it is from local council taxpayers in the poorest areas, who are least able to pay. They should not blame police and crime commissioners, as they do not have an option about putting up the maximum.

This settlement is more of the same—it has not changed in the last 13 years and it will continue. Those areas that can afford it will get more while areas such as County Durham, which cannot afford it, will get less, despite the dedication and hard work of some very dedicated individuals who work for Durham police.

4.3 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Before I give my brief speech, I want to pay tribute to President Zelensky. What a touching, poignant and remarkable speech it was, and how courageous of him to come here. I very much hope we do exactly what he wants to support him and his vulnerable nation.

First, I pay tribute to Dorset police, which is a wonderful force that does a fantastic job of keeping us all safe and catching criminals, which are its two primary tasks. I thank the outgoing chief constable, Scott Chilton. Sadly, he has gone across to Hampshire, where his home is, having served three years with us; we wish him well. He is a remarkable chief constable, and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight constabulary is very lucky to have him. He is Dorset's loss. I welcome his replacement, Amanda Pearson, who will take up post at the end of March. I understand she is outstanding. I have corresponded with her already, and we look forward to meeting and supporting her. I also pay tribute to David Sidwick, our excellent police and crime commissioner, who works alongside the chief constable.

I spoke to the Minister, who sadly is no longer in his place, and I was very grateful to hear yesterday that at last—we have heard it from all sides of the House—the funding formula will be looked at. Let us hope it finally will be. I was also very grateful to hear contributions from Conservative Members on topics such as rurality. Millions of people visit Dorset. We have 20 million visitors a year because it is, of course, the most attractive county in the country. However, the police funding formula does not account for that and that puts huge

[Richard Drax]

pressures on our force. We welcome the extra funding that Dorset has received, but we still have issues with the funding formula.

The police and crime commissioner, David Sidwick, and the chief constable have taken part in negotiations with the Home Office on the funding formula review, which I understand is still ongoing. They are optimistic that rurality and other issues that have previously not been taken into account, not least sparsity in Dorset, will be taken into account. That is all welcome news. However, two particular areas have been identified that I want to raise this afternoon.

First, on the illegal use of drugs, as I understand it the funding is based on population, so big cities do better. However, the Government's harm to hope strategy identifies that some areas such as Bournemouth, which is not in my seat but is certainly in Dorset, have greater use of illicit substances, cannabis factories and some of the highest crack and heroin usage in the country. Funding should be allocated proportionally to assist such areas.

Secondly, the police precept has been mentioned on both sides of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke eloquently, and complained about 45% or thereabouts coming from his precept. I think that was right. I can tell my hon. Friend—dare I say it—that in Dorset the figure is 51.5%. We have probably one of the highest rates in the country. We pay a huge amount in council tax as it is. That is historical and is down to the fact that we have such a rural community. It is just another tax on local people, which I just do not think is fair.

Funding for Dorset, with all the issues we have, must come from central Government. I urge the Government please to come up with the funding formula correction as soon as they possibly can and I ask for some indication of where we are on that when the Minister sums up. I assume it will not happen until the Budget, because he cannot say what he can and cannot do until the Chancellor has given him the okay. For some police forces, 20% of activities are funded from the precept. As I said a moment ago, our precept accounts for 51.5%, which I really do not think is fair. Dorset police force has been one of the lowest funded forces for as long as I recall. I remember campaigning on that back in 2006 when I first became the candidate for South Dorset. That seems an awful long time ago and not much has changed.

Finally, before I sit down, may I go back to my old hobby horse which is police stations? I think they have been mentioned by someone on the far side, on the Opposition Benches. It is a fact that hundreds have been closed. I am, I am afraid, an old-fashioned Conservative MP and I like police stations. I like them because they are where people, not least women and the vulnerable, can go to at 2 o'clock in the morning when they are being chased by some lunatic down the street. Sadly, that happens all too frequently nowadays it seems. They can run to a police station. It is somewhere safe to go to and it is manned 24 hours day. Officers who are based there patrol on foot—obviously, they have vehicles to back them up—to gather all the intelligence, meet people on the street, and reassure women, children and others coming home, maybe in the early hours, from wherever they have been. They see a policeman, policewoman or

PCSO on the street in uniform and they know they are home. That gives them the confidence and reassurance to go out, and that is what we are desperately missing—a police station. I urge the Government to please, please consider, when it comes to funding, that police officers should have enough money to buy up—or certainly not sell off—police property.

I will end by touching on Portland, a beautiful island in my constituency that now has a population of circa 13,000. It used to have a police station, and I can confidently say that it had an inspector and more than 10 officers. Now, it gets a visit by car, if it is lucky, plus responses to crimes. I believe that an island of 13,000 people needs a police station, and islanders think so too. I make that point firmly to the Minister and the Government.

4.10 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), and not just today. We repeat this debate year after year; I followed him last year, if I recall correctly. One of the downsides of following such an excellent constituency MP and neighbour is that his speech had most of the lines I wanted to use, but I have a few important extras to share.

First, I thank the Government very much indeed for their continued investment in our policing, which is very important: £287 million is impressive. I am pleased that we can have this debate. It is a step forward, although of course we know that there are things we need to address.

From Dorset's perspective, there is a lot of good news to share about what the force has achieved. In no small part, that is down to our police and crime commissioner, David Sidwick. Over the past year, the rural crime team has quadrupled in size to tackle some of the most difficult rural crimes, which in many cases have not received the necessary attention for many years. Dorset police have made huge strides forward with Operation Viper, the drug enforcement initiative that they launched in April 2022. In the first six weeks alone, £100,000-worth of illegal drugs were seized and there were 29 arrests. Officers made 48 cuckooing prevention visits and 22 related arrests in one week, as well as seizing 146 wraps of heroin and crack cocaine and various weapons. Those were not headlines that I could have shared with the House this time last year.

It is very important to note that there has been a step forward. When we had this debate last year, we were in a very difficult position and I was not at all happy about the increase in funding that we were facing. We were at the bottom of the league table—I think we were 40th out of 41 constabularies across the country—but we have now come up the scale somewhat and are 28th. It is important to state that for the sake of fairness.

Further to my intervention on the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), it is really important to understand what has been going on underneath the mechanism, and what I think the Government are starting to correct. The right hon. Gentleman referred to Gwent, Merseyside and other forces, but the reality is that those forces have received higher funding per capita than anywhere else in the country for a very long time. Cleveland, for example, has a fairly new police and crime commissioner who is having to deal with many difficult issues, but the House should note that it is

more often than not Labour police and crime commissioners who are fortunate enough to have such per capita income, whereas Conservative police and crime commissioners often do not.

The police grant report shows that we are starting to make strides ahead in terms of fairness. That said, we ought not to forget that the split between Government funding and local funding through the precept is fair. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) commented on his situation earlier. I am not sure whether I am right or my hon. Friend and neighbour is right, but according to my figures 49% of our funding comes from the precept, and that is much more than for the vast majority of other constabularies—49% is enormous.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Member must look at the facts. Dorset is No. 6 in the league table, and its increase in this spending round will be 4.2%. The figure for Cleveland, which the hon. Member also mentioned, is 3.12%. I do not blame him for arguing for his area, because that is exactly what he was elected to do, but he is arguing that somehow Dorset is badly done by in comparison with other areas. I am sorry, but it is not.

Chris Loder: As always, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the reality is that we are playing years and years' worth of catch-up, because the overall police funding settlement has been directed to areas such as his and those of other Members which have benefited year after year, while the good people of Dorset, Bedfordshire and other counties have been bearing the brunt of the policing costs to enable the Government to direct their finance capability towards helping areas such as his.

I am very conscious of the fact that crime dynamics will differ—I am not suggesting that that is not the case—but the reality is that we have faced a particular problem in rural areas with county lines drugs and rural crime. We in Dorset have survived for years with just three officers in the rural crime team. However, we have not been able to do the crime statistics justice, which is why I made those points at the beginning of my speech.

Ms Rimmer: Surely this is about meeting needs. In Merseyside we have a port; we import crime. Drugs come through the port and there are all kinds of organised crime. Does the hon. Gentleman have that in his area?

Chris Loder: No.

Ms Rimmer: No, he does not. Where do we get the finance to handle that? The funds have to go where they are needed, but we are not getting the funds and we are not getting the truth. If there is a desire for us to work together to tackle the needs of communities, let us be honest and let us work together. It is no use standing up and giving false statistics involving disproportionate amounts. Even the Prime Minister, the former Chancellor, boasted about shifting funds away from these areas—the red wall areas, as he described them—to other areas. He boasted about that during his own campaign, so the hon. Gentleman cannot deny it.

Chris Loder: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; I do value the points she has made in response to some of the things I have said, and I agree with her to an

extent. In West Dorset—it is probably the same in South Dorset—we are dealing with county lines coming from Merseyside that actually cause us great difficulty.

Ms Rimmer rose—

Chris Loder: I am sorry, but I have already given way once to the hon. Lady, and I need to respond to the points that she has made.

It is frustrating for me to look at the per capita funding for policing and see that consistently, year after year, Merseyside has benefited from considerable extra funding to help it deal with these issues, while we in Dorset, along with other rural constabularies in particular, have suffered—it might not be fair for me to say “at the expense of other areas”, but I think it is fair to say that we have cut our cloth to fit. We have reached a point at which we have had to act. Our population increases by a third during the summer season.

I know that the hon. Lady is particularly keen to intervene again. I will happily give way to her, but it will be the last time.

Ms Rimmer rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Can the intervention be brief this time, please?

Ms Rimmer: Yes, it can. I fully accept what the hon. Member says about county lines. We have had major issues and a lot of work is going on. Yes, a lot of that comes out of Merseyside and St Helens, but does he know that the police follow them? The Merseyside police follow the crime out of Merseyside, so a lot of our police are going out to get those people back.

Chris Loder: I do not like to criticise the hon. Lady's constabulary, but I can tell her that, clearly from my experiences, it has not been following the crime to Dorset, because that has been a huge problem for us and, I suspect, for neighbouring colleagues in Dorset and probably in Somerset as well.

Richard Drax: Let me make a very quick and rather cheeky observation: it may be useful if the police got those people in Merseyside before they had to follow them all the way to Dorset.

Chris Loder: That is indeed the ideal situation—that the police stem the issue at the root. I agree with some of what the hon. Lady has to say, but the reality, from what I can see, is that the funding has gone to those forces and commissioners in order to address it, but I do not think it has happened. That is why we must now intervene.

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Member is talking about Merseyside, and I am a Merseyside MP. In actual fact, we are still short 450 officers compared to 2010. We have had a big loss of officers, which we have felt in our communities. I think the hon. Gentleman agrees with my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) that local policing is about national policing, too.

Chris Loder: Indeed, but it is worth noting that my point, which I will make again, is that when it comes to per capita funding for the police, Dorset has been historically at the bottom of the pile and Merseyside has been near the top. That is the point I am making in this debate, and it is an important one. To be honest, if either of the hon. Members wishes to make the case for Merseyside, they may have the opportunity to speak a little later. I am conscious that I have had my fair share of time and we probably ought to move on.

I want to emphasise that parts of what the Government have brought forward do not take into account some of the pressures that we face on an annual basis. As I may have mentioned, the population rises by a third during the summertime. There is no measure in the current police funding arrangements to take that into account. That puts huge pressure on us in Dorset, particularly because we are not eligible, regrettably, for the violence reduction funding that others are. I am conscious of the fact that some things need addressing, especially given that we are at the top of the list in the crime pressure calculation—I am not sure whether Members are familiar with that, but it is the severity of crime against the number of officers available. It proves that for a long time we have had a particularly lean machine in Dorset. I am pleased that the Government have pushed us up that league table for extra funds to help deal with that.

I will conclude my remarks by saying that when the House considered this matter 12 months ago, we debated the reform required for the police funding formula. My right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who is no longer in his place, was at the Dispatch Box and, if I recall correctly, he told the House that we would be seeing a consultation on this imminently and that we would see progress coming forth in short order. We are now 12 months on from that. It is very important to my constituents in West Dorset, and indeed to those who live across the county of Dorset, that we see this police funding formula revision and reform come forward quickly, and I would urge the Minister to take this back to her Department and to make that point clear.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Stamp Duty Land Tax (Temporary Relief) Act 2023
Northern Ireland Budget Act 2023

Police Grant Report

Debate resumed.

4.25 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): This is a debate that I would not in any circumstances wish to miss if at all possible. The contributions from the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) demonstrate that this is an important cross-party issue for Bedfordshire. In that vein, I would like to give the Minister a little ready reckoner for how she should think about the importance of pencil sharpening in working around the police grant. Which Members have been here to make contributions today? I have the scores for her. Thirty-eight police forces: nil. Hampshire and Durham: one apiece. Merseyside and Dorset: two each. Bedfordshire: three. Seriously, that is an important consideration for the Minister.

Can I give the Minister a further focus about where her priorities should be? We have heard about this year's increase in some of today's contributions. Let me just go through the four areas that had particular concerns. They are Merseyside, Durham, Dorset and Bedfordshire. Let us look at the estimated funding per capita after the increase. For Merseyside, it is £290 per capita; for Durham, it is £244 per capita; for Dorset, it is £213 per capita; and for Bedfordshire, it is £203 per capita. Good points have been made about particular areas having special circumstances, such as having a port, but I would point out that in Bedfordshire we have Luton airport—frankly, we have issues in Luton more generally—so every area has its special issues. There are tourists in certain areas, for example. But there is a wide disparity between Bedfordshire and Merseyside. It is £203 compared with £290, which is 50% more. That is a lot.

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

Richard Fuller: No, I will not give way.

I think the Minister should focus on those issues. Where will we be after these increases, and who was here to make the case for their police force? Merseyside and Durham have made strong cases, and Dorset certainly has as well.

Ms Rimmer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Fuller: I will not give way.

Let me move on. The way in which we have tried to work around this in Bedfordshire is through the special grants. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire mentioned the concerns about these grants being reduced. I say to the Minister that there is a difference between a top-up grant—it does what it says: it tops up the basic level of funding—and an infill grant, which tries to bring an area up to a basic level of funding, and that is the case with the grants in Bedfordshire. It is a different kettle of fish for our police force than perhaps it is for others, and I would ask her and her colleagues to look at that.

We have a new chief constable in Bedfordshire, and we expect great things from him. We also have a fantastic police and crime commissioner in Festus Akinbusoye, and I pay tribute to both of them for focusing on rural policing and getting the right balance between the demands

of urban policing and rural policing, particularly by putting in new officers. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire said we now have 1,403 officers in Bedfordshire, which is fantastic.

I know concerns have been raised—I have thought about them myself—about young officers versus experienced officers. Of course we never want to lose experience, but we should be optimistic about this influx of younger people and new officers who want to contribute to their community. That is fantastic, and this generation's camaraderie and co-operation will come. Not all of them will be young, and some of them may be joining as a second career, but they will bring an understanding of new ways to do things, which is important in our police force. We should balance our concerns a little. In Bedfordshire, given that 25% of our police officers are new, that is an important issue, which I know the chief constable will work on carefully.

It is not often said, but I fully believe that individual police officers always treat women and people of African origin with equal respect and equal concern to make sure they have the protection of the law but, because of the history and people's experience, there is still a lot of work to be done by our police officers to rebuild trust and expectations among women and, particularly, people of Afro-Caribbean or African origin. I know it is not part of the report, but that consideration should form part of the Policing Minister's understanding.

Finally, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) did not quite answer my question. This is a cross-party debate on what is right for all our communities. There will be a time when the Opposition have to answer my question about where they will find new funding if they want to roll back the council tax increases. They cannot keep going back to the same source. Responsible funding for our police forces requires us to have sensible conversations about what is affordable, as well as how the police funding formula allocates money between forces.

Policing is a tricky brief. We have heard about the expectation that the funding formula will be changed. It would be heroic of any of us to say today that we know what will happen in the next 12 months. I cannot see anyone indicating with any confidence that that will occur. Nevertheless, police officers across the country are doing the best with what they have to deliver a great service for our constituents. I commend their actions.

4.32 pm

Sarah Jones: With the leave of the House, I will respond relatively briefly. I thank everyone who has contributed today. I am not surprised that Bedfordshire and Dorset are represented in this debate, just as they were represented in previous debates.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is a champion of the need to address the funding formula, and he made some reasonable and sensible points. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made a powerful speech about how we cannot level up without tackling crime, and about how the funding situation does not work on that front.

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) talked about rurality, and it is important that we tackle rural crime—I have seen a lot of that work on my trips in this brief. He also spoke of the need for police

stations, and I agree with that, too. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) talked about there being three officers in a rural team, which does not sound like much. We all agree that the funding formula is not good enough and does not get the right results, and that we need better-funded policing.

The hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) asked what Labour would do on funding, and I reassure him that we have committed to putting 13,000 officers and PCSOs on our streets, and that we are funding that from £350 million of identified procurement savings. At the moment, each force chooses its own uniform, cars and IT system. There are lots of savings to be made across that piece that have not been explored. The importance of local police forces having local independence is key, but police officers say to me, "That independence to do what needs to be done does not amount to what kind of car we buy. It amounts to how we respond to a protest in our local area." So there is work to be done on that and that is what Labour would do.

This debate comes in the context of the UK being set to have the slowest growth of any G7 nation in 2023. Because of the economy, Government funding for PCCs in real terms is being cut by £136 million. We see the replacement of 20,000 officers that were cut and we are asked to be grateful for that—alongside all the cuts to PCSOs and staff.

I agree with many colleagues who have spoken today about the precept. It is unacceptable that the most deprived communities with the fewest band D properties will get the least cash through this increase; it is unacceptable that the decision to raise the precept limit is presented by the Government as "increased flexibility", masking the truth of a council tax hike; and it is unacceptable that the Government are further burdening local taxpayers, instead of dealing with inflation and properly funding the police. We all know about the Policing Minister's passion for low taxation during his time in the Treasury, so I am surprised that he is defending that policy.

The first job of any Government is to keep their people safe, but to make them pay more locally for that right during this economic slump looks like an abdication of duty. The Government have made a fanfare about their levelling-up agenda, but with the police funding formula consistently unfair, even according to Conservative Ministers, and a precept grant that favours PCCs from affluent areas, levelling up looks like more empty promises. This Government are not proposing common sense; they are making people pay for the Government's economic mismanagement.

This country is suffering after 13 years of Conservative Governments. The disastrous mini-Budget, so vocally defended by the Policing Minister, has left our economy in ruins. Inflation is running at 10.5%. Ours is the only major economy forecast to shrink this year. Public services are on their knees and around the country people are struggling to make ends meet. This Conservative Government are failing to deliver justice to victims, to rebuild neighbourhood policing and to support the police.

Therefore, I must ask the Minister: when will the re-announced review of the funding formula be published? Will he update us on progress being made on the emergency services network and on the £5.1 billion overspend, to date, on that project? Is he proud of

[Sarah Jones]

increasing the burden on local tax payers, instead of getting a grip on the economy? We will not vote against this grant, but we must stress that these plans discriminate against struggling households. We need an active Home Office that tackles crime, puts victims first and looks after our police officers but sets national standards on conduct. Labour will be that active Home Office. We will rebuild neighbourhood policing, punish criminals, prevent crime and protect communities. I ask the Government to think again about how they fund our policing, so that the victims of crime up and down our country get the service they deserve.

4.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): We are grateful for all the contributions from Members from across the House, and it is a privilege to represent the Government in this debate on a topic of such immense significance for our constituents and our country as a whole. The police funding settlement announced today affirms that this Government are steadfast in supporting the police in their vital mission to keep the public safe and cut crime. Next year, we are increasing total funding for policing by up to £287 million, providing forces with an increase of up to £523 million and committing £1.1 billion on national policing priorities, and we will continue to provide more than £1 billion to counter-terrorism policing. That is a significant investment, even if the Opposition do not think it is. It will enable the police to maximise the value of the uplift, cut crime across the country and increase confidence in the criminal justice system by putting victims first.

Let me turn to some of the specific points that have been made by hon. Members in their colourful interventions and speeches. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) raised various issues at length and used a teasing tone with the Policing Minister, but my right hon. Friend has an impressive grasp of the facts and, however energetic he is, he is never boring. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who is not in his place, pontificated at length, but might turn his attention to the difficulties within his own party.

In relation to local funding, the Government are increasing funding to the policing system in 2023-24. The police funding settlement offers additional investment from central Government for forces to maintain the additional 20,000 officer uplift, as well as additional precept flexibility for PCCs in England to support their local policing priorities. Overall, police funding available to PCCs will increase by up to £523 million—3.6% in cash terms—next year.

Police and crime commissioners in England have been given the flexibility to raise council tax contributions for policing by up to £15 a year—not 15p, as was erroneously said by the Opposition spokesman—for a typical band D household next year, which is less than 30p a week, without the need to hold a local referendum. That is, of course, a lot of money, but it will be well spent by very good PCCs.

The level of police precept is a local decision and elected PCCs must carefully consider what they are asking their local constituents to pay. Local taxation

should not be in place of sound financial management, and we expect PCCs to exhaust all other options to prioritise their budgets, seek efficiencies and maximise productivity of their existing resources before looking to local tax payers for additional funding.

The police uplift programme continues to be a success and remains a top Government priority. As of 31 December 2022, 16,753 additional officers have been recruited in England and Wales as part of the police uplift programme, which is 84% of the target of 20,000 additional officers by March 2023.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Miss Dines: Sorry, we have limited time.

The Government are on track to recruit 20,000 additional officers by March 2023. For the first time ever, there will be more than 148,400 officers across England and Wales. That is the highest number of officers ever serving communities across England and Wales. There are now also more women and ethnic minority officers than ever before, so I do not accept the criticism and the narrative put by the Opposition.

I was interested to hear hon. Members from across the Chamber talk about a change in the current police funding formula. Valuable speeches were made by my hon. Friends the Members for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), for South Dorset (Richard Drax), for West Dorset (Chris Loder) and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). The issues that were raised were pertinent, covering rurality; fairness; and increasing population. Those will all need to be considered. That is why we intend to publish the first public consultation this year, which will set out the principles of the review and consult on the purpose, structure and components of the formula. I very much welcome the levity of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire. I will remember that and mention it to the Policing Minister over tea, if we ever get a chance.

In developing the new formula, we are considering the demands that face each police force and the relative impact of those local factors, not least of which is the cost of managing the estate—police stations and the like. Any changes to those funding arrangements will be well planned, with effective transition arrangements to enable sound financial management. The plans will be nuanced and well thought out.

Let me mention briefly the criminal justice system. We are working with partners across the criminal justice system to increase the number of cases being charged and prosecuted, and to reduce the time taken to reach that point. We are committed to ensuring that the criminal justice system works better with police and prosecutors, improving charge rates, which have dropped for many crimes. Getting the basics right must be a top priority, and that means ensuring that reports of crime are taken seriously and investigated, and that offenders are brought to justice.

There was criticism by an hon. Member of the new police officers having a lack of experience. To some extent, that is always true of new police officers, but I view that as an opportunity to look at issues, such as tackling violence against women and girls, which, historically, have not had the prominence that they should.

New officers are a new opportunity for new education and new common-sense policing. We will continue to improve our criminal justice system for victims by investing in a new victim satisfaction survey to shine a light on performance and drive improvements in the support that police forces provide to victims. There is much more I could say, but the criminal justice dashboards that show local data will be informative, and the Policing Minister's knowledge of statistics means that we will be well served when looking at that dashboard across the whole criminal justice system.

The Home Secretary has made it her priority to deliver justice and high-quality outcomes for victims and is concerned about the level of cases being investigated. To get those cases converted to charges and prosecutions, this Government are working collaboratively with the Courts Minister and the Solicitor General to ensure we are jointly enabling our operational partners in policing, the Crown Prosecution Service and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service to deliver improvements. Only an effective and robust criminal justice system will effectively enforce our rights in society, and that is why it is critical that it functions properly.

We must continue to press serious violence issues and ensure that our public are safe. That may mean that police officers will stray into a neighbouring police force at times, but that is to be expected. It will be cross-force work that is so effective on policing county lines. The settlement provides funding to combat serious crime, including violence reduction units and the Grip hotspot policing programme, as well as providing funding to clamp down on drugs and county lines, delivering on commitments made in the 10-year drug strategy. Improvements are being made and convictions are forthcoming. The final allocations for programmes related to violence prevention, including serious violence and drugs, will be confirmed in due course. There is much I would like to say about the police technology programme, but unfortunately we do not have time.

Keeping people safe is the foremost responsibility of any Government, and I am pleased that I can agree with the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), on that. However, it is this Government that are delivering on that duty by putting record numbers of police officers on the streets—far more than there ever were under a Labour Government—and by supporting all forces to maintain them. We have made strong progress, but there is more to do. We will continue supporting and challenging the police to deliver for the people they serve, and the settlement shows that there will be no let-up in our mission to cut crime, pursue perpetrators and make our country safer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2023-24 (HC 1066), which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Local Government Finance

[Relevant Documents: Second Report of the former Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2021–22, Local authority financial sustainability and the section 114 regime, HC 33; and the Government Response, CP 543; Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 21 November 2022, on The Work of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022, HC 808; Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 9 January 2023, on Departmental Annual Report and Accounts 2021-22, HC 962; and Written evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on Local Government Finance Settlement, reported to the House on 14 December 2022, 9 January and 6 February 2023.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The three motions on local government finance will be debated together.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2023-24 (HC 1015), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this we shall discuss the following motions on local government finance:

That the Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2023-24 (HC 1016), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

That the Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) Report 2023-24 (HC 1017), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

Lee Rowley: Today we are confirming the major parts of the settlement announced in December: greater funding for local government, greater stability for councils, greater certainty in their ability to plan, and greater space in their ability for future reform, responding to what local councils have asked us to do. We know that local government has faced significant challenges in recent years: the pandemic and its incredible local response to that, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the challenges that that has brought for prices, the cost of living and inflation, and, more broadly, global inflation, which has fuelled the cost of living. We know that that has had an impact across society, and that includes the tremendous work that our colleagues in town halls and council chambers up and down the land have done throughout. I am hugely grateful for all their efforts to continue to deliver for their communities in difficult circumstances.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Minister talks about the terrible circumstances in Ukraine and the events of the last year, but he must recognise that the scale of the cuts since 2010 have been devastating for our local authorities, which have had to consider closing libraries, swimming pools, leisure centres and so forth. Can he confirm that it is in fact more of a long-term problem and that we need greater investment in our public services?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for outlining her concerns. She tempts me into a wider discussion about the financial policies of the previous Labour Government and the coalition over the last 13 or so years, which have been discussed at length here. I was a councillor in 2010, and I know that where I was a councillor the money was not in the right place then, so 2010 should not be seen as a panacea for the effectiveness and efficiency of local government.

None the less, we are dealing with a specific challenge this year, and there is a significant improvement in the local government funding provided as part of this settlement. In recognition of those exceptional pressures, we are confirming funding from the taxpayer totalling almost £60 billion for local authorities in England for the next financial year.

It is important to acknowledge, as this House confuses it on occasion, that political debates are always about much more than money. However, using that calculus, we are confirming an additional £5 billion in core spending power for 2023-24, a new one-off funding guarantee that ensures that every council will see a minimum 3% increase in its core spending power before decisions are made on raising council tax locally, plus £2 billion in additional grants for adult and children's social care for the coming financial year.

Taken together, they represent a significant increase that will allow councils to deliver the vital local services upon which we all depend and that responds to councils' request for greater certainty and greater space to reform in the years to come. That is in addition to the billions already available to local government through the levelling-up fund and other regeneration and infrastructure funding, which is helping to boost growth, jobs and opportunity, as demonstrated only a fortnight ago in the additional funding announced for more than 111 local infrastructure projects across the UK.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way; he is very kind. Is he aware of concerns that the revenue support grant does not reflect updated population statistics, which will have a severely negative impact on constituencies such as mine in Salford? Our population has increased by 15.4% from 2011 to 2021. How do the Government propose to address that glaring deficiency in the plan?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady raises an important point: a number of the formulas in place in local government have been in place for a number of years. There is always the question, which Governments of all parties have debated and discussed over many years, of when it is the right time to reform and when it is the right time to offer stability. I would be happy to talk to her in more detail about particular challenges that occur in the north-west with the changes in the census, but, as a principle this year, given the requests of local government, we have chosen to prioritise stability and certainty, which councils have asked for.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister talks about levelling up, and I do not want to go into the pain he had last week on that, but there was a report yesterday in the *Financial Times* that the Treasury has stopped his Department doing any further capital spending because it is concerned about value for money. Could he comment on that?

Lee Rowley: The Treasury certainly has not stopped anybody doing capital spending; we need only look at the amount of money going out of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and supporting communities such as my own in Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire, through two town deals and the levelling-up funds. That demonstrates this Government's commitment to levelling up across the whole country, all through the year.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the recent funding from the levelling-up fund that will benefit projects across my constituency. In addition to core funding, we have had transforming cities funding and coastal communities funding—a huge amount of money has gone into local government, above and beyond the core spending grants. Furthermore, as our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State knows, local authorities now predominantly do not fund schools, which are directly funded by the Department for Education. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the uplift in funding will allow local authorities such as mine to concentrate on core functions that the public expect, such as filling in potholes and cleaning the streets?

Lee Rowley: That is exactly the intention behind what we are confirming today. Local government does a brilliant job every single day all across the land, and we are seeking to give it the tools to continue doing that and space to reform in the coming years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Lee Rowley: I will make a little progress and then I will happily give way to more hon. Members.

Throughout, we have been mindful of the squeeze on household budgets and how it is being felt more acutely in some places than in others. That is why money is going to the communities that need it most and why, alongside that, we are providing councils with £100 million-worth of further support to help the most vulnerable households with council tax increases and cost of living pressures. It is also why we are striking a fair balance between giving councils the flexibility to make local decisions to meet local pressures and support the most vulnerable, and continuing our general policy of protecting local taxpayers from excessive tax increases, in line with our manifesto commitments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Lee Rowley: I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman from Liverpool.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): The Minister is very kind. After 13 years of Tory austerity wreaking devastation in my city, £75 million-worth of cuts are expected this year, putting vital services such as the benefits maximisation team under threat. Those are the very services he talks about—the ones that have kept people alive during this time. At the moment, one in three people in my city lives in food poverty. The ideological underfunding of councils such as Liverpool's is becoming a national scandal. Does the Minister agree?

Lee Rowley: No, I do not agree. I encourage hon. Members from the Liverpool area to focus on the fundamental problems that are occurring in their councils and on the reasons why the commissioners are in Liverpool City Council at the moment.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) *rose*—

Lee Rowley: My apologies; I have not yet given way to the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for his apology. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) asked a pertinent question about the story in the FT yesterday, and he did not really get a full answer, did he? It did not say that the Department had been stopped from spending capital money; it said that the Department had been

“banned from making spending decisions on new capital projects without specific permission from the Treasury, after concerns were raised about the ministry’s ability to deliver value for money.”

That is a pretty damning intervention by the Treasury. Is it true?

Lee Rowley: I would not believe everything written in the press. As we do all the way through the year and through all these projects, we work very closely with the Treasury, and we ensure that we are achieving the ultimate objective, which is to level up communities such as those represented by Opposition Members, by me, and by my hon. Friends on the Back Benches

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Lee Rowley: I will make a little more progress and then I will happily give way to a number of colleagues.

We have also set a core referendum principle of up to 3%, plus 2% for the adult social care precept, for both 2023-24 and 2024-25, alongside wider flexibility. We expect councils to balance the financial needs of local residents at this challenging time with support for action to keep our streets safe and the delivery of key services—that is, to continue doing what they are so good at.

That very much includes services to protect the most vulnerable. We are all too aware of the pressures on, and the concerns about, social care services. That is why this settlement ensures a significant boost in that area, through about £2 billion in additional grants for social care in 2023 and 2024, including £300 million—distributed through the better care fund—to get people out of hospital on time and into a care setting; £1.3 billion for adult and children’s social care, provided through the social care grant, on top of the roll-over funding from 2022-23; and the £400 million additional adult social care grant announced in the autumn statement. That will be combined with the retained £162 million distributed in 2022-23.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): On the point about focusing on the things that councils do best, Warrington Borough Council has borrowed more than £2 billion and is now acting as a lending house to commercial businesses in the north-west of England. It has bought office blocks, supermarkets and an energy company that went bust, and it has invested in banks. Is

that really what local councils should be doing? Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time that we looked carefully at the indebtedness and the risk to local taxpayers?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In any system where councils have the opportunity to do things, the vast majority will do the right thing—achieving and focusing on the basics that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) mentioned a moment ago. However, at times councils may not do the right thing. The Secretary of State has been clear that when councils do not do the right things, we will hold them to account. We will also seriously examine any local council if there is a suggestion that there may be a problem; I know from discussions with my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) that we are currently undertaking activities in his area.

I want to finish the point about social care. I am pleased to announce that today we have published an explanatory note about social care funding, setting out more detail on the different social care grants provided for through the settlement. We absolutely recognise that some councils find it easier than others to generate income from council tax to fund social care, so we have equalised that against the adult social care precept since it was introduced. We will continue to do that in 2023-24.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way; I appreciate it.

First of all, the Minister tells us that local authority care spending will be increased by 9.2% in 2023-24 in cash terms. The Government are assuming that every council will raise its council tax by 5% without a referendum—previously, we could not raise it by more than 1% without a referendum. Then this afternoon, the Minister stood up and said that he expected councils to help us honour a manifesto commitment to keep tax increases low. He is saying that we should raise care spending on the one hand, and taking the credit for that, and then telling us not to collect it and keep taxes low.

The main issue I want to raise is social care; the Minister cannot get away from this, and I know he understands what is going on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Interventions should be brief. The hon. Lady’s interventions are longer than some speeches I have given in this Chamber.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who has a long career in local government; I defer to her knowledge and experience. I absolutely accept what I think she was about to say about social care: that there is challenge. I have acknowledged that in my speech today. We have also come forward with a significant amount of additional support over the winter and beyond, and given greater certainty about what is coming.

I come back to the hon. Lady’s first point. Given her experience in local government and her leadership of her local council over such a long period before she came to this place, she will acknowledge and understand that the job of Government is to provide the flexibility

[Lee Rowley]

for local areas to do what they do best. With that flexibility comes choice. The Government have a long-standing manifesto commitment to try to limit council tax rises, and given what I have just seen in the debate about policing—a succession of Opposition Members standing up to highlight the challenges—we think we are striking an appropriate balance.

I turn to the consultation itself. Following the consultation on the provisional settlement, we have listened carefully to the issues raised. We thank each of the 150 people who responded from across the country. We have listened and responded. We ask councils to check the accuracy of the home building data that they have returned to us and in response we have increased new homes bonus allocations by £630,000. We recognise the cost pressures of serving all populations, but a strong case has been made to us about those in rural areas. Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) led an important debate on rurality, and I thank him for doing so.

We have increased the rural services delivery grant by £10 million, to take it to a total of £95 million. We said that we would release unused contingency back to the sector through the services grant, which goes to all authorities. We have done that, increasing that grant by £19 million. Following local failings that have left them with unprecedented financial deficits, we have also agreed to requests from Thurrock, Croydon and Slough for the flexibility to raise additional council tax. This is not a decision that the Government have taken lightly. The historical behaviour of those three councils has been poor, leading to significant financial mismanagement, and that is not acceptable. However, each council has been clear that, given the scale of their budget deficit, additional increases are necessary to support their financial recovery, on top of the support that the Government have already provided and that may further need to be provided in the future. Equally, the Government are clear that the councils have failed to operate with the necessary leadership and propriety and should take action locally. The failings in each council are deep-seated, and alongside agreeing to this request, the Government will continue to work through the commissioners and panels already in place to oversee the councils' wider recovery.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On the issue of mismanagement, may I suggest it is much better to have prevention than cure? We do not want Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council to get into a situation that results in 15% increases because of mismanagement. That is why I am grateful to the Government for initiating an assurance review that will start soon, as I understand it, and for intervening to prevent the council from engaging in what was described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the predecessor of the current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, as “a dodgy deal”. My constituents much appreciate what the Government have done to save them from that.

Lee Rowley: As my hon. Friend has indicated, we are shortly to begin an assurance review of governance arrangements within Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, and we look forward to seeing the outcome of that.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On the point about mismanagement, I note that the Minister is yet to mention the disastrous mini-Budget from last autumn, which pushed inflation to the highest rate in 40 years and has wiped out the benefit of a lot of the additional funds he is talking about. What message does he have for my constituents under St Albans City and District Council and Three Rivers District Council, who are each facing an approximate 22% cut in real terms since 2015 in their local budgets?

Lee Rowley: My message to the very discerning residents of St Albans and elsewhere is not to listen to this attempt to conflate the challenges that occurred, which we accept and have acknowledged, with the wider global issues that have been evident for many months. Most people, having watched the news, would acknowledge that, rather than having the rather one-dimensional response, if I may say so, shown in the hon. Lady's question.

These changes address many of the issues raised during the consultation. We also know that certainty and stability to plan ahead is another priority for councils in these challenging times. That is why, just before Christmas, we published a policy statement that outlines a two-year blueprint for local government finances, and it is why we have confirmed that, based on the stability and certainty that was asked for, we will not be going ahead with the business rates reset during this spending review period. We will be delaying reforms on charging for adult social care until at least October 2025.

There is certainly more to do to simplify the funding landscape and to reduce the associated burden of bureaucracy on councils. In that spirit, we are combining the £400 million in additional adult social care funding announced by the Chancellor in the autumn statement with the market sustainability and fair cost of care fund, and we are also rolling in four grants worth more than £200 million to the settlement.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On the question of clarity for local authorities, can the Minister confirm why we yet again have a one-year settlement for local authorities? This is the fifth successive one. Why do we have no confirmation as to whether the new homes bonus will continue in 2024-25 and why are this Government yet again kicking the pebble down the road on much-needed adult social care reform?

Lee Rowley: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. He brings long experience in local government, and I look forward to working with him in the coming months. To answer his question directly, this is the first time in a number of years that we have published an outline of what local government and those working in it can expect beyond the immediate financial year. In as many circumstances as possible we would like to be able to offer more extensive understandings of where funding is going, and that is why, responding to the requests for certainty, we have published a policy statement. We hope that it has been well received in local government—certainly the feedback I have received is that it has—as providing greater and longer-term understanding of what is likely to come in future financial years.

Strong, accountable local leadership that delivers high-quality, cost-effective services has never mattered more in this current climate. That is why today's settlement is

a recognition of the challenge and a response to difficult circumstances. It seeks provide the tools and space to deal with those circumstances. It is a significant settlement that seeks to balance the many different demands on Government, but acknowledges that local government has a vital role to play in the year to come and has done before. This will provide additional funding to deal with difficulty, additional space to improve, transform and make things more efficient, and additional time to better plan for the challenges and opportunities to come. We know that local government will use it to boost their communities and to level up for the long term, as it always does. I commend the motion to the House.

5.10 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is clear that, in every corner of the country, from coastal towns to rural communities to dense urban areas, our constituents are being short-changed by this Government. Their local authorities have been starved of funds since 2010 and, instead of offering them revival, the Government are content to watch regional inequality worsen and to pit city against city, town against town and village against village in a bidding war, with winners and losers picked out by a Department with almost no transparency.

In reality, everyone loses under this Government, apart from maybe non-doms and personal protective equipment contractors. To compound this “Hunger Games”-style bidding war disguised as levelling up, consecutive Ministers have made bigger and bigger cuts to Government funding for local authorities, to the point where councils have been left with no choice but to raise local taxes to fill the void.

Let us look at the local government finance settlement. As with most things that the Government tell people that they should be grateful for, the devil is in the detail. Let us look at where the 9.4% is really coming from, because the majority is coming from local taxpayers. They are the same people who have had their mortgages increased because the Tories crashed the economy; the same people who were paying through the nose for gas and electricity while the Tories refused to implement a windfall tax against energy companies making record-breaking profits; the same people who are seeing council services slashed across the country. And today, Ministers are asking them to pay £6 billion more in council tax for it.

On top of that unfair and unsustainable approach, this also threatens to widen the levels of regional inequality even further, with the Chancellor’s plans to raise council tax bringing in more than £80 a household in Surrey compared with just £39 a household in Hull and Manchester. That makes a mockery of levelling up.

Since 2010, the core funding for councils has reduced by £16 billion, but council tax bills have been forced up by more than £15 billion. Those are the hard facts, no matter how much Ministers want to spin this. In the middle of a cost of living crisis, when nearly 4 million children are living in poverty, I am frankly fed up of hearing the Chancellor and various Ministers spinning out the tired old mantra that they are taking difficult decisions, because they are not. They are forcing the difficult decisions back on to local authorities and the cost of crashing the economy back on to taxpayers locally. That is passing the buck, dodging the difficult decisions—

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Taking back control.

Sarah Owen: Those are the kind of difficult decisions that the people we represent are forced to take. The Secretary of State chunters from a sedentary position about taking back control; he has had control taken off him by his own Treasury.

Even when this Department actually gets around to taking some decisions, there are huge questions over how effective they are. Even their Conservative colleagues are asking whether they are getting value for money from Levelling Up Ministers, and the rest of the country is asking that question as well. To top that off, it has been reported that the Prime Minister does not even trust the Secretary of State to make the financial decisions for his Department, adding yet more bureaucracy to an already cumbersome system. If the Tory Government cannot be trusted by, well, the Tory Government, should they still be in government? We are at a ludicrous new low where the Treasury does not trust the Department to spend its money wisely, so why should anyone else, especially local authorities? We are at a ludicrous new low where the Treasury does not trust the Department to spend its money wisely, so why should anyone else, especially local authorities?

This is not the first time the Department has been warned over how it is spending taxpayers’ money. Just last year, the National Audit Office criticised the Department, saying that,

“it doesn’t know whether billions of pounds of public spending has had the impact intended.”

To be honest, how could it, since hardly any of it has actually been spent? In November, a freedom of information request revealed that £243 million, or just 5%, of the entire levelling-up fund—for projects such as transport hubs, cultural centres, green spaces and all these things—had actually been spent.

To cover for this Conservative Government’s failure to deliver funding to the parts of the country that need it and for the last Conservative Chancellor crashing the economy, the result is what we see before us—getting local taxpayers to pay the price again, and making local authorities take the flak again.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is worse than that, is it not, because the levelling-up process is costing local taxpayers as well. For example, in round 2 County Durham put in five bids, and it is estimated that working up those bids cost £2 million. It was told it could put in five bids, only for the goalposts to be changed once they were in and to be told that if it had got one bid in round 1, it would not get anything in round 2. It is not just about the inefficient way the Government have allocated money nationally; it is costing local authority taxpayers’ money to be part of this fiasco of a process.

Sarah Owen: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention and, unfortunately, he is absolutely right. Councils across the country have spent £27 million in a cost of living crisis bidding for levelling-up funds—£27 million—only to not know whether they will win or lose, or be told why they have won or lost.

When will this Tory Government stop using local authorities as their political shield and face up to their own failure to deliver? It does not have to be this way, and to be honest, none of us has the option of more of the same. Local government shows time and again how

[Sarah Owen]

innovative, productive and trusted it is to deliver the change our communities need. It just needs to be empowered to do that. Councils should not have to go to Ministers with a begging bowl for individual projects. These are some of the worst aspects of centralised policy making I have ever seen. It is, frankly, insulting to local government, local communities and the people we seek to serve.

Under a Labour Government, there will be no more pitting councils against each other for pots of cash. Local areas need and deserve to be treated as equal partners, so Labour would deliver multi-year financial settlements for local government, ending the one-year sticking plaster approach of the current Tory Government and allowing councils and communities to plan properly and make genuine efficiency savings. We know that the only way to achieve growth is to power the economy everywhere, so Labour will undertake a great rebalancing of power, with wealth, security and opportunity spread across the whole country. We will deliver that, we will bring forward strong local authorities that deliver strong public services and, wherever people live in this country, everyone will be better off.

5.18 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Since 100 Saxons gathered around the stone on the edge of my village in the Elloe wapentake, local authority—or, we may say, local government—has informed the character of civil society. The link between the exercise of authority and local need lies at the heart of that democratic infrastructure that we call local government. Of course, since those days local government has metamorphosed, and from the seventh to the 11th centuries counties emerged. They remain fundamentally important, and I say to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that we must never lose sight of the salience and importance of county government. Cities, of course, have had their own particular forms of local government. However, the essence of the relationship between the exercise of authority and a locality from Saxon times onward remains intact—it is as relevant now as it was then—with the connection between people and those who wield power, and the ability of those people to hold others to account for the decisions they make.

As local government has metamorphosed and developed over time, the cost of local authorities has grown and the way they are financed has changed. The comments made in the opening salvo from the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), which I thought was characterised by feistiness and brevity—a rare combination in this place, where people are often feisty and sometimes short, but are rarely both—were sadly ignorant of the fact that the change she described has happened over a very long period of time. Long gone are the days when most of the money that local authorities spent was raised locally. There is a good argument for that. One could argue that the very essence of local government that I described a moment or two ago, requires a direct link between money gathered from local people and how it is spent. That direct accountability was once rooted in local government, but for a long time—we are talking aeons, certainly going back to well before I was a county councillor in Nottinghamshire—local

authorities have depended to some degree on grant funding from central Government. We could unpick that—

Mr Betts *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who, I know, has a distinguished history in the local government of Sheffield.

Mr Betts: I am just reading the figures and I think the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. About 60% of local government funding as a whole comes from council tax, so it is raised locally.

Sir John Hayes: That is why I said it is a mix of grant funding from central Government, and money raised locally. I was making the case that we could move to a model where all funding was raised locally, and thereby improve the accountability of decisions made in that locale. The problem with that is that the tax base in different places is so widely different that we would have to find some way of transferring money from one part of the country to another. That is exactly why we ended up where we have, with an arrangement under successive Governments of all political parties, made over decades, that copes with the fact that we simply cannot raise everything locally because we need to mitigate for those differences.

Daisy Cooper: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one good way we could give local authorities a way to raise money would be to remove the Government-imposed cap on fees that local authorities can charge big developers when they put in applications? At the moment, my constituents in St Albans are subsidising big developers to the tune of £3 million a year because of the cap that the Government impose on those fees.

Sir John Hayes: I cannot comment on the specifics of St Albans or the question, but it is absolutely right that local authorities should put the interests of local people above the interests of soulless, heartless corporate institutions, including developers, that might ride roughshod over those local interests. I spend a good deal of my time as a Member of Parliament fighting unsuitable developments in my constituency, including onshore wind turbines, solar panels on greenfield land, and all kinds of other elements of urban or suburban sprawl into the open countryside. I hold no candle for developers, and that is a well-known fact in my locality.

Moving back to the matter in hand, the Government have chosen over a long period to fund local authorities and top up what they can raise locally. The trend that has emerged in my time in politics has often been a grant-funded process, and that local authorities have bid for particular chunks of money in particular circumstances. I share the view that that has disadvantages—uncertainty, and perhaps inconsistency—but it also has a profound advantage because it sharpens minds and focuses attention on what is really required. I was delighted that through the levelling-up fund I was able to work closely with South Holland District Council to put forward a bid, which was successful, to deliver a new leisure and wellbeing centre in the heart of Spalding in my constituency. Working with the local authority and refining that bid was an extremely valuable exercise. It was educative and a real opportunity for me as the Member of Parliament

to engage with local councillors and officers of the council, to get that bid in in a highly competitive field, and to win.

I appreciate that not every bid succeeded, and far be it from me to comment on those who did not, but I think that was a useful process. As I say, it obliged us to work together, but it also obliged us to make sure our bid was fit for purpose. There are some virtues to that approach, although I accept that one would not want to fund the whole of local government through a series of competitions and bids. That has not been a recent change but something that has prevailed for a long time.

The problem I want to address with the Minister, which I hope he will deal with when he winds up, is that as we have a mix of locally raised funds and central Government support, which sometimes takes the form of particular competitive bids, it is important that we recognise the challenges faced by rural counties such as Lincolnshire, both at county and district level. Some of those challenges are too subtle to fit neatly into the models developed by central Government.

For example, sparsity is of profound importance in delivering public services in my constituency and my county. A sparse and scattered population makes it very difficult for public services to be accessible and effective, unless the funding is adequate to recognise the challenges that sparsity brings. It is all very well to say that Lincolnshire is well off in particular ways. I chose to live there, represent a seat there and bring my children up there, so of course I think it is a glorious place to be, but it is quite difficult for local people to access the services they need to sustain their wellbeing, and difficult too for the local authority to deliver services in a large, rural county such as Lincolnshire.

I gather the police funding formula is being revised and there will be a consultation. That has taken long enough—I have been fighting the battle for 26 years—but, none the less, it is good news that it is coming. When we look again at the funding formula for local government, the issue of sparse and scattered populations needs to be taken into greater account. That applies to other things too: ambulance services are a good example, I have already spoken of policing and I could name many other services that are hard to deliver in such circumstances.

May I also mention drainage? Again, the subtlety of the subject may be lost on some Members, but in an area such as Lincolnshire, unless we are perpetually drained through the good work of the internal drainage boards, we risk severe flooding, given the topography of my constituency and, indeed, the whole of the fens. I have met the Minister with colleagues from local government to discuss the subject, again working in partnership with local representatives, and I have also spoken to him personally. I know he is looking at the issue. Extra fuel costs have made drainage difficult in the short term, but in the long term we have to look at local authorities that levy a drainage rate on behalf of the drainage boards and face a burden that is not commonly faced by places with a different character and topography.

I raise those two matters with this pitch, bluntly: I want a fair funding deal for Lincolnshire. I recognise that people from all parts of the country are represented in the Chamber who will make a case for their own locality. Although Lincolnshire has many virtues—too

many for me to name—it is peculiarly and particularly disadvantaged by its geography, demography and topography. Those challenges will be met only with a funding formula that is sensitive and sophisticated enough to identify those peculiar and particular needs.

I give notice through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the Minister that today I launch my campaign for fair funding for Lincolnshire. I hope that, far from that campaign falling on deaf ears, the Minister and the Secretary of State will have their ears pricked up and, when they consider matters more carefully, will respond by not just listening but acting on behalf of the people of Lincolnshire, who deserve a fair deal.

5.29 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, if I struggle to speak during this debate it is not because I am speechless at the generosity of the Minister's settlement this year; I just happen to have quite a bad cold. Anyway, on to the facts at hand.

First, I accept the point that this is a better settlement than in previous years. It probably could not be as bad, with the circumstances local authorities were in. It probably means that the level of cuts we experienced in previous years will not be repeated in all authorities, but that the cuts that have been made will not be restored. There are particular issues with swimming pools and leisure centres that, as we see it at present, the Government are just not going to address. The energy costs are enormous and it will be a major challenge to the health of our citizens if we do not sort out that particular problem. Most authorities do not have the reserves they had three or four years ago. If they do get into difficulties, there is nowhere to go. That is simply the situation. Authorities that have been prudent and spent their reserves over the years are now in a very different position.

That is against the background—I do not think this can be challenged—of local government having the worst cuts of any part of the public sector since 2010. Local authorities in the poorest areas have had bigger cuts than those in richer areas. The Government will say that they had more grant to cut. Well, that is true, but they had more grant because they actually needed it. They had greater needs and fewer resources to draw on. The other change is that social care funding now takes up about 60% to 70% of local government funding. Local authorities have prioritised it and they are right to do so. But even that means that many people who would have had social care in 2010 do not now get it because the criteria have been tightened.

Look at the rest of the services: the cuts to buses, libraries, parks, street cleaning and environmental services have in many cases been up to 50%. We can see that. We can see the libraries have been shut. We know we are going to get a massive round of bus cuts again in South Yorkshire come April. The grant is not there from the Department for Transport, as far as we know, and there is no possibility that councils can replace it from their own resources. The rest of the services, aside from social care, have smaller resources from a smaller pot. That is simply the situation they are left with.

They are the services, of course, that the vast majority of our constituents rely on. Most people do not get social care. They think it is right that people who need it

[Mr Clive Betts]

should get it, but they themselves do not get it. What they see is a large increase in council tax once again and they are getting less service for more money. That is a real worry—I have made this point before—for the future of our local democracy. If people feel they are getting a bad deal—that they are paying more and getting less—at some point there will be a reaction from local communities. That reaction will probably be against their local councils, as opposed to the national system which puts councils in that particular place.

We know there are other major challenges. On social care funding, the extra money is welcome, although some of it is coming from council tax. I accept the point that the social care grant has been adapted to try to reflect the fact that authorities with the greatest ability to raise money through council tax have had less money than those who cannot. I accept that there has been an attempt to equalise that, but nevertheless the Health Committee, when the Chancellor was its Chair, along with the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, produced figures from the Local Government Association and others showing a gap of around £13 billion. A bit of extra money now, taken from the money that should have gone into the Dilnot reforms, is not a long-term solution. So much of this funding package is short-term solutions, because there have been long-term issues.

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend mentions social care funding. What is his view on the fact that the overall package for child and adult social care is £2 billion, yet last week we received the Government response to the MacAlister review, which shows that some £2.6 billion is needed to right the current issues in the children's social care sector and ensure that our most vulnerable children are safe and secure?

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Many of us can slip into speaking just about adult social care. We recognise the challenges of an elderly population. People growing older is a good thing—some of us may have a personal interest in that—and people with learning disabilities are living longer, but the biggest percentage increases in demand for care over the past few years have been in children's social care. That important point is often overlooked, so my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise it.

On big issues such as social care, we need a discrete source of funding. We cannot carry on muddling away at trying to fund social care from the current package of funds available to local councils. That is not my view, but that of the Local Government Association: its Conservative chair and the leader of its Labour group have both said that we cannot sort out local government finance until we get a solution to social care funding.

Council tax is taking more of the strain—it now represents up to 60% of local government funding. It is not a great tax, is it? The Secretary of the State has one great redeeming feature: when he comes before the Select Committee, he is actually quite honest in his answers, at least most of the time. [Laughter.] He accepts that there are challenges and problems. He was very honest when we asked him whether he thought council tax is regressive: he said yes, and passed the parcel to the Minister to do a review of council tax.

We look forward to seeing that review, because council tax is a major challenge. It is based on 1991 valuations, and the amount that people actually pay rises nowhere nearly as quickly as the value of their house. It is a regressive tax and it enables richer areas to raise an awful lot of money for every percentage increase. Those are challenges that any future Government will have to deal with—I put a marker down for my Labour Front-Bench colleagues, too.

Business rates are not fair. We have had a Government review, but everyone knows that they are simply not fair at all for high streets versus digital companies. The business rates reset has been put to one side. Has there been any impact assessment on which councils are benefiting from that and which are not? I suspect that councils that have done quite well with development over the past few years have probably raised their tax base anyway and are now doing quite well out of the fact that the reset has not happened. It would be interesting to see some figures on that.

I turn to the fair funding settlement. I think it was the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) who announced the fair funding review, the first time he was Secretary of State. We are still waiting. I know that there have been problems, including covid, but work could nevertheless have gone on. That ties into the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) made about having just a one-year funding settlement with no long-term plan.

The current grant arrangements are based on data that in some cases is nearly 20 years old. That cannot be right, it cannot be fair and it cannot be reasonable. I recognise the challenge for any future Government once we get into fair funding reviews: one person's fair funding is another person's unfair funding, because the same amount of money is being moved between areas. It works best when funding is going up, because even areas that lose in relative terms do not face an absolute loss. There are big challenges there.

Those are the issues that are being ducked: council tax reform, business rates reform, fair funding and the long-term funding of social care.

Sir John Hayes: It is always interesting to hear from the hon. Gentleman. Long-term funding matters too for things such as infrastructure, and in my county it is about roads. Lincolnshire's roads carry an immense amount of the food that services the whole country—many of them were de-trunked by a previous Labour Government, of course. We need long-term funding of the kind he describes to secure our roads, as well as for social care.

Mr Betts: The right hon. Member is absolutely right; it is about being able to plan ahead. Councils need certainty about what is coming to them.

That point ties into a related issue: the housing revenue account, which is not often talked about. We heard in the Select Committee the other day about the enormous challenges that will result from the surveys that the Secretary of State has rightly asked councils to carry out, as has the Regulator of Social Housing. We will see some very big numbers come out of those for some of our worst social housing to be put right. It is

not just about a bit of plastering here and a few repairs there; it is about regeneration and, in some cases, complete demolition and rebuilding.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Chair of the Select Committee is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that there are also questions to be asked about the scope for councils to build new housing, given the enormous demand from residents? People want trusted landlords and they want the quality of council stock, but the ability of councils to build that housing is very limited at present.

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend is right. Apart from a housing revenue account with limited headroom, councils are facing pressures to build new homes and pressures to make existing homes more energy-efficient, to make them safe and secure and, in particular, free of mould and damp, and also to make them safe and secure in relation to the challenges post-Grenfell. They cannot do all that with the money they have, and the same is true of housing associations, which are in exactly the same position. We need a real, proper debate on those matters.

The settlement is better than it might have been, but it does not actually improve the present situation following several years of biting cuts in important services—and, by the way, perhaps when the Minister winds up the debate he will tell us what has happened to the public health grant, because that is very important as well.

5.41 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): In challenging circumstances, the Government have come up with proposals that are broadly acceptable and will enable local government, on the whole, to function properly and to deliver a wide range of services for the benefit of local communities. This is vitally important, because it is local government that best understands the needs of local people and is best able to ensure that funding delivers the benefits for which it is intended. There are some drawbacks to the settlement, which I shall briefly outline; and there is also the need to carry out that much-needed review of the funding formula, about which we have already heard and which, indeed, has been talked about throughout my 13 years in the House.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on coastal communities, my hon. Friend will be well aware of a report by Pragmatix Advisory that draws attention to the need to change the local government funding formula to better reflect deprivation and the needs of coastal communities with strategic, long-term, sustainable funding, and to see projects to the end. Does he agree that the Department must consider that as we move forward?

Peter Aldous: The short answer is that my hon. Friend has a crystal ball, because she has anticipated the conclusion of my speech, and we have been reading the same report.

In the circumstances, as we have heard, some might liken this settlement to a sticking plaster, but I would suggest that it resembles a bandage more, and that in itself reinforces the need for a fundamental overhaul.

Let me now comment briefly on the settlement's drawbacks, which the Government should seek to ensure are not repeated next year. First, as others have said, this is the fifth one-year settlement in a row. Such short-termism makes it very difficult for councils to plan properly, to deliver world-class local services, and to fully implement key policies such as levelling up. I therefore urge the Government to come forward with a multi-year settlement next year. We have heard that they have made a start, but let them finish delivering that particular strategy.

Secondly, as we have heard, rural areas continue to get a raw deal, notwithstanding the fact that wages in those areas are invariably lower, the cost of living is higher, and it is much more expensive to deliver services. In this context, it is very disappointing that the increase in the rural services delivery grant has been wiped out for rural district authorities, as it is linked to another grant which reduces by equal measures. That makes it more difficult for authorities such as east Suffolk to deliver vital services such as waste collection, recycling and planning. I suggest that next year, the existing formula should be applied in full, without dampening.

Thirdly, the additional funding for children's social care will help to tackle the most immediate pressures, but it is insufficient to invest in preventive and early help services, nor to invest in the workforce or additional homes needed for children in care. Moreover, it falls short of the £1.6 billion required simply to maintain current service levels. As I have mentioned, there is a need to review the local government funding formula. One of several reasons that the review remains outstanding is that the debate on whether it should take place, and what changes should be made, has been conducted in a way that pits rural communities against urban communities. The result is stalemate—nothing happens, to the detriment of areas where a better funding formula is urgently required. As we have heard, nowhere is that more needed than in coastal communities all around England and the UK, including in the constituency that I represent.

Coastal communities such as Lowestoft face significant challenges: a higher proportion of children living in workless households; household incomes £3,000 on average per annum lower than elsewhere; disabled people less likely to find work; people facing greater health challenges and inequalities, including shorter life expectancy, obesity and higher rates of depression. Those challenges are exacerbated by the fact that in coastal areas, funding must go further and stretch that extra mile. There is a higher cost of delivering services: the population is much older, and in the holiday season there is a need to provide services for visitors.

It should also be pointed out that there is enormous potential in coastal communities that properly funded local government services can help unlock. That includes jobs in the low-carbon energy sector, sustainable fishing and leisure and staycations. Therefore, the local government funding formula must be urgently adjusted to better reflect the needs of coastal communities. I urge the Government to commit to doing that straightaway, so that for 2024-25, coastal communities that have been forgotten for far too long finally get that fair deal that they need.

5.47 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I start by joining the Minister in paying tribute to all those people who work in local government? As a former

[Mr Kevan Jones]

councillor, I know the tremendous work that they do, but it does not get much recognition and we need to put that on the record.

As Members know, I speak in these debates every year. It seems like groundhog day today, because we are back exactly where we have been every year in the last 13 years. We have a system that has seen the central Government grant cut over successive years since 2010 and moved on to local council tax payers. The Minister said that 2010 was not perfect; from County Durham's point of view, it was £244 million a year more perfect than it is today. That is a direct result of the money taken from the council each year by the slow reduction of the central Government grant over the years, which has been pushed on to local council taxpayers.

We have had the slogan "levelling up", which I am told the Government are now not supposed to use because they need to find some new way of expressing this, but while we were having all the publicity and showbiz around the levelling-up grants—I will come to those in a minute—what we have seen in local government funding is exactly the opposite. We have seen the moving of resources away from areas such as County Durham to more affluent areas of the country. That is because of the way the formula is constructed. The Government are taking a political decision—let us be honest, it is a direct political decision—to reduce council tax support to areas such as County Durham. The present Prime Minister even admitted in his leadership campaign that it was a deliberate policy to do that, so there is honesty there if nothing else.

This is creating real problems for the ability of councils in places such as County Durham to fill the gap with local council tax increases. That is because in County Durham, 58% of our properties are in band A. We always quote band D, but band A is important. County Durham's ability to raise any additional funding is therefore limited. Raising council tax there by 1% raises £3.8 million, but raising it by 1% in Surrey will raise £8.9 million. The effect of that over a period of time has seen wealthy areas such as the constituency of the Secretary of State in Surrey increasing their spending powers while deprived areas such as County Durham have seen them decline. That has not been done by accident.

I hear Conservative Members saying that they want a new funding formula—well, yes, but this has been going on for 13 years. Levelling up was the great thing, but it has done exactly the opposite; the problem is that it was a slogan that was used mainly around capital projects. There is a difference between what is being bid for in most cases—namely, capital—and the money that is being taken away from day-to-day revenues and running costs, which as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, puts pressure on those core functions that local councils cannot avoid providing, such as social care and looked-after children. The cake that is left is very small.

There is a bidding process which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, basically involves someone in Whitehall deciding who gets what, and we have clearly seen where some of this money goes and the reasons why. The latest round was a complete farce. In County Durham we had one successful bid,

worth £20 million, in round 1. I am sure it was just a coincidence that it happened to be in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison). We put five bids in for the second round, only to be told, once they were in, that the rules had changed and that if we had had a successful bid in round 1, we would not even qualify for round 2. Why did officers in Durham County Council have to waste an estimated £2 million of local taxpayers' money working up bids that were never going to be seen? We now hear—the Minister did not correct me or my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East on this—that the Treasury is getting a bit wobbly about whether this is a good way of spending money.

This money is supposed to make a real difference, but it is not. Even if we get it, most of it is capital and will not make a real difference to the core funding that councils need for projects such as roads. Added to that, the last Conservative manifesto talked about the great dividends from Brexit and the fact that no one would be worse off without the European regional development funding. If we had stayed in the European Union, County Durham would have been in one of the new assisted areas, and over the next five years we would have had £155 million in European funding. At the last count, we have £30 million, which has to be spread over the next five years. That is a clear broken promise, and it is a complete distortion of what has actually happened in practice.

Why does that matter? It matters because funding programmes such as DurhamWorks, which has done fantastic work to get people who are not in education, employment or training into employment and training, will fall over in September because there is no money left. Such projects, which have made a real difference in many parts of the country, will have no money at all. Councils might be able to make a capital bid for, say, a new leisure centre, but the cost of running it will fall on local taxpayers. It is a double whammy. Councils such as Durham County Council will lose out not only because their ability to raise funds from local taxpayers is limited compared with other areas but because the other vital money is not there either.

The devolution agenda—or the devolution con, as I call it—means that the new North East Combined Authority mayoral deal will get £1.4 billion over the next 30 years. County Durham alone has lost £240 million in central Government funding since 2010, plus the £155 million of European funding that we are not receiving. That £1.4 billion over 30 years is a drop in the ocean. Every other member of the combined authority has had cuts to real-terms spending of between 25% and 35%. Ministers trumpet the mayoral deal as a great deal for the north-east, but it pales into insignificance compared with the money that has been taken away over the past 13 years and that continues to be taken away.

Again, it is even worse in County Durham because of the incompetence of the coalition that is running Durham County Council. The coalition jumped on the bandwagon of the mayoral deal at the last minute because it could not argue or put forward a case against it. Over the next three years, Durham will have no extra transport funding at all. Is this a great deal? No, it is not. It is a con to think that the deal will change things and make a real difference locally.

In addition, my constituents have had no say on whether they want an elected Mayor to represent the area from Berwick right down to Barnard Castle. It annoys me that Conservative Members argued in the 2004 referendum on north-east devolution that it was important people had a say, but this Government have not allowed anyone to have a say on any of these reorganisations.

The other outstanding issue is public health. We were promised a new public health funding formula, which has been kicked down the road. There is still no indication of where it is going. Under the proposed funding formula, County Durham was going to be the biggest loser in the country. Funding formulas make a real difference. We talk about levelling up, so it is astounding that, in the world's sixth wealthiest economy, life expectancy has gone down, not up, in County Durham over the last 10 years. The idea that levelling up is more than a slogan is disproved by the facts on the ground.

Unless we put effort into public health, life expectancy will continue to go down. The point at which people need more care from the health service is dropping and is now about 58 years old. These things need to change. Health inequalities in places such as parts of County Durham have an impact on other services, so investment there would be good investment. For example, if we look at mental health, we see policing being used as a last resort.

Another issue that has been raised are the two pressures on the services that have to be provided. There is a lot of concentration on adult social care—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East was right about that—but the other big one is looked-after children. Durham County Council has more than 1,000 children in looked-after care. These are not options that can just be forgotten about; the council has to do this and look after these individuals and their families. Without some recognition that areas such as County Durham have a huge problem with this, it is not going to move.

The other issue to address, which again has been raised, is rural buses. The bus recovery grant finishes at the end of March. If that goes and is not replaced, the north-east will end up with rural services to parts of County Durham and Northumberland just being taken away. Does local government have the ability to step and support that? No, it does not, so the Government must examine that urgently. I understand that the Transport Secretary is not keen on an extension, but if that does not happen, it will have an effect.

People say that this settlement is more generous than those in years past, but the moving of the cost of raising and supporting local government on to local taxpayers continues. For example, Durham County Council this year will be putting its council tax up by the maximum, 4.99%, it is making savings and it is taking £10 million out of reserves. That is ironic because, as I reminded those in the coalition of chaos currently running the council the other day, their leaflets in the run-up to the last county council election condemned the then county council for having large reserves and blamed it for putting the council tax up to the maximum. But they are doing both: they are spending the reserves and putting the council tax up to the maximum. A bit of honesty needs to be had as to the reasons why. If we had not got that cushion that the Labour administration put in, we would certainly be in a worse space this year than we would be if we could not have access to it.

We hear this stupid argument that we can just look at the reserves and keep dolloping them in for one year. That is just a sticking plaster for one year and it cannot carry on for future years. As I say, the chaos ensues. The council is making some strange decisions. Despite all the austerity, the problems it faces on the budget and the maximum council tax, it is now going to provide a new multimillion-pound arts centre for the city of Durham, with running costs of up to half a million pounds a year. We must ask whether it has its priorities right. It is trying to cover this by trying to suggest that this is a new home for the Durham Light Infantry collection, which is nonsense, because most of it has already been reallocated to the new history centre. The incompetence of the administration there, alongside the pressures resulting from this settlement, mean that, again, council tax payers in County Durham and the poorest are going to suffer the worst.

The funding formula does need to be looked at, but the Government also need to be honest: their levelling-up agenda is a con, as we see when we look at what has happened over the past 13 years in places such as the north-east, where money has been taken away. What has been trumpeted as great new levelling-up money to the north is, frankly, as I said earlier, a drop in the ocean compared with what has been taken away.

6.4 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones); I am sorry that every Member except me was on their phone. I hope to be a little more entertaining and, shall we say, to come at this from a different perspective. If I have this correct, Durham Council had £29 million last year from the revenue support grant, compared with Dorset, which had zero, so it might be worth his while going back to his local council and others to ask them a few questions about that, rather than the Government.

I rise this evening to make the case for rural England, and West Dorset in particular. I am conscious that, 12 months ago, a number of us were in this place when we last debated such a motion. I am delighted to support the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), particularly in respect of rural areas. It is very clear that a disparity exists both in this motion and the report before us. It is not necessarily the disparity that some share; it is very clearly, in my mind, one that exists between rural and urban areas, and it is important that we fully digest that.

Rural areas will receive £111 per head less than their urban counterparts, according to the settlement funding assessment, yet rural residents often pay on average £110 more in council tax than those in urban areas. We get 13% less per head in social care support overall, which means that, on those few points alone, we have real issues to contend with, especially in constituencies such as mine.

It is worth noting that London, as an authority area, gets £236 million more in Government grant than the formula says that it should. I appreciate the comments made last year and more recently about the funding formula—it is very difficult to change it—but it feels to me that it might not be as difficult to change in one direction as it is in another. In the interests of parity and fairness, it is important that we understand why it is easier to adjust it in an upward direction in some cases, but not in others.

[Chris Loder]

The rural services delivery grant is very relevant to me as a representative of a rural area. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made mention of that earlier, and I echo his comments. In 2022-23, rural councils were able to budget a spend of only £67 per head on so-called discretionary services. That is totally unacceptable, especially when we compare that with urban areas, which have a spend of £131 per head. That is primarily because, in constituencies such as mine, two thirds of the council's income goes to support those in adult and child social care, which is a huge amount, partly because the average age in Dorset is so high.

The services that we have in Dorset are more expensive to deliver, which is partly because of our sparse geography and a number of other issues. What is relevant here is that if England's rural communities were treated as one distinct region, in the same way that mayoral authorities and others are, the need for levelling up would be singularly greater than in any other area in the country. That is an important point to note.

I mentioned this earlier, but I reiterate the key point: local authorities are not just here to empty bins. There is an increasingly difficult issue with adult social care, and it is growing. We have also heard about transport, which I understand faces great upcoming difficulties. I understand that there is no solution to bus funding locally from 1 April onwards. People in rural communities, especially older people who do not drive, are very dependent on public transport to get to the doctor or do their shopping, and any solution to that will mean the local council stepping in.

In fairness to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), I am somewhat delighted that we have taken a step forward on revenue support grants. I remember we were at zero this time last year. We have taken an enormous stride forwards—£654,000—which is an important and welcome step. I should say, however, that some of that has been cancelled out in other ways, which means our net effect is even smaller than that.

The primary issue I have in Dorset relates to council tax, which is where we are picking things up. For many years, we have had a zero-revenue support grant, which has meant the council having to fund important and crucial services through council tax. That is why our average band D level is the third highest in the country—£800 more than what some constituents of hon. Members in this Chamber pay. That is a huge amount, particularly because when we take care of people who have moved into or retired to Dorset, that has an associated social care requirement. That points even more strongly to the need for local government funding mechanisms to be reformed and adjusted.

There is a perception—I have heard it in this debate and others—that the south-east and the south-west are well off compared with the north and the north-east. That is absolutely not the case. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), who is not able to be here, and I share an area in Weymouth and Portland that is the worst area for social mobility in the whole country, according to the Social Mobility Commission. When we look at the situation with council tax and the comments made earlier about how people in poverty, particularly

urban poverty, struggle in this area, we have to ask ourselves: why does rural hardship not matter in the same way? We on the south coast, particularly in Dorset, have a good number of difficult issues to contend with, and that makes it hard for us to justify the situation with council tax and the revenue support grant.

I kindly ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to consider a few things, and I would be delighted to hear in the wind-ups about whether he can make some progress. I hope that he will expedite the reviews that we have talked about for some time, whether that is the formula for revenue support grant funding or other ones. I am particularly keen to meet him, along with the leaders of rural councils in England, to discuss how we can make real progress on sorting out this enormous disparity and unfairness in how the formula supports urban areas much more than rural ones, and I do not think we should have that challenge. I would be pleased to hear whether he would agree to such a meeting. Finally, I would be grateful to hear what commitment he might offer us in Dorset on better support for rural communities to address the issues we face.

6.14 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Government's latest local government finance statement represents a continuation of underfunding of our local councils and widening of inequalities. We know that, since 2010, councils have lost 60p out of every £1—an estimated £15 billion cut from council budgets by this Government. Even if we focus on the past five years, analysis suggests that only eight of 151 local authority areas have not experienced real-terms cuts since 2018, even once levelling up funds are factored in.

People in Luton have suffered those cuts, with £160 million stripped out of Luton council's budget over the past 13 years of Conservative Government. Cuts have decimated our local services, from youth services to bus routes to social care, and there is no solution to the sustained Government underfunding on the horizon. Further cuts to the tune of more than £7 million still need to be made in 2023-24 to balance the budget, and it is working people who will pay the price.

Instead of offering the fair funding that councils need to sustain their work, funding that takes account of need, councils are being in effect forced to raise council tax by up to 5% in many areas. Luton council is left with no choice but to do that, but at the same time council tax bills will see a further increase in the police precept, since, just like Luton council, Bedfordshire police has suffered from sustained underfunding through a broken police funding formula and has had to set the police precept at the maximum.

Due to the Tories' self-inflicted financial crisis, helped by their crashing the economy last autumn and their 13 years of failure on the economy, the Government are once again passing the burden on to council taxpayers. That will deepen regional inequalities, as many councils such as Luton will receive less than wealthier councils due to their lower council tax base, despite facing increasing demands and needs. Increasing the burden on taxpayers is not a solution to the long-term pressures faced by councils, particularly in areas such as social care that are in desperate need of reform.

During these challenging economic times, every penny spent matters. Our communities deserve more long-term certainty and money spent closer to home. I noted that at the beginning of the debate the Minister made a proud point of having been a councillor—well, so have I. I am very proud to have been a councillor, but, having been a councillor, I understand the importance of public health and the responsibilities that make such a difference in our communities.

Research from the Health Foundation has shown that the public health grant has been cut by 24% in real terms per person since 2015-16, with the largest reductions hitting areas of service such as drug and alcohol services, tobacco control and sexual health. To reiterate a point made earlier, can the Minister tell the House when the public health grant allocation for 2023-24, due this April, will be announced? Yet again, that uncertainty has a detrimental impact on councils' budget-setting process and puts at risk those hugely important, often preventive services.

I will finish by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) on her excellent opening remarks in this debate. Labour will empower our towns, cities and regions to build strong local economies that support strong local services.

6.18 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Listening to this debate and the earlier one on the police grant—I have been in the Chamber for several hours listening—has been a fascinating exercise in politics. Those on the Government Front Bench have made valiant efforts to claim that the aggregate made available for policing and local government has been splendid, while almost every single Back-Bencher on the Government side made a different argument, that the formula is not working. That argument was first made in quite a crude way by the right hon. Member who is now the Prime Minister, when he said they were going to stop money being shovelled into deprived areas—that was the expression he used—in order to look after places such as the one where was speaking, Royal Tunbridge Wells.

That is the problem Conservative Members face: how do they reconcile their embrace of austerity with the fact that their constituents are now suffering because the austerity has bitten deeper and deeper? Their answer is to say, “Well, it’s the formula that’s wrong.” But the truth is that the aggregate sums available for policing and local government are the problem; austerity itself is the cause of the problem. I have now heard two speeches from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) in which he made similar points about the formula.

Chris Loder *rose*—

Jon Trickett: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but let me put a point to him first. Does he agree that the aggregate amount of money made available to local government is simply inadequate to meet the needs of the communities that he and I represent?

Chris Loder: The point that I was making earlier, which I will make again, is that the formulas that we have been dealing with have often favoured Labour-led councils and Labour police and crime commissioners in funding the issues that Labour-led authorities face.

We in Conservative areas, however, have had zero revenue support grant, zero in other areas, and we were lower to start with. I just wanted to say to the hon. Gentleman that, no, that is not what I said. It is important that he notes that.

Jon Trickett: Well, we will let people read the record and see what conclusions they arrive at. The hon. Gentleman’s case was based on rurality. I represent a rural constituency with 23 villages. The problem for my constituency, and perhaps for his as well—I listened to what he said, but it is not for me to say—is not rurality but deprivation. That is the core problem.

The Prime Minister let the cat out of the bag when he said, “We’re going to stop shovelling money”—to use his expression—“into deprived communities and put it elsewhere”. That was the truth, and it is what the Minister and all his Back-Bench colleagues are valiantly trying to avoid addressing by developing arguments about their constituencies all being special cases. The truth is that our services have been radically underfunded.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Jon Trickett: I want to make progress, as others wish to speak, but I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Jones: This has not happened by accident; it is deliberate, as my hon. Friend says. It is always interesting to hear—as we did in the previous debate on policing—about x amount of money per head. The key thing is that since 2010, the need element that he is referring to—certainly for things such as public health grants—has been taken out of the formula.

Jon Trickett: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need indices that reflect the need that communities experience. Those indices should then be translated into a formula that provides some kind of social justice.

I represent a rural community in what was once the mighty Yorkshire coalfield, which heated, lit and provided power for our country. It helped to create the wealth that is now in the hands of a very few corporations and rich individuals. The hard-working people in that community were brought to their knees by a Government decision that left us in a really deprived position. It is not our normal practice to get up and whinge, and that is not what I want to do today. I want to make the political case that we have got this wrong; that the Government are wrong.

Although I was the leader of the great city of Leeds for a number of years—under Mrs Thatcher—let me refer to the situation in Wakefield, which is my home council. Local government was difficult in those days; it is almost intolerable to be part of it now—I speak with experience. Wakefield Council, which is a great Labour council led by Councillor Denise Jeffery, has had major cuts. I think £2 in every £5 has been cut since 2015, in a community on its knees. I will illustrate that point in a moment or two. This year, it looks as if there will be another £14 million of cuts. How is that for a Minister who is trying to celebrate the amount of money that he says he is giving to local government? In the meantime, we will have to raise council tax. If I remember to, I will make a point about raising council tax in a moment or two.

[Jon Trickett]

Huge amounts of money—tens of billions of pounds—have been taken out of local government across the whole country, in all communities, and Tory MPs are no doubt finding the squeeze as tough as it has been in our areas for the last 13 years and beyond.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the same enormous pressures on families struggling to get by in the most awful cost of living crisis apply in every region of the country? My area, Reading, is in the south-east, but many people there are struggling to get by and suffering from the same dreadful cuts.

Jon Trickett: I entirely agree. I am not making a special point about former coalfield communities, but they were treated particularly badly by a previous Conservative Government and have never been allowed to properly get back on their feet.

I want to take one council service—education—to illustrate an important point that I would like the Government to think about, although I do not expect particularly progressive decisions from them. In my district, the cuts to school funding over the years have been £400 per pupil—£400 less for every child in my community since the cuts began. People might say, “Well, we’ve all had to take a little bit of austerity”, and we have. But look at the educational results in my constituency—we have also heard about this in Reading, North Durham, Luton and elsewhere.

The number of people in my constituency with NVQ level 4 or higher is 22%; in the Prime Minister’s constituency, it is 42% and in London it is 59%. There is massive educational underachievement in some communities across the country, including the one I represent. Yet there are these cuts. What happens with a community that has underachieved educationally? I will tell the House: wages are in decline. I refer again to my constituency, but I am making a general, national point: the average wage there is £495 a week—£12,000 a year less than the average worker earns in London, or £5,000 a year less than the average across the nation as a whole. That is a consequence of underinvestment in education because of the cuts. Funding cuts feed through to poor education results and then to low wages and underinvestment in business.

The final link in this chain is social mobility. If a large population is not achieving its full potential because of underinvestment in education, social mobility begins to collapse. The hon. Member for West Dorset was talking about social mobility in his constituency. The Government created a mobility index, which shows that of the 533 seats in England, mine is the 529th least socially mobile. How can it be that statistically a child born today in my constituency will die younger than those elsewhere, live in poverty and be very unlikely to make it up the so-called social ladder? There is a continuum of effects from underinvestment in a community that has been suffering from deprivation for a long time.

The situation is this: austerity has gone too far and too deep, and it is impacting on communities. We have heard people across the House talking about their constituencies, as I have partly done about mine, and then trying to make a special case. I do not want to make a special case; I want to say that the Government’s

indices are wrong. It is true that the formula is incorrect, but the bottom line is that we have underprovided for social services, public services, education and all the other services that councils should provide. The aggregate is too small, and the Government should accept that. It would be better to hear that than what we are hearing now as some sort of good news.

My final point is this. I can speak on behalf of my constituency: in two weeks, I will have been first elected 27 years ago. I know what my people think. When they hear the now Prime Minister saying, in a swaggering tone, “On behalf of prosperity, and in the face of deprivation, we have shovelled money into communities like mine”, they think it is unfair, unjust, cruel and untrue. I predict this: when the local elections come in May, people are not going to believe it is the Labour council’s fault that the council tax has gone up. They will know where the responsibility lies. It lies with this Government, and mark my words they will pay a price in May this year.

6.30 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Earlier, the Minister spoke about the necessity for stability, but does he realise that to achieve that, local authorities need long-term financial settlements? Those long-term settlements need to be built to address inequalities in the regions, to start to repair the damage caused by years of austerity and to support local authorities to ensure that high-quality services can be built and maintained, because that improves outcomes in both health and education as well as housing standards. We have had a big debate about black mould, and a number of properties in Blackburn suffer from damp. We had a programme called housing market renewal, which was supposed to be for 15 years, but in the first week of Tory Government, that programme was stopped. Bidding for competitive bids is expensive and does not provide stability. Passing the burden to council tax payers, as with the police precept, does not provide stability, particularly when so many people are struggling with the cost of living.

Local authorities have essential plans to build economic growth in the UK. We have had 26% cuts in spending power, on average, from 2010. In Blackburn, that is nearer 50%. Once again, the poorer areas are suffering more. We also need to measure the impact of the cuts, because the loss of that resource means that buses have been cut, which reduces employment opportunities and health. We have less street cleaning, fewer libraries, poorer services for open spaces and play areas and pressures on children’s services and adult social care.

I am sorry that the Secretary of State’s wings have been clipped, but the Treasury needs to understand that to grow the economy in this country, the Government have to invest in local authorities. Time and time again, we hear Ministers say what a wonderful job local authorities do. Blackburn was pretty amazing during covid, and that was because Blackburn with Darwen Council, led by an excellent councillor, Phil Riley, knows how to bring people together, and people in Blackburn like to support each other. However, when things are constantly being taken away, it makes it very difficult.

The last Labour Government invested in Blackburn, and the stats will prove that health improved, employment statistics, educational outcomes and transport links improved. We opened Sure Start centres, giving every

child a good opportunity and a good start to life. Austerity has seen the decline of Blackburn and places like it, and it is only by long-term investment and a clear strategy to rebuild communities that they will come back. People cannot open a mortgage if they are on a 12-month contract, and they cannot go and get a car with a loan. How will we build the future that the Government claim they want if we do not support basic services? Every Government Minister says that local government is best placed to deliver, but if local government is going to deliver, the Government need to put their money where their mouth is, and stop putting things on the backs of council tax payers.

6.34 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): We are sick and tired—tired of the press releases, tired of the spin, tired of the same old con tricks. To listen to the language in these press releases, people would think that Ministers were handing out largesse, a gift, for which cash-starved local communities should be grateful. To listen to the Minister opening this debate, they would think that they were living in some kind of parallel reality where our well-funded councils were able to pay for every service that our residents need. It is a nonsense.

Once again, buried in the small print, is the catch: if people want compassion and care for the elderly in their community, if they want clean streets, libraries and parks, if they want choices and chances for their kids, they will have to pay more for it. Consider for a moment handing families struggling with the biggest fall in living standards on record £6 billion council tax bill. Families in band D will see their council tax rise above £2,000 for the first time ever.

I am old enough to remember when the Conservative party believed in low taxes. I am old enough to remember when they said that people who worked hard should keep more of their money. What would the 2010 version of the Secretary of State make of the spectacle of a Secretary of State handing a £6 billion council tax bill to families at a time when taxes are already at a generational high?

The good news for people who are lucky enough to live in an area controlled by a Labour council is that their council tax bill is £335 less on average this year than the bill of those who live in a Conservative council-controlled area—that is 20% less. Let us never, ever hear again from Conservative Members that theirs is the party of careful stewardship of our economy, low taxes, and siding with working people. They have blown themselves out of the water.

Let us cut the spin. The Secretary of State's party has taken £15 billion from our communities since they were elected and he has voted through every single measure. By 2021, a full decade after the Conservatives came to power, English councils' core spending power was 26% lower in real terms than it was when they started. The reality of that is youth workers laid off, with the bond between a young person and the only adult they trust—a lifeline—broken for some of our most struggling young people. The clubs and the pubs where a pensioner would go to spend time with other people and get a hot meal, and sometimes have their only conversation in a day, have been boarded up. We are talking about boarded-up high streets and the antisocial behaviour that plagues our town centres in places that have so much pride, so much potential.

All that ambition has been wasted because of this Government, so do not tell us to be grateful for a small refund on the money that has been taken from us systematically for more than a decade. This is the original con trick—handing us a fiver while nicking a tenner. It is not just those of us in the Opposition who are saying it. I was really struck by the fact that not one contribution from Government Members, many of which were very thoughtful and very fair, welcomed the settlement. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) rightly said that he was launching a campaign for fair funding for his community. That is the job of a good local MP—standing up and fighting for their communities—but why is it always a fight with this Government?

The Conservative chair of the Local Government Association called this settlement “disappointing” and said that it “continues to hamper” councils’ “financial sustainability”. The Conservative leader of Fareham Borough Council says “there is nothing here” that will help his council. And Tory-controlled Norfolk County Council says that it will mean

“some tough decisions in Norfolk”.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, tough for who? They are tough for some of the poorest people in the country who are struggling the most, and guess who pays the most? Yep, you guessed it: the places that were already falling further behind.

Thanks to this sleight of hand, this con trick, it is precisely the places that the Conservatives promised to level up in 2019 that are again getting the thin end of the wedge. If they raise council tax by 5% in the north-east, they get £52. If they do it in the south-east, they get £66. This is the question that the Secretary of State has to answer, if he is going to stand by this plan and this approach: why does he think that people in Surrey deserve better-funded services than people in Bishop Auckland? This is not so much levelling us up as razing us to the ground, and driving a coach and horses through his own strategy to level up the country.

I have heard Ministers make a plethora of excuses for the mess they have created over the last few months. I have heard them blame Putin, I have heard them blame the bond markets, I have heard them blame the Labour party, I have heard them blame the Bank of England and I have heard them blame “society”. I am sure that, after this week's events, the Secretary of State might also privately add the Treasury to that list.

However, it is genuinely extraordinary to witness the spectacle of a Secretary of State undermining himself. He said that long-term funding matters, and in December his own Department said that that was crucial to the ability to plan for the future. A full 12 years after his Government ended the three-year funding settlements, that was a welcome admission, but where is it? While we are on the subject, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) rightly asked, where is the announcement on the public health grant? It is absurd that councils have to budget without having any idea what the budget is. This is the fifth one-year funding settlement in a row—the one-year funding settlements about which he himself has delivered a devastating critique. Boy, will he be livid when he finds out who was responsible for delivering them!

[Lisa Nandy]

Councils are critical—the Secretary of State knows, they know—in making the long-term strategic decisions to invest in and grow their local economies, but that is undermined today by the very Minister who is meant to be their champion. It is that sort of short-term, sticking-plaster approach that has led us to this point, where universally across these Benches not one single Member has got up to welcome the announcement today.

With levelling-up funds thrown at us like “The Hunger Games” and councils forced to go cap in hand to Whitehall—the begging bowl culture excoriated by the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands—councils are competing with each other while Ministers sit behind their desks. They took a full year to pick winners and losers, and to decide who was getting new picnic areas and traffic lights in communities in this country. They then changed the rules of the game and pulled the rug out from under us, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, wasting our time and wasting our money.

The Government have form on this. It was not just that they had already decided that many of the councils—those spending the millions of pounds handed over to consultants to get over the many hurdles and through the many hoops that this Government had set up for them just to get small amounts of their money back—were not even eligible while the process was still ongoing, but that this comes hot on the heels of a month-long scramble to put in bids for investment zones that went straight into the bin. What are this Government doing? They are wasting our time.

Imagine what we could do with a Government who matched the ambition of people in every part of Britain, or who could trust our Mayors and councils—hell, who could trust themselves—as well as our business and college leaders and our frontline workforce to harness the skills, assets and potential in their own communities. We in the Opposition are angry because we know how much better this country can be. In the three years since this Government were elected on one promise alone—to level up the country—they have crashed the economy, wiping out the value of the funds on offer. Geographical inequality—their goal was to tackle it—has widened and the transport network is in chaos. The Secretary of State cannot even appoint a single levelling-up director, a job he created. Taxes are at their highest level in decades, and today he has come here to say that he is forcing them up again.

The cost of everything in this country is going up, but the one thing that this country can no longer afford or can least afford is more of this Tory Government. This is it: this is the plan—that they come to this House and tell us that they are going to pass the buck and abdicate leadership to local councils to load the cost of their decisions on to hard-working families and leave a broken system untouched. This country can be so much—so much—better than this. In every community in this country, despite the mess they have made and everything they have broken, hope burns brighter than ever before. If they will not match the ambition of the British people, we will, and the sooner that they get out of the way, the better.

6.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): This has been a passionate, at times, but also thoughtful debate, and I thank every Member who spoke not only for the degree of ardour they displayed on behalf of their communities, but for their command of detail in laying out the challenges that everyone in local government faces.

Like speakers on both Front Benches—indeed, I think every speaker did this—I wish to thank those in local government, council workers and elected representatives, who work so hard on our behalf in every community. Our democracy depends on them. As the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley) pointed out, those in local government have faced unprecedented challenges in recent years, not just with the covid pandemic and the response to the public health challenges that that provoked, but also because of the way the war in Ukraine has meant not just inflationary increases, but new demands on them as we welcomed to our hearts and into our homes Ukrainian refugees in record numbers. Local government has been asked to step up, and has shown leadership, commitment and the very best of public service.

A number of speakers pointed out the essentially unsatisfactory nature of the way that local government finance is allocated, due to the complexity of the formulas over time. Indeed, the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee pointed out the way that a number of historical kinks in the architecture of local government finance mean that any Government face challenges in ensuring that money is distributed as effectively as it might be. I will not weary the House by going through the formula for tariffs and top-ups of business rates, which are on page 20 of the report, but for anyone who wants to look at them, we can all see how complex that system is.

Within that context, in this year’s local government report we have been able to increase core spending power overall by £5.1 billion, secure an additional £1.7 billion of additional grant funding, ensure additional support for adult and children’s social care, ensure a minimum 3% increase in core spending power for every local authority without the need for council tax increases, and ensure that the most deprived local authorities receive a 17% increase.¹ It was notable that while there were specific requests from individual Members, all of which were made well, overall there was a recognition of the constraints under which all Governments are operating, and a recognition that within the circumstances we face, at the last spending review local government secured additional resources to ensure an overall core spending power just shy of £60 billion.

I thank Members from my own party for their comments. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), and my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for West Dorset (Chris Loder) are all highly effective advocates for their constituencies. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings reminded us of local government’s history, and the vital importance of the institutions that safeguard our communities. He made a point consistent across the Benches, which is that rurality needs to be a key feature when thinking about local government funding. That is why in the settlement that he laid before the House, the

1. [Official Report, 9 February 2023, Vol. 727, c. 5MC.]

Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, increased the recognition of rurality in the way we distribute funds.

I acknowledge that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney and—particularly powerfully—my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset pointed out, more is required to be done. Indeed, the name of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset is never far from the lips of the leader of Dorset Council, Spencer Flower, as an object of praise for his assiduity in pressing the case for his constituents. I am more than happy to say that his persistence and passion has not gone unnoticed, and I would be delighted to meet him and the representatives who he would like to come to the Department to discuss the concerns he has specifically raised. I also extend that invitation to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings made a point about internal drainage boards and the challenges they face—*[Interruption.]* I will come to Labour Members in a moment. We will ensure that internal drainage boards are supported for the work they do. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney pointed out the particular challenges faced by coastal communities, and they are at the heart of many of the strategies in the levelling-up fund and the levelling-up White Paper that we are bringing forward.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for that invitation. As an hors d'oeuvre to what will be the main course of the meeting, may I again mention road funding, and the relationship between roads and the rest of the country? Where a service such as haulage is provided, taking food across the nation, that should be reflected in the settlement.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I will be returning to that question, with the Transport Secretary, as we look at potential devolution for Lincolnshire, in order to ensure that transport is a critical part of that.

Talking about devolution takes me to some of the concerns expressed by my good friend the hon. Member for—

Mr Kevan Jones: The right hon. Member.

Michael Gove: The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—that's fantastic. A knighthood should be coming as well. I am a great admirer of the right hon. Member, and he was a doughty opponent and critic of the devolution deal that we just secured in the north-east. While he makes the case against it, better than anyone I have ever heard, it is still the case that the deal was welcomed across the north-east. We had Labour leaders joining forces with Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to support a deal that secures and levers in an extra £1.4 billion for the north-east.

I know that Durham Labour was opposed to it, but it is the case that Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and independents across County Durham, and indeed Labour leaders in Gateshead, South Shields, Newcastle and North Tyneside, have welcomed the deal. We must hear more.

Mr Jones: I am sorry but that is not true. At a meeting in December, three Members of Parliament who represent the Minister's own party, the Liberal Democrat leader of the council, Conservative and independent council members were vehemently opposed to a north-east deal and wanted a county deal. The only reason they jumped on the bandwagon at the last minute was because he gave an ultimatum that they either did that or did not get anything.

Michael Gove: However persuasive I think the right hon. Gentleman is, he clearly thinks I am even more persuasive. In this mutual admiration auction, all I can say is this is a deal that was universally welcomed across the north-east, but not by Durham Labour, which has, in the right hon. Member, a brilliant advocate.

One of the reasons why there is not a Labour council in County Durham is because the voters voted it out at the last election, because they were scunnered by the way in which those councillors, at the height of the pandemic, thought an appropriate use of public money was to have a 3,500 square foot roof terrace on their new £50 million county hall. If only County Durham had the right hon. Member leading its Labour group, then Durham Labour would be doing even better.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), for whom I have enormous respect, is a brilliant local MP and a distinguished former member of the Cabinet and the shadow Cabinet. He made a series of points about the neglect of coalfield communities. I understand absolutely the point he makes. That is why visiting the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, at the invitation of the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), was one of the welcome first invitations I accepted in this role.

I say to the hon. Member for Hemsworth: let us work together in order to make sure that we can do more. Denise Jeffery, the leader of Wakefield Council, whom he mentioned, welcomed the levelling-up funding that we gave to Wakefield over all as good news, and education is improving across Wakefield. There are some outstanding academies, including Grove Lea in the hon. Gentleman's own constituency, that deserve support. Of course he will always ask for more funding, as we all will for our constituencies, but we should all celebrate the progress we are making.

I also want to celebrate the richly entertaining speeches from the Opposition Front Bench. The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) made the case that it was terrible that additional funding was coming from taxpayers, which prompted me to think, "Where else is additional funding that the Government distributes going to come from other than from taxpayers?" She then tried to suggest that it was a terrible thing that the money came from local taxpayers. That must be news to the leader of the Labour party, who in January, in his marvellous "take back control" speech, said that the core of a Labour Government at some point in the future—who knows when?—will be greater fiscal freedom: in other words, more local taxation. Obviously there is something there that we can only describe as a creative tension.

The hon. Member for Luton North went on to attack us for parsimony in the distribution of money and, in the same breath, said we were forcing councils to have a plethora of funds with which to deal—on the one hand we were being mean; and on the other hand overgenerous. The shadow Front Bench lamented the lack of poetry

[Michael Gove]

in local government finance, but I am afraid the hon. Member for Luton North brings poetry to local government finance, in particular the words of Walt Whitman:

“Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself...I contain multitudes.”

And there were multitudes of something in her speech.

The approach from the Labour party, which I can politely describe as wanting to have one's cake and eat it, is one that covers up the vacuum at the heart of its approach. While we have been working with local government to provide, not just in this settlement, a more sustainable funding with a determined effort to ensure that deprivation is addressed with a shift of resources to those communities that need it most, the Labour party seeks refuge in rhetoric and positioning, rather than engaging with the reality of the complexity of making sure that local government funding works for those who serve us so well. That is why I commend this settlement to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2023–24 (HC 1015), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

Resolved,

That the Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2023–24 (HC 1016), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Resolved,

That the Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) Report 2023–24 (HC 1017), which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Authority to Carry Scheme and Civil Penalties Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 9 January, be approved.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Question agreed to.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I notified the Speaker's Office of my intention to make a point of order, and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to put this on the record. I seek clarification and direction on how to take this matter forward. Dáithí's law relates to organ transplants. All political parties in Northern Ireland agree on the need for this lifesaving legislation. The only thing stopping it is a mechanism for introducing the legislation, due to the current impasse caused by the

Northern Ireland protocol. The Government have taken two decisions in this House to bring forward legislation relating to Northern Ireland: on identify and language; and on the most liberal abortion legislation in Europe, despite the opposition of political parties in the Northern Ireland Executive. Dáithí's law on organ transplants has nothing but support in Northern Ireland. I am therefore asking you, Mr Deputy Speaker, what I can do in this House to ask the Government to bring forward this legislation, through the precedent they have set on the two occasions I have mentioned, acknowledging that it will save lives. Dáithí's law is endorsed by all the political parties in Northern Ireland and by the public will of the people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): While I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order, it is a moot point. It is certainly not a matter for the Chair, and it is a moot point as to whether it is actually a point of order at all, in the sense that it does not arise from any matter that has been debated today. He has been here long enough to know that he will have an opportunity to raise the matter at business questions tomorrow, when the Leader of the House, who is responsible for Government business, will be in a position to respond to him.

PETITION

Dangerous driving

6.58 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Bradford South, of whom 288 have signed, although I know these issues are recognised right across Bradford and, indeed, the country. The petition reflects concerns across Bradford that the Government have stripped proper policing investment for tackling dangerous driving, speeding and other related offences.

The petition states:

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the issue of dangerous driving within the constituency of Bradford South must urgently be addressed; notes that speeding, thoughtless parking, anti-social vehicle use, and the reckless use of off-road vehicles are common issues; notes that that these are a threat to life and the quality of life of residents; and further that there must be a reallocation of funds to invest more in the policing of roads.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to police roads frequently and urgently introduce measures to reduce dangerous driving, speeding, thoughtless parking, anti-social vehicle use, and the reckless use of off-road vehicles in the constituency of Bradford South.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002802]

Kosovo: Security Situation

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Stuart Anderson.)

7 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): After five years in this place, I have finally managed to secure my first Adjournment debate. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kosovo, I am pleased that it is a debate about security in Kosovo.

Last July, I went to Kosovo with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, alongside the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who are both in their place, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). We had high-level discussions with the Prime Minister, the President's office and KFOR about the security situation. The situation has since worsened, which is why we need this debate.

I share the Republic of Kosovo's concern that Serbia is attempting to incite violence in Kosovo—a serious threat to peace and stability in the region and beyond. Those attempts come after Serbia has already destabilised and created tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, through the “Republika Srpska” entity, and in Montenegro. Because there have never been sufficient repercussions from the international community, Serbia has increasingly been threatening and engaging in staged acts of violence to destabilise Kosovo—so much so that its progressively more destructive approach has become normalised by the formulaic language of “both sides”, which must be decisively rejected.

Serbs in Kosovo are treated with respect. We need to ensure that relations between the two communities—Kosovan Serbs and Kosovan Albanians—and other minorities are harmonious and normalised if we are to have a secure and stable Kosovo and a solution to what is increasingly becoming a crisis. However, in the best-case scenario, Serbia is intentionally trying to destabilise Kosovo to prevent progress of the dialogue, especially in the context of the newly proposed EU plan, supported by France and Germany, for the normalisation of relations. In the worst-case scenario, the deliberate escalation is reminiscent of Serbia's modus operandi of starting wars in the 1990s. It is indeed a bad omen and a materialisation of what the current regime in Belgrade, many of whom served under Milošević, have been trumpeting for years now.

From my perspective, Kosovo has been willing to compromise, including on IDs, vehicle registration plates and the postponement of elections. Left without any bargaining chips or means to block progress on dialogue, Serbia has decided to artificially create a crisis in Kosovo.

On 9 December last year, Serbian Prime Minister Brnabić announced that Serbia was requesting the return of its military and police to Kosovo. That request was rejected by KFOR. In parallel, violence was instigated in the northern enclaves: in less than 24 hours, citizens started being terrorised by random detonations of stun grenades, journalists were attacked, Kosovan police were shot at multiple times and a police officer was hospitalised. That came after weeks of intimidation of

citizens in the north, including by burning cars whose plates had been converted to official Kosovan registration plates.

On 10 December, Serbia instructed criminal groups in the north of Kosovo to set up barricades. That is now a commonplace measure whenever Belgrade wants to increase tensions in Kosovo, but what is different this time is that Serbian President Vučić is no longer feigning ignorance as to who is behind them. Not only does he openly admit to being in control of the barricades, but he is now legitimising them and leveraging them as a political tool for destabilisation. On the same day, after attacks on citizens, police officers and journalists, a European Union rule of law mission reconnaissance patrol was attacked by a stun grenade.

The following day, on 11 December, an official request was submitted for the redeployment of Serbian troops to Kosovo. It was eerily reminiscent of Russia's tactics of invading a sovereign state under the pretence of protecting its “endangered community”. The Republic of Kosovo authorities purposely did not move to dismantle the barricades, in order not to raise tensions, and asked for support from the KFOR mission.

I could go through each day of the past two months in turn—you can see me turning through pages of infractions and escalations by the Serbian Government, Mr Deputy Speaker—but I do not think we have time, so I will skip ahead. I might share one or two more reflections on the subject later if there is time, but I first want to reflect on the Yorkshire contribution to Kosovan security.

ASD Lighting, which is based in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, is working with the Kosovan Government to provide assistance with state-of-the-art technology that will provide much-needed additional security measures to the disputed border areas with neighbouring Serbia. It is looking to improve infrastructure countrywide with energy-saving and security solutions. A delegation from various Kosovan Government Departments visited ASD Lighting in December to assess the capabilities and solutions that it could offer. This has been followed up by a visit by ASD's personnel to Pristina and also to some of the disputed border region, in order to provide advice and guidance on the technology and solutions required to provide increased security measures. I ask the UK Government and, in particular, the new Department for Business and Trade to support that move, and to assist ASD. I thank my constituent Brian Deane, who has been working with ASD and has been a significant contributor to cultural life in Kosovo for many years. He is a brilliant ambassador for Yorkshire in Kosovo and for Kosovo in Yorkshire, alongside a former Member of Parliament for Keighley, John Grogan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. As he may know, a security training firm in Northern Ireland, consisting of former officers from the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, had a contract to train police officers in Kosovo, which was funded by European money. It is clear that the job has not yet been completed, that there must be further training of the first line of defence in Kosovo—the policing sector—to make improvements throughout the region, and that the Government should offer any help that they can for that purpose. Will the hon. Gentleman make representations on behalf of his constituency firm and mine?

Alex Sobel: I thank the hon. Gentleman: it cannot be an Adjournment debate without an intervention from him. What he has said reflects what we have seen in Kosovo, when we went there in July and generally: the high regard that the Kosovans have for the United Kingdom and the role that we played in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and since, in the security and stabilisation of Kosovo as a nation. I think we continue to do that. There are more opportunities for us to work jointly with Kosovo than I have seen in many other places I have visited. The Kosovans look to us first, and others afterwards.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that at the most recent Council of Europe meeting, I initiated a debate on Serbia and Kosovo to ensure that Kosovo was admitted as a full member of the Council? It is already a partial member, and we have promised the Kosovans all our help in completing the documentation that is required to give it full membership.

Alex Sobel: I am aware of that, and I thank the hon. Member, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd)—another member of the Council of Europe delegation, who was Minister for Europe at the time of the initial crisis and genocide in Kosovo, but who cannot be here this evening—for the work they have done to support Kosovo's entry to the Council. It is hugely important for it to enter a multilateral, multinational organisation, which is part of its ambition. It sees the Council not as an end in itself, but as a stepping stone to greater things so that it can fully enter the community of nations.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It was a good trip of Kosovo that my hon. Friend and I, along with others, made last year. Does he agree that the 25th anniversary of the support that the UK and our allies provided for Kosovo in 1999 will be an opportunity for the UK Government, and the Governments of our allies, to make the case for its full participation in multilateral arrangements, starting with full membership of the Council of Europe?

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is worth reflecting on the contribution of that UK Government to Kosovo: I am thinking particularly of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale, of Robin Cook, who is sadly no longer with us, and of Tony Blair, who is held in high regard in Kosovo. The 25th anniversary is a time for other countries to reflect on the progress that Kosovo has made, and to ensure that it enters all those multilateral organisations and is brought into our community as a fully fledged nation.

Serbia has still not condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine. President Zelensky was here today, and we have a nation in Europe that cannot even condemn what is happening to his nation. Serbia is still acting aggressively to its neighbours—not just Kosovo—which risks peace and stability not only in the region, but far beyond as well. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is already following the situation closely, and is not hesitating to voice its support for Serbia openly in the event of an armed conflict, having militarised it heavily for years. Given how emboldened the Serbian authorities have become, it is concerning that further coddling of Serbia for the sake of stability could seriously backfire and lead to tensions spiralling out of control. The UK

Government and the international community should condemn Serbia's unilateral destabilisation attempts. They should urge the Serbian authorities to return to dialogue to normalise relations with mutual recognition at the centre, and resolve all issues peacefully. However, the west continues to allow Serbia's transgression. The international community does not rebuke Serbia or compel its justice system to seek convictions for the deaths of thousands of victims in Kosovo—an example of something that the international community could do.

Kosovo needs guarantees similar to those given to Sweden and Finland, which would serve as a game changer, deterring possible threats to our collective security and putting the region on a fast track to stability. The UK position on the association of Serb majority communities should be welcomed. The UK should invest political weight in this position, sharing its views with the Quint countries and the EU mediator. Without a doubt, that would aid the normalisation process between Kosovo and Serbia and help prevent ethno-territorial solutions.

The stabilisation of community relations inside Kosovo is key to peace. The five non-recognising EU nations are also a concern and play a major role in the normalisation process that is foremost in the international consolidation of Kosovo. The UK has played a major role in consolidating Kosovo's presence in international organisations and its gaining of new recognitions. The Government should use their influence, especially with the five non-recognising EU states, to unlock the normalisation process and the Euro-Atlantic path for Kosovo.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for successfully securing this debate. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I think he and others did a great job last week in securing the visit to Parliament of UK ambassador to Kosovo, Nicholas Abbott, who updated us on relations between the UK and Kosovo and the current situation there. Yesterday, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti wrote:

“We do accept the EU proposal for normalization of relations between Kosova and Serbia, and consider it a good basis for further discussion”.

Would the hon. Gentleman also be interested to hear the UK Government's position on the most recent proposal for the normalisation of relations?

Alex Sobel: That is a very live issue. For years now we have seen a dialogue based in Brussels. The current Prime Minister Albin Kurti, who has been to Parliament twice since I have been an MP, has a willingness to compromise and to go the extra mile, but that is not returned by President Vučić. The UK, working with others—particularly the French and German Governments—can apply pressure to Serbia to be an honest partner for peace and not to act as it has in undermining the process and, frankly, pulling the wool over the eyes of other Governments in Europe, including our own. That is the most useful thing that the UK Government and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office can do. If we can get to an agreement that both sides are able, frankly and honestly, to undertake, that is part of the path.

The five non-recognising states are a big issue that needs to be overcome. The EU needs to move forward and give more to Kosovo. Kosovo's constructive commitment

to the normalisation process should be translated into steps ahead, particularly in relation to those five non-recognising nations.

I have four asks of the UK Government, which I hope the Minister can respond to. The UK Government should support Kosovo in NATO Partnership for Peace membership by enhancing Kosovo and NATO relations. What has the UK's Government role been so far in that? The UK Government should support Kosovan capability building, with a focus on military and information capabilities to oppose Russian influence in the region. We know about the listening station Niš, which is jointly operated by Russia and Serbia, and is a big issue, which we were briefed on by the KFOR and others when we were in Kosovo.

What is the Minister's view on how we can curb Russian influence in Serbia? We need to support Kosovo's military capability so that it can defend its territory and, at the same time, ensure that it is involved in NATO international peace operations. How can we enhance that role in Kosovo so that it can defend itself? For a more safe and secure environment in the Balkans, especially in Kosovo, can we ensure that KFOR has specialised units on the ground, because, as we see in Ukraine, wars are now hybrid, and we need a NATO force in Kosovo that is able to resist hybrid threats in case the worst happens.

I thank the House, and I think we will come back to this issue again and again, because after Ukraine, peace in the western Balkans is the most important issue for peace and stability in Europe.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I am acutely aware of the hon. Gentleman's interest in these matters, but this is an Adjournment debate. Does he have the consent both of the Minister and of the Member in charge? I have had no indication that that is so.

Alex Sobel *indicated assent.*

7.15 pm

Martin Vickers: That is the case, Mr Deputy Speaker. We advised the Speaker's Office, and I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for allowing me an extra minute or two to add to his contribution, as we are the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on Kosovo. I am also the trade envoy to Kosovo and the western Balkan region. I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the security situation. I have had the opportunity of meeting Prime Minister Kurti on four occasions, one of which was with the hon. Gentleman on the visit to Kosovo to which he referred. It is notable that Prime Minister Kurti is eager to extend our bilateral ties and the economic investment opportunities between our two countries, and I will certainly do all I can in my role as trade envoy to ensure that that happens.

Kosovo has a young, dynamic population, and that is evident when I visit businesses over there. We have great opportunities to secure the future of Kosovo after so many British and allied lives were lost during the conflict 30 or so years ago. This is an important part of the British contribution. I know that the Minister has visited the region in the relatively short period that he has been

in office. That is very welcome and I look forward to hearing him give us a reassurance that he and his colleagues will continue with that working relationship. The hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned Nick Abbott, our ambassador in Pristina, who was here last week. He does a splendid job, along with a very small team over in Kosovo, and it is vital that we ensure continued peace and prosperity for that country.

7.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this important debate, and I pay tribute to him for his work and his interest in the subject as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kosovo. I am grateful for his comments, and I was particularly pleased to hear about Yorkshire's contribution to the cultural life and development of Kosovo. I was also pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the expertise from Northern Ireland that is being brought to bear in addressing the security challenges in Kosovo.

Kosovo is a vibrant country with democratic values and western European standards, but like other states in the western Balkans it contends with the challenging legacy of the conflict of the 1990s. Next week, Kosovo will celebrate the 15th anniversary of its independence, and I am very pleased—especially following his contribution today—that my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), the Prime Minister's trade envoy to the western Balkans, will visit Pristina to take part in the celebrations. We wish him well with that visit. Fifteen years ago, the British ambassador was the first to present a letter in Pristina confirming our recognition of Kosovo, making the United Kingdom the first country to do so.

With the support of its partners, not least the UK, the Kosovo of 2022 has made significant progress in strengthening its economy, the rule of law, freedom of the press and its democracy. In the past year it has formally applied for both Council of Europe and European Union membership, and it is seeking to join NATO. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who is no longer in his place, for his efforts in this area and for his contribution this evening. The UK supports Kosovo in its international integration ambitions, including through our support for modernisation and the reform of the judiciary and security forces. The United Kingdom's bilateral relationship with Kosovo was, of course, forged in the most difficult of times, which will always provide a very firm basis for partnership. That partnership has gone from strength to strength in recent years.

Building on our defence partnership, for the first time our troops are now working side by side on an operational deployment outside the region. Building on our economic partnership, for the first time Kosovo is able to access financial support from the UK's export credit agency, which now has substantial capacity for western Balkan countries and can support projects in a range of sectors, including infrastructure and energy. And building on our security partnership, for the first time we have sanctioned individuals linked with organised crime and corruption in Kosovo.

[*Leo Docherty*]

In December, we cemented all this into an annual formal institutional dialogue, the UK-Kosovo Partnership Council, which I was delighted to open in person during my visit to Pristina. During that visit, I met both Prime Minister Albin Kurti, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. In conversations that ranged from energy security to foreign policy, I gained a first-hand understanding of their deep affection and respect for the UK.

As I said at the outset, we must recognise the significant challenges that Kosovo faces, some of which are common to most new and developing states and some of which are particular challenges in the western Balkan region. These include the challenges of serious and organised crime and corruption, which the Government of Kosovo promised to tackle upon assuming office. We also work very closely with Kosovo's Government, media and civil society to strengthen resilience to hybrid threats such as disinformation and cyber-attacks.

Of course, there are other challenges that are unique to Kosovo. Unfortunately, 15 years after independence, Kosovo is still not recognised by many countries. In 1999, NATO intervened to prevent a humanitarian disaster. Today, KFOR is NATO's largest overseas mission and remains the ultimate guarantor of Kosovo's security. I was pleased to meet British members of KFOR, and they are doing great work to build security in Kosovo. The UK commitment to KFOR remains strong, including by providing its strategic reserve capability. Many of those reserve forces were most recently on the ground in Kosovo for an exercise from September to November 2022.

A unique challenge facing Kosovo is the absence of a normal relationship with its neighbour Serbia, which does not recognise its independence and still asserts a territorial claim to Kosovo. This is a major obstacle to Kosovo's integration into the international system. The EU-led dialogue on normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which began in 2011, is the primary vehicle for seeking to address these issues. We are confident that a comprehensive and sustainable agreement between Serbia and Kosovo is possible, but it will take political will and political courage. The progress we have seen over the last year on several dialogue agreements, including on energy and car number plates, shows that progress is possible.

Through the dialogue, Kosovo has committed itself to the establishment of an association of Serbian-majority municipalities, and it is for the parties to agree the association's form and the timing of its establishment. We encourage both Governments to make progress. Such a body is not only an international commitment but provides an opportunity for Kosovan Serbs to be an integral part of Kosovo.

We have heard much in recent weeks about efforts led by the EU, including proposals put forward by France and Germany to kick-start the process of real dialogue and to move beyond the cycle of rhetoric and tension

that risks spilling into more violence. This Government welcome all steps that can help to deliver a long-term solution, including the present initiative.

Luke Pollard: The 25th anniversary provides a real opportunity for the Government to step forward. I am concerned that, notwithstanding Kosovans' huge amount of good will towards the UK, we are not always as present in Kosovo as we ought to be to make the required progress. Will the Minister look at that again ahead of the anniversary?

Leo Docherty: We will continue to inject political and diplomatic energy. I recently visited Kosovo, and others will do so in the near future.

We will continue to support the EU-led dialogue both politically and practically. We absolutely agree with our international partners that the priority should be to reach a position where time and resource can be focused on co-operation and real benefits for the lives of ordinary citizens. It is strongly in the interests of both countries, the wider region and, indeed, the whole continent that Serbia and Kosovo move beyond division.

Over the past year, we have repeatedly seen tension fuelled by sudden action and inflammatory rhetoric. We therefore welcome the steps taken by both sides to de-escalate tensions, but we want to avoid an endless cycle of crisis management. Our embassies in both Pristina and Belgrade are active and working in close co-ordination with our Quint partners to encourage all parties to focus on the longer-term benefits of normalisation. The Prime Minister's special envoy to the western Balkans, Lord Peach, was in Pristina and Belgrade in January, urging progress and exploring opportunities for UK support, and I did the same thing during my visit to both countries in December. I have been encouraged in recent days by commitments from the Kosovan Government to work towards the establishment of the association of Serbian majority municipalities, as part of Prime Minister Kurti's acceptance of the wider EU proposal for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Positive movement here has the potential to unlock progress on a wider relationship, with a very direct benefit for citizens,

In conclusion, 24 years after the conflict and 15 years after Kosovo's independence, it is high time to move beyond the legacy of conflict and look towards the future. We remain unwavering in our support for Kosovo's indisputable independence and its right to security. We look to the region to promote peace and security for all countries in the western Balkans. At the same time, we look to the Kosovan Government to look after the interests of all their citizens, and to work constructively and pragmatically for the normalisation of relations with Serbia and for improvement to the everyday lives of all citizens.

Question put and agreed to.

7.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 February 2023

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

National HIV Testing Week 2023

2.30 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered National HIV Testing Week 2023.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this important and timely debate, Mr Gray. It is 40 years since the untimely death of Terrence Higgins, who was not only the first recorded British person to die of HIV/AIDS, but a Commons *Hansard* Reporter—one of our own. Since then, we have made huge progress in the testing, diagnosis and treatment of HIV. Today, people living with HIV can continue to lead very normal lives. It is essential to remember, however, that HIV remains a critical global health issue, with millions of people living with the virus and many more at risk of infection.

Early diagnosis and treatment of HIV is essential in reducing the spread of the virus, improving health outcomes and reducing the stigma associated with the disease. Charities such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and the Elton John AIDS Foundation have worked tirelessly to lead the fight against HIV. I thank them for the phenomenal work they have done, and continue to do, to help those living with HIV and to achieve the goal of no new transmissions by 2030.

I thank the outgoing chief executive of the Terrence Higgins Trust, Ian Green, for his hard work and dedication to the charity over many years, and for his immense contribution to the fight against HIV. I also congratulate Richard Angell on his appointment as Ian's successor. He has big shoes to fill, but I have no doubt that he is more than capable of doing so, stepping up to the challenge and driving this important work forward into the future.

As Members will be aware, human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, weakens a person's immune system and their ability to fight everyday infections and disease. HIV is passed from human to human and, if left untreated, can progress through a series of stages and lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Although there is currently no cure for HIV, there are treatments available that enable a person to live a long and healthy life. A person living with HIV has a similar life expectancy to an HIV negative person, provided they are tested and diagnosed in good time.

As the House knows, TV is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal to help educate the public, with award-winning dramas such as "It's a Sin" bringing HIV to the forefront of the national consciousness again. I am not sure if there are any "EastEnders" fans in the Chamber, but, if there are, they will know that the character Zack Hudson, played by James Farrar, has recently been diagnosed with HIV. The story portrays Zack's struggles in coming to terms with his HIV diagnosis and his difficulty in opening up to his friends and family. I encourage Members, perhaps over the forthcoming recess, to catch up on those powerful episodes of the

Albert Square soap, which perfectly captures the stigma around HIV and the challenges those living with it continue to face. I also hope that the storyline will encourage more people to take an HIV test.

During my time in government, the work I am perhaps the most proud of is introducing the new national HIV action plan. It had the clear aim of reducing new infections by 80% by 2025 and, crucially, ending infections and deaths from HIV by 2030. As Public Health Minister, I was clear with colleagues across government, as well as in the NHS, that this goal could only be achieved if the plan was properly financed.

By securing over £23 million of new funding to support the work needed to deliver the action plan, including scaling up HIV testing in targeted, high-risk populations, including the black and African communities, and increasing access to the anti-viral drug, pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, I am wholly confident that we can, and will, eradicate HIV in the UK by 2030.

Despite progress over the years, the Terrence Higgins Trust estimates that there are still 4,400 undiagnosed people living with HIV in England. I challenge the Minister to play his part and commit to finding them so that we can achieve our goal of zero new transmissions by 2030. To do that, we need to encourage more people to test for HIV, and expand opt-out testing across the UK, especially in high-prevalence areas.

This week across the country, including on the parliamentary estate, we have been marking National HIV Testing Week with a number of events to raise awareness of HIV testing. This annual campaign aims to raise awareness of the importance of regular testing to reduce the number of people living with undiagnosed HIV and those diagnosed late. This year, the campaign's new strapline, "I Test", replaces "Give HIV the Finger", which has been in place for the past five years. I urge everyone to take advantage of the services available during National HIV Testing Week and throughout the year to get tested and know their status.

Forty years ago, testing for HIV was limited and often difficult to access. We had only just begun to understand what HIV was, including its variants and its potential impact on health. Charities such as the Terrence Higgins Trust were established, but at that time could only offer support and advice to HIV-positive people. Fast forward to today, and the contrast is evident. For the first time this year, during National HIV Testing Week, in addition to the traditional test, people in England are able to order or collect a rapid home HIV test that gives results within 15 minutes. It operates similarly to a lateral flow test, which we all became familiar with during the pandemic. It only needs a few drops of blood from a small prick on the finger, and the results are known promptly afterwards. That means that, for the first time, HIV testing is quick, free, confidential, easy and will certainly save lives.

I turn to the steps the Government have taken to tackle HIV. Over the past few years, the Government and charities have worked together to try to achieve the goal of eradicating HIV transmissions in England by 2030. In 2019, the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), set a goal to eradicate HIV transmissions in England by 2030. In fact, I think he was set the challenge by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). That led to the launch of an independent

[*Maggie Throup*]

HIV Commission, supported by the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and the Elton John AIDS Foundation. Its aim is to develop evidence-based recommendations to end HIV transmissions and attributed deaths within a 10-year period.

The commission's report, which was launched on World AIDS Day 2020, made 20 recommendations. It outlined that the single most important intervention to meet the 2025 and 2030 goals was to make widespread HIV testing readily available across the NHS, delivered as opt-out, not opt-in, testing. At the current rate, it is possible, but not probable, that we will achieve that 2030 goal. There needs to be a concerted effort by the Government, HIV charities and the NHS to come together to turn that vision into a reality. As the HIV Commission outlined:

"Opt-out rather than opt-in HIV testing must become routine across healthcare settings, starting with areas of high prevalence." I firmly believe that if we want to be the first country in the world to achieve zero HIV transmissions by 2030, we must rapidly expand opt-out testing at the earliest opportunity.

In particular, opt-out testing, which is a scheme whereby a patient can explicitly decline instead of implicitly accept an HIV test, can help to ensure the UK is the first country in the world to eradicate HIV transmissions by 2030. An opt-out programme refers to when a patient visits an accident and emergency department and is offered a discreet test, which screens for HIV and hepatitis B and C when blood is taken for other tests. That is usually the case for most A&E attendances.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent contribution. Is not one of the real benefits of opt-out testing that it starts to chip away at what remaining stigma is left with HIV testing by normalising it?

Maggie Throup: The spokesman for the Opposition makes exactly the right point. One of the ways that we can achieve our goal for 2030 is by taking away the stigma that, sadly, affects people who test positive for HIV.

Nobody is forced to take the test, and the patient is allowed to opt out, but I am led to believe that very few people do opt out. There have been some notable successes since the adoption of opt-out testing in very high-prevalence areas, and it is clear that the way this is being carried out is saving lives. In the first 10 months, A&E departments in London, Brighton, Blackpool and Manchester have seen 261 people newly diagnosed with HIV, in addition to finding 137 who were previously lost to care. Additionally, 710 people were newly diagnosed with hep B, and 288 people were newly diagnosed with hep C. Crucially, this means that people can access the treatment they need to live a normal life, and that they cannot pass on the virus unknowingly.

Opt-out testing has a number of benefits for the NHS, too. At a time when the NHS is under increasing pressure in terms of both the backlog and funding, opt-out testing can help relieve both of these problems. Research from the Terrence Higgins Trust has highlighted that, in the first 100 days of the scheme, opt-out testing has cost the NHS only £2.2 million and saved an estimated £6 million to £9 million in healthcare costs. That is well illustrated at Croydon University Hospital,

where opt-out testing has been taking place for some time now. Before opt-out testing, the average hospital stay for newly diagnosed HIV patients was 34.9 days. After two years of opt-out HIV testing, the average stay is just 2.4 days. That frees up hospital beds, which, in turn, will help to reduce the backlog, and it shows that opt-out testing can benefit the NHS and the patient.

The pandemic clearly had an impact on HIV testing and may have affected the possibility of reaching our 2030 goal. According to the UK Health Security Agency, the total number of people newly diagnosed with HIV in England decreased by 33% in 2020. Reasons for that include the impact of the unprecedented public health restrictions and the strain on health services, resulting in a decline in HIV testing. Although covid accounts for the fall in testing, we need to address a number of problems to give us a fighting chance of being able to meet the 2030 zero-transmission target.

I therefore ask the Minister to consider the following points. The first is about the roll-out of opt-out testing in high-prevalence areas and not just in very high-prevalence areas. Despite the fantastic achievements of opt-out testing in very high-prevalence areas, we need to do more to undertake testing in areas of high prevalence. An area is classified as having high prevalence if between two and five people per 1,000 are HIV positive. Currently, there are 32 areas of high prevalence outside London. Cities that are classified as being in this class include Bristol, Liverpool, Derby and Nottingham. With my constituency of Erewash sitting between Derby and Nottingham, I have a vested interest.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the British HIV Association, the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV, and the British Infection Association all recommend routine HIV tests in areas of high prevalence for anyone having a blood test for other reasons. Despite this guidance, there is no Department for Health and Social Care or NHS England funding, and no route map for opt-out testing in areas of high prevalence outside London. If we are serious about meeting the 2030 target, the Government need to expand opt-out testing across the country, and specifically in high-prevalence areas. This form of testing has been extremely successful across London, where a decision was taken to fund opt-out testing not just in the boroughs with very high prevalence, but in those with high prevalence. It is estimated that a further £18 million is needed to expand opt-out HIV and blood-borne testing in 40 hospitals in 32 areas outside London. Anyone leaving an A&E department who is HIV positive and is not diagnosed is a missed opportunity.

Secondly, we need to reduce the chances of late diagnosis. It is reported that in 2020 42% of all people diagnosed with HIV were diagnosed late. The impact of late diagnosis can be extremely damaging. As well as meaning that people might unknowingly pass on the virus, if someone receives a late diagnosis their chance of dying in the first year after diagnosis is ten times greater than if they had received an early diagnosis. Additionally, late diagnosis can have a detrimental impact on an effective response to treatment, which in turn leads to greater healthcare costs, at a time when there are already financial strains on the NHS.

Late diagnosis is particularly common among certain groups; 54% of heterosexual British black Africans and 29% of gay and bisexual men were diagnosed late.

Opt-out testing has allowed us to identify that those groups are the most likely to be HIV positive. Although opt-out testing highlighted that those groups were most likely to have HIV, we need to encourage more people from them to get tested.

A simple solution to encourage more people from those groups to get tested could be to use public message campaigns. Targeted messaging across radio, television and social media could be created to encourage people to come forward and get tested. It could also specify the importance of testing and tell people where their local test centre is. Let us face facts: during the pandemic, it became second nature to go to a covid testing centre or a vaccination centre outside of the usual healthcare settings. In a similar way, pop-up testing centres could be a useful way of reaching out to the hard-to-reach communities.

Research by the British HIV Association has shown that many people have missed opportunities to test for HIV in primary and secondary care. The most common clinically related barrier is linked to the failure to appreciate HIV risk, or to properly diagnose HIV. Other barriers include time pressures, clinicians not seeing it as their role to test, the perceived need for pre-testing counselling and unfamiliarity with discussions about testing. Clearly, all those factors can lead to a late diagnosis and to greater health risks.

Ultimately, in order to address late diagnosis in both primary and secondary care services, HIV testing needs to become more prominent across the entire NHS primary and secondary estate. If we want to turn the UK into a science and health superpower, and if we want there to be no new cases of HIV by 2030, it is essential that we address the issues that I have highlighted today. In particular, it is vital that we rapidly increase testing levels in high and very high prevalence areas through opt-out testing. That will not only save the NHS money and reduce the backlog, but it will enable patients to know quickly whether or not they have HIV.

My challenge to the Minister today is for him to fight the corner for the funding needed to expand opt-out testing to all high prevalence areas. If we achieve such an expansion, then this time next year—when I am sure there will be another debate on this subject—we can report that we are back on track to meet the goal of zero new HIV infections, and zero AIDS and HIV-related deaths, in England by 2030. As well as saving lives, Ministers' actions in this area would also save the NHS quite a considerable amount of money. If we implement this programme properly, our country will continue to lead the way in this area of healthcare and it will achieve the status of becoming the first country in the world to eradicate HIV.

2.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Mr Gray.

I thank the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for setting the scene. As the health spokesperson for my party, I think it imperative that we speak out on these issues. I have done so in the past—indeed, I do not think I have missed any HIV debate, whether it was in Westminster Hall or in the main Chamber—so I am very pleased to come to Westminster Hall today and participate in this debate.

How wonderful our NHS is. It is instrumental in providing support and care for us all. Where would we be without it? Regarding HIV, we have come on in leaps and bounds since the late 1970s and the 1980s in terms of providing diagnosis, support and treatment, and indeed in removing the stigma around it. It is good that we are where we are today, because that shows there has been progress—positive progress—and I support that progress.

It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), in his place today. It seems like only yesterday—in fact, it was last Thursday—that we were here in Westminster Hall to discuss cystic fibrosis. And I am very pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), here today as well. I know that he will give positive responses to the questions that we ask; he always is positive and we very much appreciate that. There is always more we can do to improve diagnosis and keep people as healthy and safe as possible, so it is great to be here to discuss these important matters.

I also put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Erewash for setting up the all-party parliamentary group for diagnostics this morning. I commend her for that; she has many supporters from within her party and others who wish to see things going in the right direction.

In 2021, 2,955 people in the UK were diagnosed with HIV. The number of people being newly diagnosed each year has been decreasing steadily for over 15 years, from a peak of 7,892 in 2005. That is down to the strategies pursued by the Government and the Minister, as well as by the local and regional Administrations, including my own Northern Ireland Assembly back home. Most people with HIV—some 95%—know their status because they have been diagnosed. We have a very clear strategic plan in Northern Ireland to make it easier to be diagnosed. I am sure the Minister has done his research, so he will know the success rate of our strategy. Northern Ireland has led the way for the rest of the United Kingdom.

In 2020, 60 people in Northern Ireland were diagnosed with AIDS; 47 of them were men and 13 were ladies. It is important to note that historically there was a stigma around being tested for AIDS and being diagnosed with it. I believe that stigma has disappeared. A large majority of people are eager to get diagnosed and then to start the treatment process. Today, in solidarity, we can encourage people to get tested. I want to make that statement, and others will want to make it as well. People in Northern Ireland can get a free HIV test and will receive comprehensive medical care and support. Provision is widely available in all health trusts, and HIV testing kits can be ordered online and delivered straight to the home. We can do this online as we do many things, such as shopping. Northern Ireland is leading the way.

The National AIDS Trust and the Terrence Higgins Trust have been in contact with my office ahead of the debate, and I am pleased to add some of their evidence and information into my contribution. They have emphasised the importance of opt-out testing being expanded to all areas with a high prevalence of HIV. Can the Minister tell us what has been done to address those areas of high prevalence? I am quite sure there is a direct strategy to address this. It is estimated that the

[Jim Shannon]

first 100 days of that scheme cost £2.2 million, and saved the NHS an estimated £68 million in care costs, because those diagnosed were able to initiate treatment. It really is a win-win; people are diagnosed early and money is saved on the care down the line. It is estimated that a further £18 million is needed to expand opt-out HIV and bloodborne virus testing to a further 40 hospitals in 30 areas, which would in turn result in savings. As always, I ask the Minister in a respectful manner, as I am looking for answers, will the Minister's Department set aside the further £18 million to ensure that happens?

Opt-out testing finds people who are more likely to be diagnosed late by other services. Fifty four percent of people diagnosed with HIV in the first opt-out testing A&E pilots were of black African, black Caribbean or other black ethnicity—more than twice as many as the nationwide average, as the hon. Member for Erewash mentioned in setting the scene so well. Thirty five per cent of people diagnosed were women, and 10% were aged 65 or over. Again, the hon. Lady asked for that to be a target area. I reinforce her request.

Between 2021 and 2022, HIV testing did not return to pre-pandemic levels, with testing rates 20% lower in 2021 than in 2019, so there is something that needs to be done there as well. That has been driven by a 22% drop in testing among women and a significant 41% drop in testing among heterosexual men. I would suggest that someone who has not made use of HIV testing needs to do so. This debate, in HIV testing week, aims to promote regular testing, particularly among the groups most affected by HIV in England, including gay and bisexual people, men who have sex with men, and people in black African and black Caribbean communities. Testing options in the United Kingdom vary across Administrations. We are leading the way in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that everybody's ambition is to catch up. It is important that our constituents know their first port of call, should suspicions of HIV arise.

I want to give a wee plug for what some of the organisations in my constituency are doing. I will give one example out of many. One of the churches, the Elim church in Newtownards, is very active with missionaries in Africa, in Swaziland—now Eswatini—and Zimbabwe. There is a high prevalence of HIV in those countries. They were keen to ensure help for those affected by HIV, first the orphans who have lost parents through HIV, by providing health treatment, an orphanage, education and job opportunities. That missionary-based church deserves to be commended for what it does in those two African countries. Every year the missionary society sends over some of the children and a choir to sing, and every year I attend those events. They remind us of how things were and how things can be. It is the ambition for change, which the Elim church clearly has.

I have a question about something that lies outside the Minister's responsibilities, so I would be happy if came back at a later stage to keep us informed. What discussions has he had with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Secretary of State to promote the fight against HIV in other countries? I know they are doing it, but I am keen to know whether the same focus, attention and authority are given.

To conclude, it is important we do all we can to encourage early testing, for early diagnosis and better treatment. There is potential to live with HIV, to keep going and protect life from illness and possible death. I am encouraged by what Government have done, but I call on the Government to ensure sufficient access to HIV tests. I thank our health trusts and GPs for providing free testing for all, as many do, in particular in Northern Ireland.

2.57 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Mr Gray.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for opening the debate so well. I echo her comments about the outgoing chief executive of the Terrence Higgins Trust. I have known Ian for many years. His leadership ensured that the trust was the first organisation to take the "U=U" message out there, along with "Can't Pass it On". Such a simple campaign and message came from the clarity of thought that Ian has brought to that organisation. The first home self-test postal service and the creation of the HIV Commission, which I will come on to, came through Ian's leadership. He is also a lover of labradors, which makes him a good person in my book. We thank Ian, and wish him well and good luck in his new positions. I look forward to seeing him soon.

As has been said, HIV emerged some 40 years ago, when I was a mere slip of a schoolboy. The epidemic that followed still dominates some people's lives, ended many too soon, and scarred many more. I knew nothing about HIV. When I became the Public Health Minister, I knew nothing beyond the tombstone advert on television, which I had seen as a schoolboy. I knew nothing, but I have learned a lot in a very short space of time.

Forty years ago, the situation seemed hopeless, as it did at the start of the covid pandemic in some respects, but we have seen improvements in treatments. Someone on effective treatment cannot pass on the disease. What we have achieved is incredible and a testament to the hard work of so many in our life sciences industry, as well as in the NHS, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. The all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, which I am proud to co-chair, has been at the forefront of the work for 36 years as one of the longest-standing all-party groups, and kept the subject high on Parliament's agenda. I pay tribute to Mark Lewis, who is here today. He looks after us and keeps us on the right track and focused.

The push to end new HIV transmissions by 2030, which my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash mentioned when she opened the debate, is the right target. The UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments have all committed to meeting that target and building on the work that I have talked. We *can* get there. I emphasise that, so I hope that *Hansard* will emphasise it. HIV care in our country today is excellent. The number of people living with undiagnosed HIV has declined year on year. In the majority of people with diagnosed HIV, it is undetectable because of the treatment and the antivirals that they are on. Effective treatment and the combination HIV prevention, including the pre-exposure prophylaxis treatment, has resulted in a marked decline in new HIV diagnoses annually, but despite the fact that we have access to all the tools we need to eliminate new HIV transmissions,

we will not meet the targets that the HIV Commission set out for 2030, nor the Government's commitment to reduce new diagnoses by 80% by 2025 unless we improve testing along the lines set out by other Members today.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I agree entirely with what the hon. Member is saying. This might be a matter that the Minister can respond to or that the hon. Member's Select Committee can take up. A lot of the arguments have been won on, for example, the availability of PrEP and making services accessible, but that has not been happening, partly as a consequence of monkeypox displacing other services and partly because of lack of resources, and that seems criminal. I have a sexual health clinic in my constituency in west London, where there is high prevalence, and people simply cannot get access to treatment. They cannot get appointments at clinics and cannot get on the escalator, as it were, to treatment. We can praise ourselves for having these solutions, but unless we solve those issues, they will not work.

Steve Brine: The point I was making was that, compared with the hopelessness of 40 years ago, we now have the tools to deal with it, but the hon. Member is right. The all-party group visited the Dean Street clinic last year and heard about the impact that monkeypox has had and is still having on its day-to-day work. Access to PrEP through, say, community pharmacies would move the dial and be a game changer. I would very much support that, and as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, I might be able to help.

Some people have mentioned the HIV Commission. I was fortunate to have the proposition for that commission put to me when I was in the Minister's job. For me and my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) and his successor as Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), it was an easy proposition to say yes to. When I left Government in 2019, I was asked by Ian Green of the Terrence Higgins Trust to join the commission as a commissioner, which I was delighted to do.

The Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and the Elton John AIDS Foundation did incredible work to put together the commission's report. As has been said, on World AIDS Day in 2021, we published our report that developed the evidence-based recommendations that are now the foundations of the HIV action plan, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove published in December 2021. Those recommendations were the foundations of the 2021 report by the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, "Increasing and normalising HIV testing across the UK".

The message from the HIV sector and public health professionals is test, test, test. As was said in the opening speech, late diagnosis remains way too high. There are still far too many people living with undiagnosed HIV who will not be reached through the existing testing strategies alone. If we are to find the estimated 5,000 undiagnosed people living with HIV in the UK, testing must be normalised through the health service and beyond. We have made great strides in doing that, but we will have to roll it out much wider to the high-prevalence areas, as has been said.

Everybody should know their HIV status. There must be equitable and easy access for everyone to that knowledge and to effective treatment, so they can live their full and

healthy lives with undetectable HIV. Undiagnosed virus is a major contributor to onward transmission. It is therefore the driver of late presentation, all the impacts on people's health and people's lives, and the costs to the national health service; sadly, it also significantly increases the risk of death in the first year after diagnosis.

We know that HIV testing is reliable, cost effective and highly acceptable to patients across a range of settings. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, HIV opt-out testing was an integral recommendation of the HIV Commission. We know that it works. The latest data available on HIV opt-out in accident and emergency departments in London, Manchester, Brighton and Blackpool shows 238 people newly diagnosed with HIV, and a further 124 people have been returned to care. That proves that it works. We have proved the concept. I will be honest with the House that, as a commissioner, I was concerned that people would opt out, or that they would take offence at the suggestion—that the patient would say, "What are you suggesting?" I was wrong. Routine HIV testing among pregnant women is completely normalised. That convinced me that it was right to make that our key recommendation.

That was our key recommendation, but opt-out testing is done only in London, Blackpool, Brighton and Manchester. I contacted my trust in Winchester today to ask whether we can have a conversation about rolling it out in our area.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: The voice of Strangford must be heard.

Jim Shannon: Only at the hon. Gentleman's behest, of course. In my contribution I referred to the success of the pilot schemes, and he has referred to that as well. There are also quite significant cost savings to the health service from people being diagnosed, so the small money spent now will be significant in the long run. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that?

Steve Brine: Yes, and that takes us neatly on to my final point. With my Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee hat on, we have just launched a call for ideas on that, which closes in just under two hours' time. We will be doing a major prevention inquiry, and there will be many workstreams in that inquiry, one of which will be sexual health, HIV and AIDS, and testing. This is a prevention issue—prevention of ill health, unnecessary suffering, and unnecessary cost the health service and therefore the taxpayer. The sector is responding to our call for ideas, and we will be getting that work under way and talking to the chief medical officer when we come back after half-term recess.

The opportunity to eliminate new cases of a long-term condition is very rare. We have the ambition to do it, but more than that, we have the tools to do it. We have to grab this opportunity; we would be missing the obligation upon us if we did not. I remain as optimistic as I was when the commission was put in front of me, four decades on from a subject I knew nothing about. I know a little bit about it now, and this is doable. We heard this afternoon from somebody who has shown what determination can do. We have the determination, I hope. Let us use the tools in the box and get this done. It is a great legacy that could sit on the Minister's desk.

3.10 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine); I pay tribute to him for all his great work in this area. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on securing the debate. A good number of colleagues applied for the debate, including me, and I congratulate her on being the one to secure it and lead it so well. It seems appropriate in this debate to mention the late Robert Key, the former Member for Salisbury who passed away last week and who did so much work on this issue while a Member of this House.

I welcomed the Government's commitment in 2019 to ending all new HIV transmissions in England by 2030. Normalising HIV testing is essential to meeting that target. I have done my test this week, and I am sharing the video and the means of obtaining a test on social media. While new HIV diagnoses have continued to fall, late diagnoses remain stubbornly high in England.

This February marks the 22nd anniversary of the death of a good friend of mine from AIDS. He sadly died from many AIDS-related complications, but I am confident that, had he been tested earlier and regularly, he would have been given the right medication and would still be alive today, causing the mischief and merriment that he always did. I remember him and others at times like this.

Last week, I had the privilege of hosting an event here in Parliament, along with the Terrence Higgins Trust, and it was a pleasure to welcome a number of colleagues who are here today. We met a young man, Oliver Brown, and Ollie is here in the Gallery today. Following a cycling accident, he went to hospital here in London, where opt-out testing for HIV was under way. Had the hospital not tested him for HIV when it took a blood sample, Ollie believes that, to this day, he may not have found out that he is HIV-positive. Thanks to that opt-out testing scheme, he is now getting the treatment he needs and can look forward to a normal, long life.

The Terrence Higgins Trust impressed upon us the huge and beneficial impact that further roll-out of opt-out HIV testing could have. Opt-out testing for HIV has already been rolled out in emergency departments in the areas with the highest HIV prevalence in England—namely, London, Brighton, Manchester and Blackpool. This testing has been introduced alongside opt-out testing for hepatitis B and C. Already, in the first 10 months, it has led to more than 1,500 people being diagnosed with HIV and hepatitis B and C, so it is clear that opt-out testing works.

I am, believe it or not, old enough to remember the famous “Don't Die of Ignorance” campaign of the 1980s, for which we have Lord Fowler to thank; he led the way on raising this issue throughout his ministerial and parliamentary career. There are generations of people who do not remember that campaign, and still, 42% of people first diagnosed with HIV are diagnosed late. People diagnosed late with HIV in 2019 had a more than sevenfold increased risk of death within a year of diagnosis compared with those diagnosed promptly.

We are simply not doing enough if we are serious about meeting our 2030 target. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, we have so many tools at our disposal to tackle HIV. I welcome that

PrEP is available, but we need to do more to roll it out. It is estimated that there are still more than 4,000 people with undiagnosed HIV in England, so we need to be testing more. We also need to ensure that everyone diagnosed with HIV accesses care so that they, like Ollie, can live long and healthy lives.

While we take action on those fronts, we also need to tackle the enduring stigma that dogs people diagnosed with HIV. Only 38% of the British public know that someone with HIV on effective treatment cannot pass it on. Undetectable means untransmissible. We must spread that message hand in hand with testing to end new HIV transmissions.

Expanding opt-out testing has the potential to save the NHS more money than it costs and further reduce pressure on services. The Terrence Higgins Trust estimates that in the first 100 days of the roll-out of opt-out testing, which has so far cost £2.2 million, the NHS has saved between £6 million and £8 million in care costs as a result of initiating treatment earlier for those who need it. That is a conservative estimate of the savings. We can infer that expanding opt-out testing for HIV and other blood-borne viruses nationwide would save the NHS even more in care costs.

Those savings come from the reduction in care that hospitals need to provide newly diagnosed patients as a result of detecting HIV sooner. When Croydon University Hospital first started opt-out testing, the average hospital stay for a newly diagnosed HIV patient was 34.9 days. After two years of opt-out HIV testing, the average stay has reduced to a mere 2.4 days. We can save the NHS money, reduce transmission further and ensure that those who need it get the treatment they need. In essence, opt-out testing delivers a win-win-win scenario.

National HIV Testing Week is all about promoting regular testing. It is disappointing that we have not yet managed to recover to pre-pandemic levels of testing. I hope the Minister will confirm that the Government will keep a laser-like focus on this issue so we can continue to normalise regular testing across the most at-risk communities. The Government's HIV action plan is hugely welcome, but we must go further. I urge the Minister to recognise the huge benefits of opt-out testing and do all he can to ensure we roll it out to the whole nation.

“Test, test, test” must be our mantra if we are to reach our goal in 2030. I know the Government will have the support of everyone in this House in achieving that aim. I know the Minister will have heard the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions, and I believe he will be pushing at an open door to secure the necessary funding.

3.17 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As always, Mr Gray, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for securing this important debate and for the detailed way she set out the issue—I do not think anyone could or would want to argue with her. She is a bit of a poacher turned gamekeeper, as a former public health Minister. In her and the new Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), we have two people who have been directly involved in formulating policy on stopping HIV transmission. I thank them and the current Minister for the work they do.

Like the hon. Member for Erewash, I want to refer to the new and outgoing chief executives at the Terrence Higgins Trust. Ian Green has led the organisation superbly, and its campaigns over many years have won successes from Governments. I look forward to working with my good friend Richard Angell, who will be superb in that job. I wish him and the whole team at the Terrence Higgins Trust the best for the future. I also thank Mark Lewis, who does so much work to facilitate the APPG. Those roles often go unthanked, but he puts so much time and effort into the group.

As has been mentioned, last year marked the 50th anniversary of the death of Terry Higgins, one of the first people in the UK to die of an AIDS-related illness. In those 50 years, we have come an awfully long way. Since Terry lost his life, we have seen major advancements in HIV treatment and testing, and in tackling bigotry, ignorance and misinformation. I acknowledge that those wins have only happened because of the tireless work of campaigners and researchers. The achievements of the last 50 years have been theirs, and when we do end all new HIV transmissions in this country, that victory will be theirs too. It is important to acknowledge that.

I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Winchester and for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for the way that they set out their arguments. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Darlington, who gave a very personal account, both here and at Prime Minister's Question Time, about the loss of his dear friend. There are so many people who, like his friend, have died—probably needlessly—a very early death because of the failure to identify an HIV transmission before it was too late. The drugs have moved on massively. If we identify HIV, we can tackle it, get the viral load down and get the CD4 count back to normal levels, and that person can live a healthy and near-normal lifespan. That is a testament to the drugs that have been developed.

As the name suggests, this week is all about testing, which is a vital tool in our fight against HIV. Labour is proud to support the “I test” campaign, which sits alongside National HIV Testing Week. People can live with HIV for a long time without displaying symptoms—an estimated 4,400 people are currently living with undiagnosed HIV—so encouraging regular testing is essential to ending new cases.

Along with a number of other Members, I went to the national HIV testing drop-in yesterday and collected a free HIV self-test. They are being distributed this week and, after either a finger prick or an oral swab, they show the result within 15 minutes. That is transformational. Anyone listening to this debate can log on to freetesting.hiv and get their test. If the last three years have taught us anything, it is that getting to grips with at-home testing is surprisingly easy. If anyone has not tested, please sign up online.

Twenty per cent. fewer people were tested for HIV in 2021 than in 2019. That is having a knock-on effect on treatment and diagnosis. It is important that we do everything we can to drive up testing rates, which is why campaigns such as “I test” are so essential. Access to free at-home testing from a central source is only available during National HIV Testing Week; for the rest of the year, access can generously be described as patchy. Will the Minister set out the steps the Government are taking to improve testing rates? How can we get tests into communities with low take-up? Given the success

of opt-out testing in areas of high prevalence, I would be interested in the Minister's comments on the current scope of that testing and whether there are plans to broaden it.

Beyond testing, there is still a huge amount of work to do in tackling HIV. During a debate on World AIDS Day, I spoke about access to PrEP. Around 40% of people surveyed struggle to access PrEP, and there are huge issues with the resourcing of sexual health clinics. Unfortunately, the PrEP action plan still has not been published, despite being promised in 2021. From a recent response to a written parliamentary question, I understand that the Government still intend to publish the plan. That is all fine and well, but the HIV action plan covers 2022 to 2025, and we have already had a year of it without a proper PrEP-specific plan. We cannot afford another year without one. Will the Minister set out a timeline today? Do the Government plan to publish the PrEP action plan prior to the summer recess?

Last week, the Government announced its major diseases strategy, but there has been little or no clarity on what that means for the sexual and reproductive health action plan, also long promised by the Government. Recently, the Minister for mental health and women's health strategy, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), said that the Government were “considering the need” for that plan. Will the Minister update us on those considerations? We know that sexual health services have faced extreme pressure thanks to the mpox outbreak, and that the capacity to deliver vital services has been compromised. Given that situation, it is really not acceptable that strategies are being promised and then apparently disappearing into the ether.

On World AIDS Day last year, the Labour party committed to scrapping the outdated barrier that prevents people with HIV from accessing fertility treatment. This is really important. Is the Minister able to confirm today that the Government will match that pledge? If not, why not? We have come an awful long way, but there are still legislative barriers in place that are based on misinformation, outdated information and scientific ignorance. We in this place must remedy that.

I have no doubt that the Minister wants to see increased testing and wants the UK to reach the historic milestone of no new cases of HIV. We support him in that and will do all we can to support the Government in meeting that aim, but that shared goal requires action now. HIV is treatable. It is detectable. New transmissions can be stopped. I invite the Minister, during National HIV Testing Week, to redouble his Government's efforts on HIV transmission, and to work towards a future where HIV is finally defeated. To take the foot off the pedal now, as we are right on the cusp of achieving something truly extraordinary, would be a profound tragedy. We support the Minister in keeping the foot on the pedal and ending all transmissions of HIV in this country.

3.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I thank Members from throughout the House for taking part in this hugely important debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on securing it. We heard excellent speeches from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the

[Neil O'Brien]

Member for Winchester (Steve Brine); we heard a very moving contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), who spoke about his friend; and we heard an important question from the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter).

Throughout National HIV Testing Week, we are raising awareness of the importance of testing as part of HIV prevention. I thank the Members who took part in the HIV point-of-care test in Portcullis House yesterday, delivered by the Terrence Higgins Trust. I join others in paying tribute to Ian Green for his work on this subject.

Our campaign aims to address barriers and normalise HIV testing, and to remove stigma by empowering and encouraging more people to know their HIV status. As many Members have said, people can live with HIV for a long time without any symptoms. Testing is the only way for people to know their HIV status. This is one of the cornerstones of our HIV action plan, published in 2021, which includes the strong commitment to end new HIV transmissions by 2030 in England.

The first HIV action plan monitoring and evaluation framework, which was published by UKHSA in December, shows that there is much to celebrate in the collective progress we have all made, with extremely high levels of antiretroviral therapy coverage and viral suppression. Still, as a number of Members have mentioned, there are an estimated 4,000 people living with undiagnosed HIV. For those paying attention to this debate and listening elsewhere, testing for HIV is quick, free, confidential and easy. It is fundamental to finding and diagnosing the population of people who currently do not know their status in order to protect their health, and for efforts to stop HIV being passed on. The vast majority of people get the virus from someone who is not aware that they have it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester said, what it means to live with HIV has transformed over the past four decades, from a terminal diagnosis to a manageable long-term condition, thanks to huge medical improvements in treating the virus. As part of our plan, we are investing £3.5 million in the HIV prevention England programme between 2021 and 2024, through which we are delivering National HIV Testing Week. Last year's results were promising: 30% of the almost 25,000 users who ordered a HIV and syphilis self-sampling kit during the campaign had never tested before, and a majority of the campaign's target audiences reported having taken some form of preventive action as a result of seeing the campaign.

What is more, throughout National HIV Testing Week, for the very first time, free HIV home tests with a result in just 15 minutes are available England-wide. As my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash said, this is completely transformative technology—something we are now very familiar with because of the covid epidemic. The test works in a very similar way to a covid-19 lateral flow test, but uses a few drops of blood from a small prick of a finger. Alongside self-tests, there is also an option for people across England to order a test that is then sent to a lab and screened for both HIV and syphilis.

The success of National HIV Testing Week is the result of close and collaborative working between key partners in and beyond Government, and I take this

opportunity to thank them for their invaluable work. That, of course, includes the HIV prevention England team at the Terrence Higgins Trust, which delivers National HIV Testing Week on behalf of my Department.

Our local authorities and regional directors throughout the country are co-ordinating placed-based and regional activities to further promote National HIV Testing Week, using posters, digital imagery and other creative resources, as well as their own local projects and initiatives on HIV testing and prevention. Community and voluntary organisations have a key role in engaging their local populations and will also be providing testing and information in their local area as part of National HIV Testing Week. I take this opportunity to thank them for their vital role in helping us to end new HIV transmissions.

We know that more still needs to be done to achieve our bold ambitions. As part of our HIV action plan and to improve testing, NHS England has made a £20 million investment in opt-out HIV testing in emergency departments in areas of extremely high HIV prevalence to ensure that people get the right treatment as early as possible. A number of Members asked questions about this. Opt-out testing is a proven and effective way to identify new HIV cases, as it promotes testing on the admission to hospital of anyone who has not previously been diagnosed with HIV, therefore helping to rapidly identify the virus. Thirty-three A&E departments are now live, delivering this important initiative. We have backed this measure with funding to provide hepatitis B and C testing as well, partnering with NHS England's hepatitis C elimination programme.

We are working closely with the NHS to understand the progress, challenges, results and learning from the initiative. I am taking a personal interest in it and the results that are starting to emerge, and have been considering the emerging evidence, which is extremely interesting and exciting in lots of ways. We will consider the evidence from the first year of opt-out testing alongside the data on progress towards our ambitions, to decide whether to further expand the programme.

Andy Slaughter: It is right that we are talking about testing and recommitting to targets, but this is part of a strategy on prevention. I will put to the Minister the same point as I put to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). I am sure the Minister has seen the briefing from the National AIDS Trust and the Terrence Higgins Trust on the fact that sexual health services were displaced by mpox, principally. About a quarter to a third of the routine work that they do, including testing and the prescription of PrEP, has gone and has not recovered a year on. What are the Government doing to ensure that clinics have the resources to do that?

Neil O'Brien: I was going to address that point later in my speech but will do so directly. We are conscious of the challenges thrown up, particularly in some areas, by the huge volume of extra work caused by monkeypox. We have provided additional resources to the places that were challenged by monkeypox, but I am conscious that it has slowed down some of the progress we wanted to make.

To finish my point about opt-out testing, which a number of Members asked about, the reason for starting in the areas with the very highest prevalence was that

there was a better opportunity to save more lives for a given investment. That is why we started in those areas rather than the low-prevalence areas. There is a point of balance in respect of how far we extend that out from the areas of the very highest prevalence, which is what the evidence we are gathering will help us to decide.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful for the Minister's comments about opt-out testing in high-prevalence areas. Will he write to me and others who have attended the debate about what considerations the Department has given to tracking people who have lived in high-prevalence areas but no longer live in them? They may have been exposed to similar risks that make those areas high prevalence, but they no longer live in them.

Neil O'Brien: That is an interesting question. I hope we can do better than that, because we will be sharing evidence as it emerges to help other areas of the country to make the case for implementing the same approach. My hon. Friend raises one new way of thinking about it, which we will consider. We will share evidence as it emerges, because there is a huge amount of interest in this extremely exciting new approach.

National HIV Testing Week gives us the chance to raise awareness of the importance of testing and of the powerful role that each of us has to play in ending HIV by knowing our own HIV status. It is also an excellent reminder of the need for a sustained, collective effort to achieve our shared ambitions and end new transmissions and deaths within England by 2030. Together, we can be the generation that beats HIV. Before I sit down, I should answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne): the PrEP action plan will be published before summer recess.

3.37 pm

Maggie Throup: I appreciate the opportunity to wind up the debate, which has been productive and knowledgeable. I thank Members from across the House for their contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) brought to the debate a great deal of knowledge and expertise, which he has gathered over a number of years. To use the words of the Opposition spokesman,

the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the fact that two poachers turned gamekeepers are present shows just how important the issue is.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) spoke so gently about his friend who sadly lost his life due to complications of HIV/AIDS. It is for those people that we need to get it right now and eliminate HIV by 2030.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) brought an international element to the debate when he spoke about the work that people local to him are carrying out in Africa. We must never forget that even though we are making great strides in the UK, other countries are quite a long way behind us.

I respect the Minister deeply and am really pleased that he has committed to continue his personal interest in this topic, but I do not think I heard from him that we will be rolling out to areas of high prevalence the opt-out testing that has been carried out in areas of very high prevalence. I am disappointed in that, because the boroughs across London have already done the work for the Department. The funding was just for the boroughs with very high prevalence, but London as a whole decided to roll it out across all the boroughs, partly because people move between them. There has been take-up of the testing and cases are being found in areas of London that were perceived to be just areas of high prevalence. I would appreciate it if the Minister could follow up on that to ensure that we speed up the roll-out to the high-prevalence areas. We should not wait too long, or we will find that more people—such as the friend of my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington—lose their lives.

We have in our grasp the opportunity to eliminate what has been a killer disease. We cannot let that opportunity slip through the net, so we must all do whatever we can to make that happen and make sure that opt-out testing is there, wherever we are in the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered National HIV Testing Week 2023.

3.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

Women's Football: Talent Pathways and Player Wellbeing

4 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered women's football talent pathways and player wellbeing.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I want to talk about women's football talent pathways and player wellbeing. I have raised both issues before, including in a Westminster Hall debate on a similar topic almost exactly a year ago, but they require more attention as women's sport grows across the board. I will start by considering the talent pathways available to young girls as a route from grassroots sport to the elite levels. I will then consider the experience of girls as they grow up playing football before possibly becoming professionals, while looking at the governance and structural issues they face.

Talent pathways, which are how players make it from being young footballers to professionals, are still experienced very little by young men and women. The first step in this journey is the grassroots game and in schools. For all sports—football, cricket, rugby and tennis—we need strong grassroots games to provide opportunities for our young people. Playing a sport offers health and social benefits, and young people may find that it is something that they love, that they are good at, and that they would consider making a career of. However, we have still not reached a point where the experience of sport at grassroots level is the same for girls and boys.

At school, only 67% of girls have equal access to football, and not all children are offered a minimum of two hours of physical education a week. I echo the Football Association's calls for equal access to football at minimum PE levels, for long-term funding settlements for schools to ensure that PE is accessible, and for Ofsted to inspect whether schools are fulfilling the requirement of equality of access in PE. In the letter that the Lionesses sent to the prime ministerial hopefuls in the summer of 2022—it seems a long time ago—after the team's triumphant win at the Euros, they asked the candidates to ensure that all girls have access to two hours of PE.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is absolutely right: the success of the Lionesses, ably helped by the support of Prince William, must continue to be capitalised on. Our young girls and women are encouraged to play and enjoy the beautiful game, but greater funding is required than is currently granted. I join the hon. Lady in urging the Government and the Minister to set aside funding to enable schools to run programmes annually.

Julie Elliott: Yes, and as time moves away from the successful competition last summer, we do not want it to fall off the political agenda.

The letter from the Lionesses asked the prime ministerial hopefuls to secure the first step in the talent pathway into the sport for young girls. In response, a spokesperson for the current Prime Minister said that he

“passionately believes in the importance of sport for children's development and would love to see all schools provide two hours of PE a week”.

I understand that this issue cuts across departmental remits—it is not just the responsibility of the Minister's Department—but will the Minister say what progress has been made? Where are we up to with the commitment the Prime Minister made to young girls following the win at Wembley? If the answer lies in another Department—for example, the Treasury—will the Minister commit to take the matter up with that Department and get some answers as a matter of urgency?

This is a really important question, because finding interest in school is key to beginning any talent journey. It is therefore extremely welcome that this week the FA announced a new-look women and girls' player pathway, which will come into full effect later in the year. It is a plan designed to make the game more accessible, more diverse and more inclusive, because this is undoubtedly an aspect of the game on which the sport most do more.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): May I draw the hon. Lady's attention to something fantastic that is happening in Darlington? FC Darlington Locomotives is led and spearheaded by three amazing people: Linda, Paul and Nathan Beadle. They have got more than 100 young girls in Darlington playing football each and every week, and they are a real springboard for the community, bringing people in from all across the town. Would the hon. Lady like to come to Darlington to see them in action?

Julie Elliott: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention and would love to come to Darlington; I pass through it twice a week on the train—it is not that far away from my constituency. The type of thing he mentions is happening all over the country. It is so exciting to see girls and young women coming together to play football.

Of 300 players in the women's super league, only 29 are of black, Asian or mixed heritage. That is a symptom of the structural barriers that remain in place for so many when it comes to accessing formal pathways. There has been a problem of talent centres being typically based away from urban centres, which requires travel and time commitment, and therefore cost. That puts these facilities out of reach for many people who would otherwise benefit. The game has been missing the proactive approach that could make such a difference.

If we look at the current investment in this area of the game, we see that the central investment from the men's game into academies via the Premier League is £88 million per year, whereas the FA's overall budget for all women's academies is reported to be around £3.25 million per year. That is not a sustainable budget for growing the game into what we want it to be, so it is great news that the FA has looked at the issue and brought forward the new women and girls player pathway. I would be interested to hear whether the Minister has any plans to make the funding settlement more equitable.

The inequalities in the game need to be rectified. I pay tribute to Fern Whelan, the former Brighton and England player who is now at the Professional Footballers' Association as its first ever equality, diversity and inclusion executive. She has done some incredible work to address the lack of diversity in the game, including launching the “See it. Achieve it.” campaign, which has been backed by a number of other successful players. The campaign aims to use and highlight role models in the game to help to create supportive communities and encourage more diverse engagement in the sport.

There are good examples from other sports. In tennis, for instance, 49% of those on the performance pathway are women, because the performance pathways through regional development centres and national academies are the same for men, women, boys and girls. That is what we should be aiming to achieve in every sport. I am sure that the FA's new women and girls talent pathway will go some way towards achieving it in football, but it will require investment, as well as reform through regulation.

When the Government publish their White Paper on football regulation, we will be able to see whether they have plans for proper funding settlements across the board. Such settlements will hopefully free up finances in the lower leagues for teams that are embedded in their local communities, potentially enabling them to open up their own pathways in the communities they represent. We know that the White Paper's release has been delayed, but I am keen to hear whether the Minister can give us a definitive date for when it will be published. The sport needs regulation and the Government have promised it. I sincerely hope that the delay is not an indefinite one.

The issue of finances in football, and in this case women's football, leads me to my next point about player wellbeing. The sport is growing and the experience of players now is much better than it used to be, especially in comparison to the time when I was a girl, when we were not allowed to play football at school. It is totally different now, but there are still massive concerns for players about job security and their working conditions.

We know anecdotally that too often players find that the idea of them being pregnant is informally discouraged because of the complications that would bring for the clubs they play for. We also know that players are reluctant to call out safeguarding issues, because they fear that complaining to their club about any such issue will damage their career. This is simply not good enough. We need the players to feel they can trust the system and to have trusted people they can go to who are independent and can help and advise them.

There has been a continuous growth in the uptake of the PFA's welfare services in the women's game, with support provided to address really important issues such as eating disorders and mental wellbeing. We need to ensure that safeguarding processes are trusted and independent, because with the rise in visibility of the sport, we have to recognise that welfare and safeguarding issues will become more relevant, too. New image rights deals, for example, bring vital revenue to players and the sport, but also new challenges, such as pressure on body image and issues such as online safety.

We already know the effect that that sort of concern has on teenage girls, where we often see in many sports a drop-off of young women playing through their teenage years. To keep growing the sport, we need better infrastructure for girls through those years, to ensure that all young women feel it is an environment they want to work and succeed in, and where they can have a viable career.

Of course, football is not the only sport with such problems. In English rugby union, for example, the lack of formal recognition from the Rugby Football Union to the Rugby Players Association is holding players back, and it is affecting the women's game. As the women's premier 15s look to move towards professionalism,

players must be protected with standard contracts and supported in their needs to be dual-career athletes. I am keen to hear the Minister comment specifically on that and on whether there have been any conversations with the sport about it, as well as his view on the importance of players' voices being heard.

Finally, through talent pathways, grassroots sports and even elite sport, it all comes down to facilities. They are being threatened by increased energy costs that risk them going out of business or being forced to reduce services. I am interested to know what more the Minister is doing to support these vital community assets. Community facilities play a key role in making sports accessible to a wide range of people, ages and ability. It is important that the sector is protected. Ultimately, today is a great time to be a female sports person. Visibility, revenue and participation are all massively on the rise, but the perils of precarious job security, health concerns and lack of investment make it a real challenge.

I will repeat for clarity the questions I have posed to the Minister. I would be grateful if he updated us on the Prime Minister's commitment on access to football in schools, with equal access for boys and girls. When will we see action, not just words? Will the Minister tell us what plans the Government have for greater equity in funding between the men's and women's games talent pathways? What plans does he have to support vital community leisure assets that are struggling with energy bills? Finally, will he give us a definitive date for the publication of the White Paper on football regulation, or even narrow it down to a week or two? That would start to answer a lot of the sport's long-standing questions.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for securing time for this important debate. I have made it my personal commitment that inclusion in sport will be a high priority for me. That will, of course, include access to all sports for women and girls, not least because last summer we witnessed major successes in women's sport, as our own Lionesses beat the German team at Wembley to lift the UEFA championship trophy.

That final at Wembley was attended by a record crowd of more than 87,000 people. Not only was that a new record for a women's international in Europe, but it broke new ground for women's and men's Euro final tournament games. The tournament also became the most-watched women's Euro ever, with a global cumulative live viewership of more than 365 million, which was fantastic to see. It was truly a groundbreaking moment for the sport and has supercharged interest in the women's game, bringing it to the forefront of so many people's minds.

The Lionesses' fantastic performance at the Euros has inspired the nation. It is great to see that figures published by UEFA in October in its post-tournament flash report confirm that. For example, more than half of local residents and two in five spectators and tournament volunteers have been inspired to do more sport and physical activity generally, and 84% of those participating in UEFA women's Euro 2022 legacy activities reported that it has improved their confidence and self-esteem, which highlights the importance of participation in this area.

[Stuart Andrew]

We want to build on this momentum, to ensure that every woman and girl has the opportunity to take part in football if that is what they want to do and, more importantly, to get active in a way that suits them. Programmes such as Game On, Shooting Stars and Barclays Girls' Football School Partnerships are engaging more girls in football at school. For example, over 3,200 primary schools are participating in the Shooting Stars programme. Initiatives such as Sport England's This Girl Can continue to inspire millions of women to get active, regardless of their shape, size and ability.

We are investing over £300 million between 2021 and 2025 to improve grassroots facilities across the UK, to help more women and girls access the high-quality facilities that the hon. Member for Sunderland Central rightly alluded to. To commemorate the Lionesses' incredible achievement, we are also working with the Football Foundation and the FA to name sites after the players in the towns and cities that shaped their careers. The Lionesses have become extraordinary ambassadors for sport, and we will continue to invest in grassroots sport to bring on the next generation of Lionesses.

We know how valuable PE is at school. It gives pupils an opportunity to excel, to be active and to lead healthy lives. We are actively working with colleagues in the Department for Education to understand the barriers that prevent the ambition of two to two and a half hours of PE a week from being achieved, and we will continue to work with them to ensure that girls have equal access to sport. I was struck by the meeting that I attended with the Secretary of State for Education and the Lionesses about shared ambitions to do that. There is more work for us to do to identify and address the different barriers to participation that exist, but we are working on that. We will continue to adopt a more targeted approach as part of our new sport strategy, which we are working on at the moment. Alongside that, the Department for Education is working on updating the school sport and activity action plan, which will set out actions to improve PE teaching in primary schools and help schools to make better use of their sport facilities.

I am pleased to learn that this week the FA will launch its revised women and girls player pathway, which focuses on providing a wide and diverse pool of players ready for senior domestic and international football. I am determined to strive for greater diversity and inclusion in women's sport. According to the Professional Footballers' Association, just 9.7% of footballers in the elite women's game are from diverse ethnic backgrounds, compared with 43% of male players in the premier league. I am glad that the hon. Member for Sunderland Central mentioned this, because it shows that there is more work to do to ensure that all women and girls, no matter their background, have access to football and the opportunity to progress, if that is what they wish to do.

The pathway that the FA has been working on includes measures specifically focused on access for a diverse pool of talent, with the Discover my Talent referral programme already seeing a more diverse cohort of players, particularly at the under-17 level. This shows progress, but that work must continue, and we will continue to work with the FA to drive for further, immediate action in this space.

There is no doubt that the Lionesses' win last year has inspired the next generation and was a turning point for women's football. However, I recognise that much more still needs to be done to achieve parity with the men's game and to drive progress more widely across women's sport.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his positive response. There are good things being done across the four regions of the United Kingdom, in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. My granddaughter is an example of that. She has taken up football and enjoys it, as does her wee sister. There are good, positive steps taking place across all the Administrations. Has the Minister had an opportunity to speak to them to see what they are doing to work together?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. We have inter-ministerial groups with the devolved Administrations, so I would be keen to focus on that. He is right that there is no need for us to reinvent the wheel. If there are actions that work and deliver results, I am happy to learn from them, and I am happy to share our experiences with representatives in the devolved Administrations.

One area where we want to see more parity is in player welfare, as the hon. Member for Sunderland Central mentioned. Progress has begun. The England men's and women's senior players have been paid the same match fee for representing their country since January 2020, and professional female footballers in England will now benefit from a level of maternity and long-term sickness cover in recent changes to their contracts, but challenges remain.

Last year, UEFA doubled the women's Euro prize money, but it is still a fraction of what the men get. The 16 qualifying teams for the women's Euros shared a pot of €16 million last year, whereas the 2021 men's Euros saw a prize pot of €371 million. In January last year it was announced that the FA would increase prize money for the winners of the women's FA cup from this season. However, there is still some way to go for that to equal the prize money for the winners of the men's FA cup. In the 2022-23 season, the winners of the men's competition will receive £2 million, with the winners of the women's FA cup receiving £50,000.

Historically, women's sport has not had the profile or media coverage that the men's sport has achieved over the years, but that is now changing. Attendances and viewing figures for women's sport are growing at an extraordinary rate, and there is an opportunity to level the playing field when it comes to prize money.

Player welfare in terms of medical care is another key area of concern. The Sports Personality of the Year winner Beth Mead has called for more research into women's anterior cruciate ligament injuries as a result of five of the top 20 women's footballers suffering serious knee injuries at the end of last year. More needs to be done to understand why women appear to be more likely to suffer from those injuries than male footballers do. We need to protect female players from injury and ensure that they receive the same level of treatment as their male counterparts.

I am acutely aware that player welfare goes beyond prize money and medical provision into the space of safeguarding and mental health. I do not wish to pre-empt

the findings of the future of women's football review or comment on recent press coverage, but I am aware that the review is inviting evidence from current and former players on their experience of the professional environment. I will pay particular attention to any recommendations that the review makes, based on their evidence. I welcome the work of the PFA in providing support for female footballers, and of organisations such as Women in Football in challenging the status quo. I will certainly follow up many of the points that the hon. Member for Sunderland Central raised.

The ongoing review of the future of women's football, which is chaired by former England and Great Britain footballer Karen Carney, will look at how to deliver bold and sustainable growth of the women's game at elite and grassroots levels. There is now an urgent need to ensure that the basic processes and structures are in place to protect the interests of the game and the people working in it. This is a defining period for women's football, and this thorough review will be at its heart.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central mentioned the funding settlement. The FA is at an inflection point in the development of the elite game, and it has flagged issues in funding the elite pathway. The review of women's football will look at the matter in great detail to see how payment is provided. As I said, I will not pre-empt anything that is said in that review, but given that such a formidable ex-player is chairing that important work, I am confident that football, talent pathways and player welfare will be cornerstones of its findings. I look forward to working with the chair as the review progresses towards its final report in the summer of this year.

The hon. Lady also raised facilities and the increasing costs they are facing. I have been holding a series of roundtables and have had regular engagement with a

number of organisations up and down the country. Although we have provided a tremendous amount of support, I recognise that there are still challenges, and I am working with colleagues in the Department and other Departments to see what other work can be done to help.

The FIFA Women's World cup in Australia and New Zealand this summer will continue to shine the spotlight on women's football, and rightly so. We should use the opportunity to build on the tremendous momentum that has already been created and drive change forward.

Julie Elliott: May I press the Minister on a date or a timescale?

Stuart Andrew: I thought I might get away with that one. All I can say to the hon. Lady is that it is extremely imminent. I keep saying it is imminent and that we are working at pace, but I assure her that there is no one more eager to get this White Paper out there than me. I hope I can give her some crumbs of comfort by saying that she will not have to wait too much longer.

I hope this debate has reassured hon. Members about our commitment to ensure that all aspects of women's sport, including football, continue to flourish. We will continue to work with the sector to make that happen, building on recent successes such as the women's Euros and looking ahead to future opportunities such as the FIFA Women's World cup and, of course, the important sports strategy, which, if I get my way, will have inclusion right at its heart.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Climate Change and Biodiversity

4.30 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered climate change and biodiversity. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

Climate change has triggered more extreme weather conditions, causing heatwaves, droughts, high precipitation and flooding. Adapting to the impacts of climate change in the UK and around the globe is necessary to keep the human population safer. Taking steps now to adapt to future change will make us more resilient and less vulnerable to its impacts. Adaptation can include traditional engineering projects, such as sea walls or other coastal defences as sea levels rise, but the natural environment also has a significant role to play. Adaption covers everything from water storage to drought resistant crops, from green urban areas to protecting and restoring natural, indigenous ecosystems.

Nature-based solutions are often cheaper to implement and maintain than alternative grey infrastructure adaption options. When their multiplier benefits are taken into account, nature-based solutions usually have a significantly higher benefit-cost ratio.

The Climate Change Committee reports on progress on adapting to climate change in England. Many of its recommendations for improving adaption planning and implementation in England have been taken up by the Government and their arm's length bodies. They accept the committee's central message that they must take greater action to build resilience to the impacts of climate change.

The Climate Change Committee has advised that the UK should adapt to a 2° warmer world for the period 2050 to 2100 and assess the risks for a 4° temperature increase. It identified the eight priority risk areas that need the most urgent action: the viability and diversity of nature; soil health; the release of sequestered carbon; crops, livestock and forestry; collapse of supply chains for food, goods and vital services; power system failure; human health and productivity; and risks to the UK from climate change impacts overseas. Nature-based solutions can help to address all these risks.

Analysis has shown that nature-based solutions can help to address 33 of the 34 climate change risks identified as requiring more action in the Climate Change Committee's third "UK Climate Change Risk Assessment", including the eight risks requiring the most urgent action.

The UK's national adaption programme sets out potential actions to address climate change risks. A recent report from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the WWF-UK, "Nature-based Solutions in UK Climate Adaption Policy", highlights opportunities for nature-based solutions in the UK and provides recommendations on how best to use nature-based solutions to deliver widespread benefits to both people and wildlife. I respectfully refer the Minister to those recommendations.

The report highlights the opportunities and policy support needed to implement nature-based solutions across the UK in ways that deliver for nature, climate and people. It also outlines how nature-based solutions

offer opportunities to mitigate the eight key risks to the UK identified by the CCC, while supporting the provision of public and private goods.

A wide range of nature-based solutions is being deployed in the UK. For example, sand dunes, salt marshes, and seagrass meadows are helping to protect against coastal flooding. Restored and in good condition, peatland can slow the flow of water during storms. Urban trees, parks and sustainable drainage systems can cool and retain moisture and reduce stormwater run-off, thereby cooling down our towns and cities during extreme heat and protecting against urban flooding.

One of the key recommendations of the RSPB-WWF report is that in the upcoming national adaptation programme—the NAP3, for 2023 to 2028—nature-based solutions must be properly integrated and given the opportunity to help us to adapt to a warming climate, while also providing other carbon and biodiversity benefits.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I agree with everything the hon. Lady is saying. I have two points to make about attracting private-sector investment for these nature-based solutions. First, we have to be very clear about the carbon offsetting value of the projects. Secondly, when the biodiversity net gain details of that strategy come forward, we need to be clear that they are creating more diversity. Does she share my concern that we are not really at the stage where we can properly measure the multitudes of benefits of investing in such schemes?

Sally-Ann Hart: I completely agree with the hon. Member's question. We need to measure metrics and outcomes more thoroughly as part of the process of using nature-based solutions to adapt to climate change. That is absolutely spot on.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend's debate highlights that it is in areas such as hers, which are very vulnerable to flooding to the sea and other urban floods, that the expertise on such complicated issues is found. Does she agree that one answer to the question from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is that private investment could be attracted through recycling centres and former landfill areas? We cannot build buildings on contaminated land, but there is an opportunity to plant trees there, and that is exactly what is happening in Gloucester right now.

Sally-Ann Hart: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. We have an issue with leaching from coastal landfill sites. We really need to think about that when addressing what we are going to do with them, and we also need to think about tree planting, not building developments.

I ask for the Minister's thoughts on the key recommendation of the RSPB and WWF report. Nature-based solutions contribute to reducing our vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. They are no longer peripheral, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has already started to develop policies that should be rolled out across all sectors. Nature-based solutions need to be mainstreamed in policy by establishing common goals, harmonising policy support and overcoming barriers across all sectors.

Increased funding is required. There is reportedly a £5.6 billion gap in the funding required to cover environmental gains, challenges facing the food system,

an integrated response to net zero and local community benefits. But funding does not have to be the sole responsibility of government. Three per cent. of private financing mobilised under the 2018 Paris agreement went into adaptation, with more than 95% going towards mitigation. Adaptation will increase resilience, benefiting businesses and financial institutions, as well as nature and people.

The UK needs a clear vision for the role of nature-based solutions. They can be measured and monitored for their effectiveness by using defined metrics, indicators and targets, and standards can be set for high-quality nature-based solutions, benefiting nature, our environment and people. They need to be utilised.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for calling this debate. She is a doughty champion for her constituents, who are very lucky to have her represent Hastings and Rye. On her point about metrics, clearly consumers want to invest in and buy products that are nature positive and that support biodiversity. At the meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on environmental, social and governance, which the Minister was at, we talked about placing a green tractor on everyday products—it would be an equivalent to the Red Tractor mark—so that people would know that they were buying British products that are aiding biodiversity in the UK and helping restore nature. Does my hon. Friend think that is a good way of encouraging the public and business to get behind a nature-positive solution in the UK?

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank my hon. Friend for a very good question. He is right: the public do really appreciate it and really understand the need for biodiversity. A very good message has been sent out, but the green tractor route really highlights the importance of biodiversity on the goods that people buy. I think it would be a really good measure to take forward.

We have a window of opportunity to take action to adapt to climate change and avoid the worst impacts, and political commitment and follow-through across all levels of Government to accelerate the implementation of adaptation actions is vital. I believe that the Government have the will to do this. Climate change will increasingly cause extensive, sometimes irreversible, damage to ecosystems. This degradation of ecosystems increases the vulnerability of people. The rise in weather and climate extremes has led to some irreversible impacts, as natural and human systems are pushed beyond their ability to adapt.

Nature-based solutions offer opportunities for cost-effective adaption to climate change, while also providing benefits to people and wildlife. Safeguarding biodiversity is fundamental for climate-resilient societal development. Conservation, protection and the restoration of land, freshwater and coastal ecosystems, together with targeted management to adapt to unavoidable impacts of climate change, reduces the vulnerability of biodiversity to climate change and benefits us all now and into the future.

James Gray (in the Chair): There are something like nine speakers and we have 38 minutes left, so I ask Members to take approximately two or three minutes each, please.

4.41 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate.

The world is facing a global biodiversity crisis triggered by human disruption to nature and the destruction of habitats. Members across the House know the seriousness of the challenges we face, but we also know we are nowhere near where we should be given the critical condition our nature is in. One million species are at risk of extinction due to human activity, but it is not only individual species that are threatened. The collapse in the abundance of nature also means that many of our ecosystems are not functioning as they should. Climate change is driving nature's decline, and the loss of wildlife and wild places leaves us ill-equipped to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to a changing climate. We must recognise that the climate and biodiversity emergencies are intrinsically linked and should be tackled together.

Britain has faced a catastrophic loss in its biodiversity, with 41% of species having declined in abundance in the UK in the past 40 years. Of the G7 countries, we have the lowest level of biodiversity remaining. Immediate action is required to reverse current trends. The biodiversity crisis requires greater ambition. I ask the Government to reconsider the ambition of their biodiversity and environmental targets. In my constituency, Cheshire West and Cheshire Council, along with local communities, schools, businesses and partners and other organisations, are committed to making Chester a greener city and to building a community that people want and are able to live in now and in the future.

We must see a more ambitious approach to nature recovery, with local communities at its heart. The success of a nature recovery corridor in my constituency, led by community groups and guided by conservation experts, is an excellent example of how this can work in reality. Does the Minister agree that conservationists around the UK, such as those at Chester zoo, are in prime position to empower local people to help tackle the biodiversity crisis? Will she comment on what concrete plans the Government are making to commit to more ambitious biodiversity and environmental targets? We cannot put this crisis off any longer, and we must work together to protect and recover our global diversity.

4.44 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I welcome this important debate. It comes at a brilliant time. Only yesterday the Prime Minister set up the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which builds on the Government's commitments in recent years to all those who live in the UK and around the world. Such an important development is welcome—and so soon after the publication of the Skidmore review on net zero. As I say, the formation of this Department is a clear commitment to caring for our planet and taking our responsibilities seriously to match and build on the commitments the Conservative Government have made since we legislated for net zero in 2019.

In this debate, we are recognising the critical role of biodiversity and nature-based solutions. We need to match our efforts to deliver decarbonisation with our

[Derek Thomas]

efforts to recover nature and biodiversity. It would be a tragic shame to reach net zero but not reach our commitments to recover nature, which is why this debate is so timely and important. It can be done. We worry about food security and production in relation to nature recovery, but I believe there is no conflict—they can be done together and, in fact, they are co-dependent.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. I completely agree; there can be no conflict between delivering the food production we need and reinvesting in the biodiversity we need. Does my hon. Friend not agree that the key to ensuring that there is no conflict is investment in new technology, which is something the Government need to look closely at?

Derek Thomas: I agree completely. Time and investment must be given to ensure that those technologies actually get to market and are commercially viable. I would go beyond that: it is about not just technology, but treating our land differently. A brilliant example of that in Cornwall is our use of herbal leys, which my hon. Friend will be familiar with, to increase the quality of the root structure of the grassland and retain moisture. There are all sorts of ways of providing better grazing land for cattle. It is certainly about devices and technology, but it is also about different ways of caring for the land from which we produce our food and which sequesters carbon.

I recently secured a debate in support of the nature and climate declaration, which embeds nature recovery in the road to net zero. The Climate and Ecology Bill is a natural instrument to build on this necessary approach. I am sure we will all be hearing more about how that Bill intends to deliver on the key things that were raised this morning by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) who opened the debate. I will leave it there.

4.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship and oversight, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), who made an excellent speech, on securing what is a really important debate.

In the two minutes I have, I want to talk about the uplands. They are massively important to us as a country and hugely important to our communities in Cumbria. They can be a massive contributor to our fight against climate change. They are where we see water management happen; 70% of our drinking water comes from the uplands. Think of the peatland and soils there, which are vital to carbon sequestration.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Very quickly on that point, the Somerset levels near my constituency contain 231 square miles of peatland, which store nearly 11 million tonnes of carbon. Every pound invested returns about four times that in economic and social benefits. The commitment to peatland restoration in the England peat action plan covers less than 20% of England's peatland.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Wera Hobhouse: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need better targets?

Tim Farron: I am grateful for the intervention. Peatland is hugely significant. It is more quickly restored than woodland and therefore has greater capacity to tackle climate change as a carbon sink. Our uplands are critical. While I support the principles underlining the environmental land management schemes and the transition payment for farmers, I think the ELMs at the moment have badly let the uplands down.

I will give you some quick figures, Mr Gray. The current basic payment rate for the uplands is £240 per hectare. With the new sustainable farming incentive, the rate for the lowlands is down to £151 per hectare; for the uplands, it is £98. Why is that? There are many things we have lost from being outside the EU, but one thing we have gained is the ability to not continue the nonsense of providing support for farming through income forgone. The idea that we compensate farmers only for what they might have got out of that land use, had that been for food or other production, rather than giving them the actual value of what they do is a nonsense. I urge the Minister to do away with income forgone as a way of calculating the payment rate and stop the system that actively penalises farmers in the uplands.

I mentioned the value that the uplands can provide in the fight against climate change and the need to value biodiversity in such an important part of our country. We must also remember how important they are to the landscape—and the economy—of the lakes and the dales. There are 60,000 people who owe their jobs to the hospitality and tourism industry in Cumbria, and we have a £3.5 billion tourism economy.

Based on what the Lake district and the Yorkshire dales look like, it would seem wrong for the Government to—I hope—accidentally transform in a negative way the landscape of our communities, particularly in the lakes. My major ask is that the Minister reconsider the payment rates for the uplands so that we can value our upland farmers and tackle climate change in our most beautiful places.

4.50 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart)—an excellent MP—on securing this important debate. I welcome the environmental improvement plan from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, although you will be delighted to know that I will not read all of it. It follows the Environment Act 2021, the Fisheries Act 2020 and Agriculture Act 2020 in laying out a path to improve our environment and to make this a better and more prosperous place for us and our wildlife.

Hedgerows are the perfect example of how the environmental improvement plan will positively impact climate change and boost biodiversity. As a hedgerow hero, I am proud to have worked with the Campaign to Protect Rural England to increase hedgerow coverage by 40% by 2050. The environmental improvement plan announced the target of 30,000 miles of new and restored hedgerows by 2037, and 45,000 miles by 2050. That will result in 360,000 miles of English hedgerows—10% above the 1984 peak. Hedgerows are a classic symbol of the

English countryside, providing a sense of continuity across the changing seasons. They also provide biodiversity's best friend—a stable home for a bounty of flora and fauna. One in nine of the UK's most vulnerable species, such as the hazel dormouse, the hedgehog and the brown hairstreak butterfly, rely on healthy hedgerows.

Hedgerows also play a crucial role on our path to net zero. We all know that planting trees and protecting peatlands are key to capturing and storing carbon, but so are hedgerows. Unmanaged hedgerows are estimated to sequester over 140 tonnes of carbon per hectare, compared with 169 tonnes for a 30-year native woodland. If hedgerows are properly managed, they can sequester even more, both in their woody stems and in the roots below.

Strong hedgerows with healthy root systems also aid soil health and reduce flooding. Farmers recognise those benefits, and more are planting and restoring hedgerows. Some 86% of farmers believe that hedgerows are important to them and their business, recognising the benefits of developing a healthy and sustainable natural environment for their land and livestock. Last month's ELMS announcement of the establishment of a hedgerow standard in the sustainable farming incentive scheme in 2023 was a welcome step.

As we go forward with our environmental improvement plan, it is vital that we continue to support farmers as they invest in sustainable practices. Leaving the EU has given us the freedom to move beyond the basic payment scheme to support farmers in a more targeted manner.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill gives us only until December 2023 to adopt or adapt 570 different pieces of legislation on environmental issues. Given the crises that we face, does the hon. Lady agree that we need to strengthen some of those laws rather than simply retain them?

Selaine Saxby: As is so often the case, I need to correct the hon. Gentleman on the details of that legislation. We do not have to stop everything in 2023; there is an opportunity within the sunset clause to extend legislation beyond that point. Like my Conservative colleagues, I will continue to work to ensure that our environmental protections are strengthened and not reduced.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. We are outside the scope of the debate.

Selaine Saxby: To come back to biodiversity and moving towards net zero, it is important that we boost our biodiversity to strengthen our rural economies. So many steps that we have taken, which are laid out in the environmental improvement plan, are key to that. It is fantastic that, as part of the plan, DEFRA recognises the importance of supporting green jobs and careers with apprenticeships across forestry, ecology, countryside management, the water environment and more, especially given that this is National Apprenticeship Week.

As we face more frequent extremes of climate change, we need to ensure that our natural environment is healthy and our relationship with it is sustainable. By doing what we can, we will support biodiversity and harvest the gains that the countryside provides on our path to net zero.

4.54 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Climate change is an absolutely huge subject and massively important, particularly for our children's and grandchildren's futures. It is really important to Stroud, because we are the greenest constituency in the greenest county in the country, and people passionately care about this issue.

I have tried to focus on a few campaigns, such as creating a GCSE in natural history. I have also focused on wetlands and biodiversity, so I was really pleased to have the Minister visit us last week at the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust in Slimbridge, which is the headquarters of the WWT. We got to show off our wetlands, show her all six varieties of flamingos and introduce her to Mr James, who is 70 years old.

I will get my asks in first, because I know we are short of time. As we explained last week, the first is for Ministers to work with the APPG for wetlands, which I chair, to reach our ambition to create 100,000 additional hectares of wetlands in the country. The second is for them to lead investment in natural flood management. We can do that through local authorities having a better strategic approach, through setting targets and through funding with blended finance options.

My third ask is for Ministers to assist us to develop the saltmarsh code, which is really important. As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, we want to get private investment into this work. To be fair to companies, they get a really hard time: if they do something, they are told they are greenwashing; if they do not do anything, they get into trouble. We want to put evidence behind what we are asking them to do, so that they can be confident when they are investing, and that is what our code will achieve.

I would also like to see a specific domestic wetlands team in DEFRA, because we have amazing, brilliant experts who focus on things such as peatlands and biodiversity. I appreciate that wetlands cross a lot of these areas, but giving us that focus, with a team behind us, will ensure that we meet all our ambitions.

Wetlands play a key role in helping to tackle climate change. The issue of climate change gets a bit shouty sometimes, and very shouty at other times, but when I talk to the public about biodiversity and things such as wetlands, which they can see, they get it. For the benefit of hon. Members in the room, I should say that one of the conversations we had with the Minister last week was about the carbon benefits of forests. The Minister asked to the local experts, "How do the carbon benefits of forests compare with the carbon benefits of wetlands?" The experts' response was, "They're about 18 times better." That is absolutely extraordinary. It is not something that farmers or the National Farmers Union understand properly yet, and we need to get the evidence so that we can back it up.

We can do great things. We can help to hit this country's net zero targets if the Minister really puts her shoulder behind the APPG for wetlands and all my asks.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is making as powerful an argument for wetlands as our hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) did for nature-based solutions. Does she agree that we can square all these things? She has fantastic wetlands, I have some

[Richard Graham]

contaminated land where we can put a new wood and have some green energy, and down in Hastings and Rye there are all sorts of different solutions to protect the sea. It is about recognising the value of this great environmental plan and then implementing it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) has in her constituency.

Siobhan Baillie: I thank my hon. Friend, who is my near neighbour. We need to be creative, to be open to ideas and to work together in our fabulous constituencies. The focus from DEFRA is absolutely brilliant—the Government and the country do not get enough credit for the progress we have made on the environment—but with things such as those I have suggested, we can also help the public to see progress.

4.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on setting the scene so well. I am a huge supporter of biodiversity and, where appropriate, rewilding. I declare an interest as a landowner and a member of the Ulster Farmers Union. A number of years ago, I made use of a scheme to plant saplings on the family farm, and we planted 3,500. That was many years ago, and the area is simply teeming with wildlife and various plants and foliage.

It is my sincere opinion that, for landowners to dedicate space to promoting biodiversity or rewilding, there must be schemes to make it worth their while. I know that that is not the Minister's direct responsibility—it is probably another Minister's—but I ask that she pass it on.

Given the price of saplings and seedlings, few landowners can afford to voluntarily plant trees at this time, but I know several who would if they had them and there was a scheme to incentivise that. This is not the Minister's responsibility, but my local council back home—Ards and North Down Borough Council—has taken a very successful approach to rewilding. It has taken significant steps in the last couple of years to benefit our borough's biodiversity by altering and reducing our mowing practices. That is something that councils can do without a lot of expense—they can reduce mowing charges and rewild. The council has rewilded 22,000 metres of closely mown amenity grasslands to managed grassland habitats, which are capable of supporting a much more diverse range of floral species, pollinators and insects—how important it is to have our bees and pollinators in place! My colleagues and friends down the road, Valentine and Chris Hodges, gave us some native Irish black bees and five beehives—they are still theirs, but they put them on our land, and that adds to biodiversity. Councils are keen to do that back home, and I am sure that the Minister will endorse that.

The council needs to have public understanding, and support is key to the success of the project. Interpretive signage is part of that as well. Studies have shown that, as well as the biodiversity benefits, conversion from species-poor to species-rich grassland can significantly increase the soil carbon sequestration rate. In addition, a significant reduction in carbon dioxide emissions as a result of less frequent grass cutting—that is the key

issue in what the council is doing—has reduced the council's carbon footprint. That is one thing that can be done.

In conclusion, I know that there would be greater buy-in if tree planting was financially possible. Will the Minister therefore tell us whether consideration has been given to funding schemes that would allow for free plants and shrubs to be given to people? That would allow more people to perhaps look at that wee square in their back garden not as an extra piece of mowing to be done, but as a chance to help our environment.

James Gray (in the Chair): I thank and congratulate Back-Bench colleagues; we have got a great deal into a short space of time. Thank you all for being so prompt and courteous. We move to the Front Benchers, with John Mc Nally.

5.2 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for securing this important debate.

As our climate worsens, it continues to negatively affect our biodiversity and threaten the stability of our natural world. The issues that arise from that are inextricably linked to many of the challenges we face as a society, and it is impacting our health, wellbeing and prosperity. Given those growing threats, it is about time that the UK Government stepped up and joined Scotland in leading the world on the frontlines of tackling climate change. We must work together as we prepare for the worst effects of the climate catastrophe.

Climate change is simply an issue of justice; it disproportionately affects the most vulnerable communities and nations. Scotland was not only the first country in the world to declare a climate emergency, but the first to introduce a climate justice fund. That fund was set up to help the developing countries most at risk to tackle the effects of climate change on the frontline. Fulfilling our role in tackling the global climate emergency is simply a moral obligation. The climate justice fund was trebled to £36 million over this Parliament, in stark contrast to the espoused global Britain led by a Tory Government who would seemingly rather cut international aid. The Scottish Government believe that a just transition is at the heart of our nature recovery ambitions, which are focused on nature-based solutions that create a greener, fairer and more prosperous nation for all.

Meanwhile, the UK Government do not seem to believe in their own consultations. In March last year, a UK Government consultation produced a legally binding target to increase tree canopy and woodland cover from 14.5% to 17.5% of England's total land area by 2050. That target was set to help to meet net zero ambitions by 2050 and provide many other benefits, including the creation of new wildlife habitats and a reduction in flooding by slowing the flow of water off hills—all admirable ambitions. Despite that, DEFRA decided to cut the target to 16.5%, claiming that a “review of our evidence”—from its own consultation—now showed that the lower figure was “the most ambitious target” that could be set. One per cent. may seem trivial, but that equates to a reduction of over 100,000 hectares in the total area to be planted by 2050 and, significantly, to an

enormous 37 million fewer tonnes of carbon dioxide being removed from the atmosphere by the end of the century.

In response to the target being cut, DEFRA upped its recommended ratio of conifers in the overall tree-planting mix. Foreign conifers make much poorer habitats for wildlife than native broadleaf trees, but they grow more quickly and, in the early years, can store more carbon. However, even with the additional conifers, the 16.5% woodland target would still leave 1.9 million tonnes of CO₂ in the atmosphere by 2050.

It is no surprise to me and other interested parties that 75% of all the new woodland trees planted in the UK were planted in Scotland. That is more evidence that Westminster should follow the Scottish Government's lead if it wants England to meet decarbonisation targets and put in place biodiversity protections.

In January 2022, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee published its report on the role of nature-based solutions in mitigating climate change and achieving net zero by 2050. It argued that, although the Government's plans for nature-based solutions were "ambitious", they were at "severe risk of failure". In addition, a report published in October 2022 by the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee stated:

"Behaviour change is essential for achieving climate and environment goals, and for delivering wider benefits. The Government's current approach to enabling behaviour change to meet climate and environment goals is inadequate to meet the scale of the challenge."

Will the UK Government finally take heed, work with the Scottish Government and commit to restoring nature and decelerating the climate crisis?

In December 2022, the Scottish Government published the draft biodiversity strategy for Scotland, which set out what our natural environment needs for us to halt biodiversity loss by 2030, reverse it with largescale restoration by 2045 and protect our environment for the future. As part of that, the Scottish Government have made significant funding commitments to protect and restore biodiversity. That is important, and it includes the establishment of a nature restoration fund, which will provide at least £65 million over five years to support large-scale natural restoration. The Scottish Govt have also committed an additional £500 million towards the natural economy over the course of the Parliament.

I will finish by saying that if we want to change the world, we need to get busy in our own little corner, and I believe that the Scottish people and the Scottish Government are doing just that. I would like Westminster to follow that lead.

5.7 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this important debate. I commend Back-Bench colleagues on their brevity, and I will prune my speech in a suitably nature-friendly way to fit into the time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), who praised her local organisations for seeking to green their city. I strongly commend them on their nature recovery corridor.

It is almost five years ago that the House of Commons approved Labour's motion declaring a climate and nature emergency. Sadly, the acknowledgment of that twin emergency does not seem to have galvanised the Government into the kind of response that many hoped for. We all know that we must halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity by 2030 for the benefit of all people and the planet. However, I am afraid that the Government's actions often seem to take us in the opposite direction, whether it is flirting with fracking, seeking to reopen coalmines or letting off the hook oil companies profit from the misery of war.

The Government are also threatening to allow 1,700 or so environmental regulations to fall under the retained EU law bulldozer. They breached the statutory deadline for setting Environment Act 2021 targets and watered down those they eventually did set. Five years into the 25-year environment plan, not one of its 23 targets was assessed as being on track by the Government's own environmental watchdog. Frankly, the verdict of the Office for Environmental Protection and its chair, Dame Glenys Stacey, was completely withering.

As many have pointed out already this afternoon, our natural carbon stores—peatlands, trees, woodlands, salt marshes and wetlands in particular—are in decline; indeed, they are at high risk of degradation in the extreme climatic conditions that are, sadly, likely over the next 30 years. Wetlands in particular can accumulate carbon for centuries, but in some areas of the UK we have lost over 90% of our wetland habitat. As the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) pointed out, restored wetlands provide rich habitat, clean water naturally and reduce flood risk downstream.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Member give way?

Daniel Zeichner: Given the time, I will not; sorry.

We do not believe that the current ambitions to halt the decline of species abundance in the UK are good enough. Frankly, the latest targets are too weak. We must be nature-positive; we should aim for a dramatic incline in species abundance. Nature fundamentally underpins human health, wellbeing and prosperity. By delivering for the planet's nature, we also deliver for its people, and Labour has always understood the importance of viewing the environment through this twin lens. That is especially important now, as we live through the worst cost of living crisis in a generation.

We need to consider those living in communities plagued by dirty air and water, and acknowledge that disadvantaged communities are disproportionately impacted. These communities are also twice as likely to be neighbourhoods without nature-rich spaces. We want to see a UK in which everyone has proper access to wild places and wildlife. A healthy natural world and more equitable access to nature are key priorities for Labour.

We also understand the importance of doing our fair share to cut UK emissions, in order to try to keep global heating down. Our shadow Secretary of State for Climate Change and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), has been clear on this, and the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), has pledged an investment of £28 billion every year until 2030 to tackle the climate and nature crisis, and to create clean, green and secure jobs for people in the UK.

[Daniel Zeichner]

In conclusion, we recognise that this is a cross-Government challenge that needs focus from all of Government, so we have committed to a robust net zero and nature test for every policy, to create certainty for business and provide leadership to seize the opportunities for the UK, while protecting nature here and abroad. It is a historic challenge, one that we absolutely have to meet, and Labour is determined to do just that.

5.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Gray, and a real pleasure to listen to my colleagues speak so positively about nature-based solutions, including wetlands, hedgerows and upland farming. However, I have to agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), my constituency neighbour, that Cumbria is the greenest and most pleasant county. Nevertheless, I must also say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) how beautiful her constituency is, in particular her wetlands at Slimbridge, which was the very first of the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust's fantastic sites that I have visited; I will say more about it later.

The debate today has been so positive, or mostly incredibly positive, and I start, of course, by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for securing it. How timely it is, straight off the back of the environmental improvement plan, which we published just last week.

I was really pleased to see that plan on the desk in front of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and to hear her speak so enthusiastically about hedgerows, because I recognise the value of hedgerows. I also recognise her value, as our very own parliamentary hedgerow hero, who champions the benefits of hedgerows for nature and carbon sequestration. Personally, I would emphasise their benefits for foraging, too, because a wonderful pie can be made from the brambles found in a hedgerow, as well as many other tasty dishes. However, I will return to the substance of the debate.

We absolutely recognise the urgency of climate change. Although we are accelerating our efforts to end our contribution to climate change, we must also continue to take action to ensure that the country is well prepared to face the challenges that the changing climate is bringing. Reducing emissions is key to reducing climate impacts in the long term and our policies to support net zero are crucial. However, climate change-related events, such as droughts, flooding and wildfires, are already impacting the natural carbon stores that we rely on to achieve net zero. We know that our country and our world is going to become hotter, drier and wetter, and that the impacts will be colossal. Our third UK climate change risk assessment, published last year, highlighted the risks and opportunities facing the UK from climate change. There are risks to all sectors of our economy, including the natural environment. We are addressing these through the third national adaptation programme—NAP3—which my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye mentioned. That will be published later this summer. We are working with many other Departments to produce the report.

Adaptation is mainstreamed across Government. All policies and programmes need to consider the risks that climate change poses to their success and build in adaptation actions to reduce these risks. Those are all brought together in NAP3, which looks at the 63 risks. NAP3 actions include restoring and creating new habitats for general resilience, as well as targeted actions, such as protecting species that will be particularly vulnerable to climate change. I have just been handed a note to say that I have confused my numbers. I said the number of risks was 63, but we are actually currently monitoring 61 risks in the national adaptation plan.

Many of these actions will be delivered through the environmental land management schemes. I want to thank my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale for recognising the value that farmers will bring to the nature-based solutions we will need for adaptation. We can deliver this through environmental land management schemes, be that countryside stewardship plus, the sustainable farming incentive or landscape recovery.

To respond to the point by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale about how we are going to look after the upland farmers, as an MP representing many upland farmers it is critical that we do. We have an opportunity now as we leave the common agricultural policy to move away from an area-based scheme and toward much more targeted support created by England's politicians for England's farmers. It is very much more targeted to environmental stewardship and those three schemes.

Tim Farron: I am really grateful to hear the Minister say that. We differ on Brexit, but I think one of the silver linings of leaving the European Union is that we can construct our own policy and are not stuck on the old forms of income forgone as a way of paying farmers. Would she look again at the upland rate for the sustainable farming incentive, because that is what at the moment is going to push many hill farmers out of business altogether?

Trudy Harrison: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Member that I am challenging how we best support our upland farmers. I am from a farming family myself and live in a farming community. In the Lake District national park I see how hard our farmers work. They are the original friends of the earth. They have created our countryside for our enjoyment, particularly across the national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty. The hon. Member can be assured that I will continue to champion farmers while also reviewing policy. While the environment is important, farmers also need to be able to thrive and survive.

Daniel Zeichner: The Minister mentioned 61 risks, but does she worry, like I do, that low uptake of ELM schemes could be one of those risks? Or are there actually 62 risks?

Trudy Harrison: It is absolutely the case that we need as many farmers as possible to take up ELM schemes, but from the discussions I am having in my constituency and with the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) in DEFRA, and from the pilots we have undertaken with the sustainable farming incentive, we are optimistic about farmers taking up the schemes, but

we will constantly look at them to make sure they are as attractive as possible to farmers, while also ensuring we provide best value to the taxpayer.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is being very generous. It is very important that farmers are incentivised, because they are the custodians of the land. They want to do better. Let us be quite clear about that. The thrust of the debate shows—and hopefully the Minister agrees—that incentivising farmers is how we can help them to achieve those goals.

Trudy Harrison: Absolutely. There is no other industry or sector where knowledge and experience is passed down the generations as it is in farming. As a farmer himself, the hon. Gentleman will know that only too well.

There will also be adaptation benefits from the new England-wide system of local nature recovery strategies. That is how farmers can come together to create wildlife corridors. I really did disagree with the spokesman for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), because doing this in our own corner just will not cut it. I can talk about the importance of the UK on the international stage and the success of the Secretary of State in encouraging countries right across the globe to protect 30% of their land and seas by 2030 and a whole raft of other measures. The climate sees no boundaries and we need to work together. I, for one, am looking forward to meeting with my counterpart in Scotland.

Local nature recovery strategies prioritise actions to drive nature's recovery. Part of our work on adaptation is to make net zero policies resilient to climate risks, for example, by planting tree species that will cope with future climate conditions in their location; through ensuring nurseries are stocked with a high-quality, diverse range of species; and by ensuring that land managers have the right tools to make decisions for the future.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) demanded more action. I thought it would be appropriate to set out what we have already achieved because that is sometimes forgotten. We have already put in place legislation, backed by action, to address the concerns that have been raised. That includes a suite of ambitious statutory environmental targets under the Environment Act 2021. Let us not forget that we were one of the first developed countries to legislate for net zero and then we set out the 25-year environment plan. Although all of those targets will help us to adapt to climate change, particularly relevant ones include: ensuring that species abundance in 2042 is greater than in 2022, and at least 10% greater than in 2030; and restoring or creating over 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside protected sites by 2042, compared with 2022.

Restoring our natural habitats has numerous benefits for helping communities to adapt to climate change risks: natural flood management, urban cooling and supporting the resilience of ecosystems to climate change. As part of our commitment to a nature recovery network, in May 2022, we launched five unique nature recovery projects spanning nearly 100,000 hectares. They will see the creation and restoration of wildlife-rich habitats, corridors and stepping-stones. They will help wildlife populations to move and thrive, provide nature-based solutions and enable people to enjoy and connect with

nature. One of the more recent pledges in the environmental improvement plan is that no one should live more than 15 minutes away from nature—a green space or a blue space.

Kerry McCarthy: The debate is about climate change, as opposed to just climate change adaptation. I appreciate that adaptation is in the DEFRA brief, but I am a little concerned that there does not seem to be that joined-up thinking about the importance of nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation as well. Those can be incredibly powerful for carbon sequestration, whether that is wetlands or planting trees. Is the Minister talking to colleagues in the newly created Department for Energy Security and Net Zero about how to ensure that those two things work together?

Trudy Harrison: I think, Mr Gray, that the debate is about the role of nature in adapting to climate change. I am prepared to stand corrected if I have got that wrong.

James Gray (in the Chair): The debate is on “Climate Change and Biodiversity”, so I think we are all in order.

Trudy Harrison: Jolly good. Yes, absolutely, I confirm that I speak regularly with my counterparts elsewhere in DEFRA, which has been one of the lead Departments, certainly for net zero, although the climate change national adaptation plan involves many Departments. However, mitigation is also a key priority in DEFRA, where I speak with colleagues, although it the direct responsibility of Lord Benyon.

Moving on to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, her request to look at a target of 100,000 hectares of wetland protected for nature was relevant. That is a worthwhile ambition, and I will certainly ask my team to look into how we ensure that we are sufficiently resourced in DEFRA to understand the benefits. She said that 18 times more carbon is sequestered in wetlands, compared with forestry, which is an impressive statistic. Wetlands not only store huge volumes of carbon, but act as natural sponges for floodwaters or as storm-breaks against extreme weather events. Furthermore, I have seen children and other people enjoying the wonders of wetlands, such as meeting the most marvellous Mr James.

That is important, and others referenced the importance of bringing society with us—I could not agree more. That is why goal 10 in the 262-page environmental improvement plan talks about ensuring that we work with people and communities to achieve what is absolutely necessary, as set out in the plan.

I have simply run out of time, although so much more could be said on the subject. I look forward to further debates on a whole raft of nature-based solutions, matters and the environmental measures that the Government are taking. I assure the House that we are committed to protecting nature, not just in England or the UK, but right across the globe. Nature sees no boundaries, and we are one of the very special places for migratory birds, as I learned at Slimbridge. We need to achieve our targets domestically, and to work with our counterparts across the globe. Finally, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye for sparking such a wonderful debate this afternoon.

5.27 pm

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank the Minister for her response. Clearly, Members across the House, representing all parts of the UK, have left us in no doubt that biodiversity and nature-based solutions are vital to this country in the actions we take to mitigate the effects of climate change. I thank everyone for attending the debate.

Using biodiversity and nature-based solutions to adapt to climate change is key. I welcome the Minister's understanding of the situation and the recommendations,

and of our need to consider those and other policy measures by working closely with the organisations that are expert in the area on NAP3.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered climate change and biodiversity.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 February 2023

EDUCATION

Student Loan Interest Rates

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): My noble Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance (Baroness Barran) has made the following statement.

I am announcing today an additional temporary cap to the post-2012 income contingent repayment undergraduate and postgraduate loan interest rates effective as of 1 March 2023.

The Government announced on 13 June 2022 that the student loan interest rate would be set at a maximum of 7.3% between 1 September 2022 and 31 August 2023, in line with the forecast prevailing market rates. The Government confirmed that should the actual prevailing market rate turn out to be lower than forecast, a further cap would be implemented to reduce student loan interest rates accordingly.

From 1 September 2022 to 30 November 2022, reflecting a lower than forecast prevailing market rate, the maximum interest rate was 6.3% for all post-2012 (plan 2) and postgraduate (plan 3) loans. Following an increase in the prevailing market rate, the maximum interest rate increased to 6.5% between 1 December 2022 and 28 February 2023.

I am now announcing a further cap: from 1 March 2023 to 31 May 2023 the maximum interest rate will be 6.9% for all post-2012 (plan 2) and postgraduate (plan 3) loans, reflecting the most recent prevailing market rate. This is a reduction compared to the 7.3% maximum rate announced in June.

From 1 June 2023 to 31 August 2023, the maximum interest rate will be 7.3%. Subject to the prevailing market rate, the Government may announce further caps to apply during this period.

[HCWS551]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Contingent Liability Notification

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I am laying a departmental minute to advise that the Department is retrospectively notifying Parliament about contingent liabilities not previously disclosed, due to procedural errors. His Majesty's Treasury has approved the contingent liability.

The minute describes the contingent liabilities that the NDA has entered with two landlords, The Crown Estate and Baron Egremont, for the renewal of an uncapped indemnity in the Sellafield replacement sea line (RSL) lease.

A pipeline runs from the Sellafield nuclear plant site over foreshore and seabed owned by two separate third party landowners, The Crown Estate (TCE) and Baron Egremont of the Leconfield Estate (Egremont). The replacement sea line (RSL) is a critical asset for the delivery of nuclear safety and the environmental performance of the Sellafield site.

These are long-standing liabilities, with the lease arrangement for the unlimited liabilities in place since 1991. This lease pre-dates the formation of NDA in 2004. The introduction of new guidelines and status of Sellafield as part of central Government (2016) meant such indemnities now require Government approval.

On this occasion, there was an unfortunate oversight: HMT approved the indemnity in February 2021, though due to a delay in commercial negotiations, the NDA did not notify the Department that the lease had been finalised in January 2022. BEIS recognises that the notification process has not been followed and is notifying Parliament now.

Therefore, it was not possible to notify Parliament of the liability particulars in advance of the transaction documents being signed. The Department has noted the Committee's concerns regarding this matter and fully accepts the need to follow the correct approvals and reporting procedures and is in the process of conducting a review into best practices.

The contingent liability's expected risk to the Department's available resource loss is considered very low as any nuclear liability would be covered by the Government indemnity, with liability above £140 million falling to central Government under the Paris Brussels convention. Non-nuclear liability is covered by insurance up to £100 million, and above this threshold would need to be funded from the NDA and Department annual budget. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

If, following the laying of the departmental minute, a Member signifies an objection by writing to me, I undertake to examine the objection and respond to the Member concerned.

I will update the House of any further changes as necessary.

[HCWS548]

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my noble Friend Lord Callanan, has today made the following statement:

This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Orsted Hornsea Project Four Ltd for the construction and operation of an offshore wind farm, located approximately 69 km offshore, to the east of Hornsea in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Hornsea Project Four offshore wind farm application is 22 February 2023.

A decision has been made to set a new deadline of no later than 12 July 2023 for deciding this application. This is to enable my Department to seek further information from the applicant and to ensure there is sufficient time to allow for consideration of this information by other interested parties.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS552]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Bereavement Benefits (Remedial) Order 2023

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (The Viscount Younger of Leckie) has made the following written statement.

I am pleased to inform the House that tomorrow, the Bereavement Benefits (Remedial) Order 2023 will come into force. This means, for the first time, bereaved cohabitants with children will be able to access bereavement support payment and its predecessor, widowed parent's allowance, supporting thousands more families with dependent children.

Bereavement support payment was introduced on 6 April 2017, replacing the previous suite of bereavement benefits which included widowed parent's allowance. For bereavement support payment, where a claimant's partner died before 30 August 2018, we will make a part payment and no initial lump sum will be payable. Where the death occurred before the order came into force and the claim is received within 12 months of that date, claimants will get the full amount due to them.

Widowed parent's allowance was introduced in 2001 to replace widowed mother's allowance. It is payable to working age people who were bereaved before 6 April 2017 and who were entitled to child benefit for at least one child, or pregnant, on the date of death. It can be paid for as long as the claimant holds an entitlement to child benefit which can be up to 20 years in some cases.

Claimants will be eligible for widowed parent's allowance where the death was before 6 April 2017, and they continued to meet the entitlement conditions on 30 August 2018. They must also claim within 12 months of the date the order comes into force.

Where more than one person claims for the same death, DWP will pay once per death, prioritising who was living with the claimant on the date of death. Where there are claims from different addresses, entitlement would be established as part of the normal decision-making process. In cases where more than one person was living with the deceased on the date of death, entitlement will be decided according to a hierarchy to reflect the most established relationship.

Widowed parent's allowance is treated as income for the purposes of income-related benefits such as universal credit and is assessed at the point of award. This order provides for all retrospective widowed parent's allowance payments up to the date of claim to be treated as capital and disregarded for 12 months or 52 weeks for the purposes of income-related benefits. This ensures that claimants will not lose any existing entitlement to income-related or passported benefits as a result of receiving a retrospective award. This order also ensures there is a disregard for the same period for retrospective bereavement support payment awards.

Widowed parent's allowance will be treated as income for tax credits and assessed in the year of payment rather than entitlement so no adjustments to past years will be needed. The payment of bereavement support payment does not affect a person's tax credit entitlement.

For bereavement support payment, claimants can make a claim online via gov.uk, by phone through the DWP bereavement service number, or via a paper claim. As widowed parent's allowance has now been replaced by bereavement support payment for deaths after April 2017, it is not possible to claim online and they will be processed by paper, with applications downloadable via gov.uk or by calling the bereavement service number.

Any cohabiting parents who were previously ineligible for bereavement support payment or widowed parent's allowance before the start date of the order will need to make a new claim as this will be a new entitlement.

[HCWS550]

Decommissioning of Temporary Jobcentres

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): This Department continues its commitment to provide local personalised support for customers and families to help them into employment and progress their careers, while delivering for the economy.

During the pandemic, and in direct response to the anticipated pressures on the labour market, the Department secured time-limited funding to rapidly introduce additional jobcentres. This was to deliver a temporary expansion to the existing network of 639 established jobcentre sites and provide more work coaches to support claimants.

The temporary expansion of the jobcentre estate enabled us to drive forward our plan for jobs, helping people back into the labour market, right across the UK. Our plan for jobs saw the launch and success of kickstart and restart which has resulted in:

Over 305,000 kickstart jobs approved for funding (as at 31 January 2021);

Over 163,200 kickstart jobs started by young people (as at 27 June 2022); and

340,000 claimants commenced on the restart scheme (as at September 2022).

We now have a low unemployment rate of 3.7%, payroll employment at a record high of 29.9 million, over 2 million more women in employment since 2010 and a record high ethnic minority employment rate of 69.2%.

In a written statement of 20 July 2022, "DWP Estate", HCWS253, the Department outlined its plans to take advantage of lease breaks and vacate older, poorer-quality jobcentre buildings. Several of the temporary sites, where they offer better, more suitable accommodation than our existing offices—and provide better value for money for the taxpayer—will be retained. Established jobcentres will move into these buildings. Others will be decommissioned where the increased capacity is no longer needed. This is due to the removal of social distancing measures, but also where work coaches and services can now be accommodated in established jobcentres.

The Department is also committed to improving the sustainability of its buildings, contributing to the commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2040 and is therefore adapting its estate to be more sustainable and energy efficient.

The Department has always been clear the additional jobcentres were opened on a temporary basis to help us adapt our services and support in response to the pandemic, as set out in my previous statement "DWP—Expanding Our Services" on 23 March 2021. The decommissioning of these additional temporary sites, where they are no longer required, will not reduce our levels of service or access to face-to-face appointments going forward. Most customers will return to being served by their established jobcentre and there will be no reduction in the number of work coaches serving customers as a result of these changes.

The Department is taking a phased approach towards decommissioning these temporary jobcentres. This will minimise any impact on service delivery and optimise opportunities, where appropriate, to gain better buildings and work environments for all.

The first tranche will include 20 temporary jobcentres, with subsequent phases throughout 2023 and 2024 as we continue to review the extra capacity across all sites and assess when exiting might be appropriate.

Letters are being sent to each MP with changes in their constituency to explain what it means for their local jobcentre and its staff, and their constituents.

We remain committed to updating Parliament on the renewal of our estates, as well as our work to ensure

that both our staff and customers are operating in buildings and environments fit for the future.

The first 20 sites to be formally decommissioned by March 2023 are:

<i>Site</i>	<i>Address</i>
Aylesbury	66 High Street, Aylesbury HP20 1SE
Bath	Pinesgate, Lower Bristol Road, Bath BA2 3DP
Blyth	Bridge House, Percy Street, Blyth NE24 2AQ
Burnley	7 Market Square, Charter Walk Shopping Centre, St James Street, Burnley BB11 1AX
Dundee	140 West Marketgait, Dundee DD1 1NJ
Gateshead	76 Upper Blue Mall, Metro Centre, Gateshead NE11 9YG
Halifax	Broad Street Plaza, Halifax HX1 1UB
Inverness	39 Glendoe Terrace, Inverness IV3 8DL
Ipswich	St Vincent House, 1 Cutler Street, Ipswich IP1 1UQ
Kettering	45 High Street, Kettering NN16 8SU
Leeds	HEM House, Kirkstall Road, Burley, Leeds LS4 2BT
Lincoln	Witham Wharf, Brayford Wharf East, Lincoln LN5 7AT
London Hackney	3 Haberdasher Street, London N1 6ED
London Kentish Town	Hermes Studios, 1-7 Hermes Street, London N1 9JD
London Sutton Carew	Sutton Carew House, Wallington, Sutton, SM6 0DX
London Tooting	71 Tooting High Street, London SW17 0SU
Stevenage	Abel Smith House, Gunnels Wood Road, Stevenage SG1 2ST
Sunderland	Tavistock Place, Sunderland SR1 1PB
Swindon	9-20 Canal Walk, Swindon SN1 1LD
Wigan	Mesnes House, Mesnes Street, Wigan WN1 1QJ

[HCWS549]

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**not later than
Wednesday 15 February 2023**

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