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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 June 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Great British Railways

1. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with the Leader of the House on legislation to establish Great British Railways. [905158]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will begin by sending my heartfelt condolences to the people of India, who, in the eastern state of Odisha on Friday, suffered the country's deadliest rail crash in over two decades. The death toll stands at 288, with over 1,000 people injured. It was caused by the collision of two passenger trains and a stationary goods train. I have written to the Indian Rail Minister expressing our deepest sympathies, and I believe I speak for the whole House when I say that our thoughts are with the victims and their families, as well as with the emergency services as they continue to respond to the tragedy.

Turning to the question, the Government's ambition is for a customer-focused, commercially-led industry, with the creation of Great British Railways as a new guiding mind for the sector. We are working closely with the GBR Transition Team, the wider rail sector and other Departments to move forward with reform, and I was pleased to recently announce Derby as the location of GBR's headquarters.

Justin Madders: On behalf of Opposition Members, may I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments in respect of the people of India?

In the north-west, we were hoping that the formation of GBR might have been on track by now to help us deal with the chronically underperforming Avanti West Coast, but we see no sign of the legislation. Parliament certainly has the time to deal with it—we finished after a couple of hours on Tuesday—and it is certainly not a question of money, as we know £50 million has already been spent on the project. What exactly is the problem with bringing the matter before the House? Is it a lack of political will, or is it a lack of competence?

Mr Harper: The Government remain committed to GBR. As I have said, we have already announced that the HQ will be in Derby. Many of the benefits can be achieved without legislation, and we are getting on with them. It is worth noting, based on statistics published this morning by the Office of Rail and Road, that we still face a massive challenge with the rail industry: leisure is now much more important than commuting and business; and passenger revenue is still 28% down on the pre-pandemic level. A successful railway needs to change to reflect passenger demand, and that is exactly what this Government are going to deliver.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): In the absence of legislation, will my right hon. Friend consider setting up GBR as a shadow authority. That could, for example, end the unsustainable practice of costs sitting with one part of the industry and revenue with another. The rail industry has a great appetite to move forward, so will he consider something like a shadow GBR?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend, who ably chairs the Select Committee, makes a good point. Joining up the profit and loss account, revenues, and costs can be done without legislation, and we are actively working to do that. I have tasked my officials to move at pace on this, and we are identifying where in Derby the GBR HQ will be. We will continue to deliver rail reform every day to ensure that we can respond to market conditions and have a successful, thriving railway, and I want everyone in the sector to join us in that endeavour.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is hugely frustrating that we still do not have an integrated system. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and others about the importance of projects such as the Ely area capacity improvement? When are we going to get some progress on such projects?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have set out a significant amount of rail investment. We will be investing £40 billion overall across the transport portfolio over the next two years, and we do have to make choices about how to spend that money sensibly. The Labour party is making unfunded spending pledges, with £44 billion on rail and, interestingly, nothing on buses or on roads.

Mr Speaker: We now come to a person who will have done 40 years tomorrow, I understand. I call Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Under the old British Rail, we used to have a direct train to London from Grimsby and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) through Market Rasen. I have been campaigning for that train to be reinstated for 40 years—ever since I was elected as a Member of Parliament. Sometimes I wander down from my home in the wolds and wait forlornly on the platform at Market Rasen, but the train never comes. Will the Secretary of State oblige an old campaigner and give us our train back, please?

Mr Harper: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his service in the House. This campaign may be coming to a successful conclusion. He has been working closely with the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and we hope to be able to implement the change in the next timetable update. My hon. Friend is working carefully to ensure that none of the things that have hitherto stopped it will prevent it from happening this time. I hope that there will be a successful conclusion.

Mr Speaker: Make sure he's not closing the station. [*Laughter.*] I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I associate the Opposition with the Secretary of State's comments. We send our thoughts and prayers to the victims of the terrible tragedy in India.

Over the past year, passengers have faced total chaos on our railways. Cancellations rose to their highest ever levels. Strikes have disrupted countless journeys, while the Transport Secretary still refuses to sit down with the unions. The fourth franchise in five years has just been brought into public ownership. And now we hear that the lucky few who actually manage to get a train will not have the luxury of using wi-fi. The Prime Minister might not be aware of this, given his preference for private jets, but will the Secretary of State at least admit that our railways are fundamentally broken?

Mr Harper: They really are not broken. If the hon. Lady looks at the numbers from the Office of Rail and Road this morning, she will see that leisure travel has rebounded very strongly, but there has been a real change in passenger demand for the railways post pandemic, which is why we need to deliver change.

As far as industrial action is concerned, there is an offer on the table that the trade union leaders need to put to their members in the democratic way in which they should operate. That is what the hon. Lady should be pushing for. She has been part of Labour Front Benchers' efforts to make unfunded commitments, which the Institute for Fiscal Studies says will drive up taxes and inflation. Interestingly, I note that Labour has massive unfunded pledges on rail but nothing on buses and roads, the modes of transport used by the vast majority of people living in this country.

Louise Haigh: The Secretary of State has some nerve accusing Labour of tax rises and interest rate rises after his party crashed the economy last year, presided over funding cuts to buses and pushed most of the road-building projects promised in his manifesto to later down the line.

The Secretary of State's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), admitted that our rail system is broken when he first announced Great British Railways more than two years ago. The bare minimum the Secretary of State could do is bring forward the legislation his Government promised, and that industry and investors have made clear is required. It is a simple question: will he bring forward legislation to establish Great British Railways before the end of this Parliament—yes or no?

Mr Harper: It is interesting to note that the hon. Lady is interested in what investors think. I thought her policy was to nationalise the rail industry and take it away from investors. People will have noted that with great interest.

We remain committed, as I said in answer to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), to moving forward on delivering Great British Railways. Much of it can be delivered without legislation. Legislation plans will be set out in the King's Speech in the autumn, in the usual way. We are getting on with making sure that we have a rail system that reflects the needs of passengers, post pandemic, as we deliver the transport system across the country, delivering economic growth.

Access for All

2. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): When he plans to make a decision on which projects will receive funding from the Access for All programme. [905159]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): We are currently working with Network Rail to assess over 300 stations nominated for Access for All, and we aim to make a determination later in 2023 for funding beyond 2024. I hope to be in a position to announce the list of successful projects later this year, in anticipation of securing further funding in the following year.

Afzal Khan: I, too, associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments about the rail crash in India.

The response from the Department for Transport has always been "later", "soon" or "in due course", so I ask the same simple question I have asked every rail Minister since 2017: will the hon. Gentleman come to Manchester to meet Levenshulme station users to talk about access and accessibility?

Huw Merriman: I have recently come back from a very positive trip to Manchester, where I met stakeholders. I have no doubt that I will be there again soon, and I would be very happy to call in on the hon. Gentleman and his campaign. We have delivered step-free access to more than 200 stations through Access for All, and we have made improvements at 1,500 other stations. I look forward to working with him and his project, which I will visit next time I am up.

Rail Usage

3. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What contractual incentives his Department has agreed with train operating companies to encourage more people to use rail services. [905160]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Under the current national rail contracts, train operators earn a fee linked to their performance on addressing key passenger priorities, including punctuality, reliability, service quality and customer satisfaction, as well as revenue growth. While the new passenger service contract is developed, my Department is looking to introduce a stronger incentive for operators to grow rail patronage and revenue.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend knows my enthusiasm for open access services and the way they bring competition and innovation. That benefits customers by raising standards and therefore encourages more people to use our railways. Does he share my enthusiasm? If so, how will he be promoting open access services? May I gently remind him that I have written to him on this subject with some ideas to promote this way of driving more usage of our rail system?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for his letter, for the number of times we have met to discuss this issue and for his enthusiasm, which is shared not only by me, but by the Secretary of State. We saw the authorisation at the end of last year of Grand Union Trains to run services between London and Carmarthen, and we are committed to getting more open access operators, in order to encourage more operators to come to the market. My hon. Friend will know that during the recent rail strikes, open access operators such as Lumo were able to continue to operate. I am meeting the Office of Rail and Road, which is ultimately responsible for the rules in this area, to encourage it to grow open access.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his response. Encouraging more people to use rail services is about accessibility, the availability of trains, and park and ride schemes, so that people can park their cars and use the trains. Like him, I am a great believer in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we should always share our thoughts, discussions and ideas. Has he had any opportunity to share how he can do those things here in the UK with Translink and the Northern Ireland Assembly back home?

Huw Merriman: I am conscious that these matters are devolved in Northern Ireland but, as I have said before to all Members of the House, I am keen to learn from best practice and to ensure that all parts of the UK can learn from each other. It would be ideal if I could meet the hon. Gentleman so we can discuss these things and I can get his ideas, and if I could come over to visit the operators in Northern Ireland that he references and join him in that endeavour.

Active Travel

4. **Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support cycling and walking schemes. [905161]

22. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** What assessment he has made of the impact of changes to funding for active travel on levels of uptake of that travel. [905181]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As the House will know, active travel is at the heart of the Government's agenda and we are investing about £3 billion to support it—that is more than any previous Government. The Government report regularly to Parliament on progress towards meeting their active travel goals, and the next report will be published alongside the third statutory cycling and walking investment strategy in due course.

Selaine Saxby: I am delighted that active travel funding has reached North Devon and that part of the missing link of the Tarka trail will be completed. However, the time constraints on when the funding needs to be spent mean that Devon County Council is not yet able to complete the whole stretch. Will my right hon. Friend confirm when further funding rounds will be available to enable this much-needed and long overdue missing link to be completed?

Jesse Norman: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic campaigner for active travel. She rightly says that it is great that North Devon has been able to benefit, along with the rest of Devon, from £1.8 million through active travel fund 4. Active Travel England plans to run a further capital funding round later this year and will work with local authorities, including those in rural areas, to encourage bids for schemes that have high potential to increase walking, wheeling and cycling trips.

Wera Hobhouse: People walking, wheeling and cycling saved 2.5 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions and avoided more than 29,000 early deaths in 2021. However, only a fifth of total active travel spending comes from dedicated funding, with the rest coming from various funding pots that are not guaranteed. With such a low proportion of ringfenced funding, how can the Government guarantee that this money is really spent on active travel, which is good for our health, economy and environment?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that active travel—cycling, walking and wheeling—is probably the single biggest health intervention a human being can make in their lives as a choice of habit. She is right to highlight the importance of supporting it, as the Government have—more so than any previous Government. There are a range of pots, including city region sustainable transport settlements, the road investment strategy 2 and levelling-up fund moneys, into which authorities can bid. Many have done so and will continue to do so highly successfully. That provides a continuing opportunity for them to benefit from these levels of increased funding.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): May I associate myself with the condolences that have been sent to those in India?

In 2021, Ministers set themselves four targets to measure progress in active travel uptake. Three years on, how many of these targets are they confident of meeting? I can tell Members that it is not a single one, according to the Government's own assessment revealed by the National Audit Office yesterday. The NAO report also uncovered a staggering cut to active travel funding of £166 million, which, by the Government's own workings, would cost the taxpayer more than £700 million in the long run. Will the Minister finally come clean and confirm whether he will be slashing this vital funding by 60% next year, too—yes or no?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have had to make efficiency savings across the board as a result of the illegal war being waged by Putin in Ukraine. The report she mentions reflects the

fact that the Government set highly ambitious targets, which have always been known and understood to be testing. One great advantage of the installation of Active Travel England—a sensational organisation—is precisely that we can drive better value for money as well as better quality of schemes across the whole of our infrastructure.

HS2: Monitoring and Oversight

5. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure effective monitoring and oversight of HS2. [905162]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Comprehensive monitoring arrangements are in place for HS2, which all provide an up-to-date view of the status, challenges and opportunities facing the programme. We produce a range of public-facing updates, including the six-monthly update report to Parliament, the next iteration of which is due for publication shortly.

Sarah Green: A few weeks ago, my constituents woke to find a large sinkhole in a field directly above where the HS2 tunnel boring machines had been. This was predicted years ago by my constituents in evidence to this House. The Environment Agency's response to the sinkhole appears to be little more than allowing HS2 contractors to mark their own homework, and it is the latest example of the Environment Agency's inadequate response to questions that have been raised about HS2. It is vital that we can have faith in the organisation to undertake its statutory responsibilities. Will the Minister meet me and my constituents to hear directly about their concerns about the oversight of HS2?

Huw Merriman: It is certainly the case that the High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Act 2017 and the High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Act 2021 specify the circumstances in which HS2 must seek the consent of the Environment Agency for construction. I know that, on this particular matter, the Environment Agency has been working with HS2 Ltd since that ground movement was discovered. I have also asked for it to be looked into. I will ensure that I get a separate report from the Environment Agency so that we have that independence, and when I have that, I will happily sit down with the hon. Lady and her constituents to take them through what has been found. She is absolutely right: we need to have independent scrutiny. I am absolutely fixed on that myself.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Two weeks ago, my constituents, the Hodges of Elm Tree farm in Steeple Claydon, discovered by accident while walking their dogs that HS2 Ltd was about to chainsaw an area of woodland on the farm that it had not paid for. There was no consultation. HS2 fenced off land that it does not own and then there were suspicious works in the middle of the night. When will my hon. Friend clamp down on this appalling, bullying behaviour from HS2 Ltd and its contractors?

Huw Merriman: I was very pleased to sit down very recently with my hon. Friend, people from HS2 Ltd and Buckinghamshire Council to go through some of the

matters that were on his agenda. I know that this is the latest case that he has written to me about. I will look into the detail to ensure that we both have the correct facts, and the next time I am up near Steeple Claydon, which, as he knows, happens on a regular basis, we can perhaps take a look ourselves.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I, too, convey my condolences to the families of the victims of the harrowing rail disaster in India.

The Government's management of HS2 could hardly be worse: the budget has ballooned out of all proportion; we are already years behind on the launch of services; the merry-go-round of Ministers has created chaos; and the project at Euston station may never see the light of day. The six-monthly update to Parliament is already months late. We are none the wiser about the promised excellent alternative to the cancelled Golborne link, and we have been waiting years for the review into the best way to run HS2 to Leeds after this Government betrayed the north by scrapping the eastern leg. It appears that trickle-down economics has been replaced by trickle-down incompetence. Rather than the usual woolly ministerial responses of "coming soon to a station near you" and rather than responding to all of these failures, can the Minister answer just one simple question: when will the Leeds area study finally be published?

Huw Merriman: The ministerial merry-go-round goes round to a Merriman to listen to yet another long-winded effort from the hon. Gentleman, which eventually turns into a question. The reality is that we remain committed to HS2 and to line of route from London all the way up to Manchester. He talks about ballooning costs, but we have tried to look at the cost estimate and rephase HS2 as a result. He cannot have it both ways. I am committed to ensuring that the study comes out very soon; I met with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to work on the matter and we work closely together. Our aim is to ensure that when that study comes out, it has the imagination in it to deliver properly all the ideas that we had always intended, and we will do so. We are committed to HS2 and to the investment and decarbonisation it will bring. I am sorry there has been a change of Ministers, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there will not be any changes any time soon.

Bus Services

6. **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support bus services. [905163]

7. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the number of bus services since 2019. [905164]

12. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the £2 fare cap on the number of bus journeys since that cap was introduced. [905170]

20. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the number of bus services since 2019. [905179]

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

The Government have invested more than £3.5 billion in buses since March 2020, including our recently announced package of up to £300 million to protect and improve services long term, and up to £200 million to continue capping bus fares on thousands of routes in England outside London until November next year. That funding is helping to ensure that those who use the bus every day to live, work and travel can continue to do so for less.

Matt Vickers: The Government recently announced huge investment to improve and protect bus services, but in my part of the world Arriva has chosen to cherry-pick the most profitable routes, ditching others such as the 17 and leaving youngsters unable to get to school, adults unable to get to work and pensioners cut off from health services. Will my right hon. Friend work with me to prevent bus operators from putting profit before people and to see what can be done to protect services in Stockton South?

Mr Harper: I am confident that my hon. Friend will campaign in his area to protect those bus services. The additional £300 million includes £1.5 million for the Tees Valley, which will help local transport authorities and bus operators to protect and improve their services. We expect them to work together to deliver sustainable networks. I know he will campaign strongly to ensure that a share of that extra money from Government goes to protect services to his constituents.

Liz Twist: In January, I was glad to hear that Transport North East's decarbonisation bid for our bus services had been successful. I now understand that subsidy control procedures mean that none of the electric buses have yet been ordered, let alone delivered, and I fear we may run out of time under the terms of the grant or get fewer buses for our money because of inflation. We need those electric buses in the north-east, so will the Secretary of State meet me to ensure we get them on the road as soon as possible?

Mr Harper: I am glad that the hon. Lady gives me an opportunity to remind the House that Transport North East has been awarded £19.5 million as part of round 2 of the levelling up fund, which delivers those buses. There are some appropriate checks that must take place, and I hope she will also welcome the fact that the North East and North of Tyne Combined Authorities got £117.8 million for their bus service improvement plans to deliver better bus services for her constituents.

Luke Hall: Rural bus services such as the 84, 85 and 622 services in south Gloucestershire are vital for residents to commute to work, get to school and attend health appointments, but they are under real pressure. South Gloucestershire Council has stepped in to provide a temporary fix for the 84 and 85 services, but will the Secretary of State urge the council and the West of England Mayor to work together to find a permanent solution for those services, using the improvement plan subsidies provided to them, so that residents in villages such as Charfield, Wickwar, Hawkesbury Upton, Rangeworthy and Tytherington are not cut off from having any bus services at all?

Mr Harper: As the Environment Secretary set out earlier this week, the Government are committed to unlocking opportunities in rural areas in particular, and

local transport connectivity is crucial to that. The extra money we set out will help to protect services, and I can confirm that I would expect local councils and the West of England Mayor to work together to deliver those. I forgot to say in my previous answer to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) that I will of course make sure that the roads Minister meets her to talk about her specific question about her buses.

Mary Kelly Foy: Recently, Arriva gave up its subsidised 57A route, which goes through my constituency. The council has struggled to find an alternative operator because the Government have banned it from creating its own bus company—one that could serve the local community, which is left struggling to access key local services and even to get to work. Does the Minister agree that it is long overdue and common sense to end the ideological ban on municipal bus companies?

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady should recognise that, as I said in answer to the previous question, the North East Combined Authority and the North of Tyne Combined Authority were awarded £117.8 million to deliver their ambitious bus service improvement plan. That is the mechanism that we have set up for local authorities to have ambitious plans to work with bus operators to deliver better services for constituents, properly funded from central Government. I hope that they use that revenue and those powers to deliver the improved bus services that she wants.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Government's latest bus deal lasts longer than the usual three months, but as ever, there are winners and losers. Last year, both Southampton and Swindon applied for zero-emission bus funding. They got nothing. They applied for BSIP funding, and how much did they get, Secretary of State? Nothing. Last month, every council finally received something, but Southampton and Swindon got barely £1 million between them, amounting to a pathetic £2 per person. Can he explain why areas such as Southampton and Swindon have got so little to fix their broken bus systems?

Mr Harper: I am pleased that, in his question, the hon. Gentleman sort of welcomed the £500 million that we made available for buses in our announcement last month, which was welcome and provides money to every local authority and to bus companies. There is a formula by which that money is awarded—it is not awarded on a whim; it is based on mileage and usage, and is done in a sensible way—and the money was awarded fairly under that process. As I said in answer to the previous question, it is all very well criticising us, but we set out clear plans to support bus services in our announcement last month. Labour Members have made no pledges on buses; it is all on rail. Is that because ASLEF pays their wages and they are not interested in buses, which twice as many people use compared with rail services?

Electric Vehicles

8. **Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con):** What steps he is taking to help improve the (a) market share and (b) availability of electric vehicles. [905165]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Government are committed to accelerating the transition to zero-emission vehicles. To support this transition, we will introduce a world-leading zero-emission vehicle mandate. That will support the future supply of zero emission vehicles by setting a minimum percentage of manufacturers' new car and van sales to be zero emission each year from 2024.

Nicola Richards: It is great news that Jaguar Land Rover will manufacture its first UK-made electric car in the west midlands, continuing our long history of attracting manufacturing investment from across the world. Will the Minister join me in welcoming JLR's £15 billion investment, and does he agree that it shows that we are emerging, thanks to this Government, as a world leader in clean technology, which is good for jobs, good for the economy and good for the environment?

Jesse Norman: Of course, I was delighted to see JLR's commitment to investing in UK manufacturing and confirming its plans to bring electric vehicle production to the west midlands. Through our policies and investments, the Government are accelerating electrification and unlocking industry investment to meet our net zero ambitions. The automotive industry is a vital part of that process. This is a vote of confidence from the UK's largest carmaker.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I say how pleased I am that, thanks to the wonderful people at Guy's and St Thomas's, I am back in operation?

May I ask the Minister not to get totally fixated on electric vehicles? There are a few companies establishing hydrogen-powered service stations for trucks up and down the country. With less impact on the environment, hydrogen has real possibility in this country.

Jesse Norman: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his seat. He will be aware that the Government are very interested in the potential of hydrogen, not just in heavier vehicles but also in maritime and, through hydrogen fuel cells, in aerospace. We take a technology-neutral approach, so I have been looking at all those things. I had the great pleasure of visiting JCB, which has pioneered a hydrogen-based off-road digger, and what a splendid machine that is.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Although electric cars are important, the EU, under pressure from the German car industry, has put back the date when petrol combustion engines will be banned. What discussions have we had with our industry about whether it might be appropriate to do that here, given that that may give some of our industry difficulty in continuing to manufacture in the future?

Jesse Norman: The third round of consultations on the zero-emission vehicle mandate has just closed. We work closely with all the relevant parties, in particular the car manufacturers. My hon. Friend should be aware that not deflecting from our path, as has been done elsewhere, will not just put the UK further ahead in this area but will trigger a substantial amount of private sector investment in charging infrastructure. ChargeUK has announced that some £6 billion will be invested by private means in the charging network over the next few years, which is to be welcomed.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The different application of VAT between domestic and public charging points is clearly a disincentive to those who are considering adopting electric vehicles. Some 38% of households do not have access to private parking and would rely on public charge points. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that the Chancellor takes account of that in the next Budget and ensures that this unfair VAT charge is scrapped?

Jesse Norman: It is worth saying that the tax system does support the take-up of electric vehicles already. As a former Financial Secretary, I can tell the hon. Lady that I would be skinned if I made Treasury policy from the Dispatch Box. I am not going to do that, but I have no doubt that my colleagues in the Treasury will have noted her concern.

Rail Services

9. **Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on delivering rail service improvements. [905167]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): The Secretary of State and the Chancellor regularly meet to discuss rail services, and between them they are delivering unprecedented investment in rail infrastructure and reform of the industry. That includes delivering High Speed 2, core Northern Powerhouse Rail and East West Rail, as confirmed by the Chancellor at the autumn statement, while investing in the existing network across the country.

Chris Stephens: According to reports, Great British Railways is dead in the water thanks to a Treasury that knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. We have seen the Yorkshire leg of HS2 dumped, Northern Powerhouse Rail stripped to the bone and HS2 terminating at Old Oak Common. Does the Minister agree that his colleagues in the Treasury are the biggest threat to the rail network and public transport across these islands?

Huw Merriman: I do not agree at all. The Secretary of State was quite clear in his Bradshaw talk that Great British Railways would be put forward. It is being put forward, and that Bradshaw address was endorsed by the Treasury and all parts of Government. We are absolutely committed. Later today I will have a discussion with all the team involved in rail reform, as I do on a weekly basis, as we look to transition this project from the Department to Great British Railways. Legislation delivers certain parts of it, but it does not deliver the project. We are delivering the project, and we will look to deliver the legislation when time allows it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer would be delighted if rail companies, some of which take a rather lax approach to ticket inspection, ensured that passengers had a valid ticket. I can give an example. I, along with seven other members of the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill Select Committee, went to Manchester on Tuesday. We paid an extortionate amount for our tickets. On the outward journey, no one inspected the tickets, nor did we pass through any barriers. If the Chancellor had more money, he could use it to improve rail services.

Huw Merriman: I thought my hon. Friend was about to tell us about an even more unfortunate incident, but I am glad that did not occur. We have increased the fine for those who are not using valid tickets to £100, which is reduced to £50 if it is paid on time. That increase demonstrates that we take this matter very seriously. Like him, I find it frustrating when I encounter journeys where the ticket is not checked either on the train or at barriers. I am determined to do more on that front; he is aware of that, and I encourage him to work with me as we do that.

Speeding on Roads

10. **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle speeding on roads. [905168]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As I am sure the House will widely agree, speeding is a very serious road safety issue that has a direct link with the risk of collisions, serious injury and fatality. Traffic law enforcement is an operational matter for the police, and operational decisions are for police and crime commissioners and chief constables. That includes policy and procedures for using police powers and resources.

Mark Eastwood: Speeding continues to be one of the biggest issues in Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale. Will the Minister agree to visit my constituency to meet with community groups and road safety campaigners and discuss how best we can tackle this problem?

Jesse Norman: The Government are committed to ensuring that roads are safe for drivers. I have no doubt that the roads Minister would be absolutely delighted to visit my hon. Friend in his constituency, and to talk to those community groups and other interested parties about this important issue.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Since 2010, the rate of road deaths has plateaued. Is the Minister proud of that record, and when will he finally publish the long-awaited road safety strategic framework?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady knows, when I was roads Minister, we did a lot of work on safety reviews for walking and cycling. I do not think anyone who looks at the statistics, which of course are not controlled by Government or any single force, will be proud of where they are. One reason why I am excited about the potential for new automated, driver-assistive and other technologies is that in principle, they have the capacity to reduce the number of fatalities and injuries very significantly. That is something we should all welcome.

Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Outside London

11. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure outside of London. [R] [905169]

18. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the rollout of electric vehicle infrastructure outside of London. [905177]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): There are currently over 42,000 public electric vehicle charge points in the UK, alongside hundreds of thousands more in homes and workplaces. The Government have allocated a share of £381 million to every local area in England under the local EV infrastructure fund, and are also supporting rapid chargers along the strategic road network. The Government also provide grants to support the provision of charge points in flats, rental properties, residential car parks and workplaces.

Matt Western: According to *The Times*, the gulf between the number of electric vehicles on our roads and the number of public charge points has doubled in the past year. Logistics UK reports that many of its operators with commercial vehicles cannot access those points, so it seems that the Government need to do more on planning and encouraging investment. Could the Minister update us?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question—I thought he was going to mention the £3.29 million of capital funding that Warwickshire County Council has received in this area, but I take the general point he raises. When EV purchases are growing rapidly, as they are in this country, there will be moments of disconnect between the amount of infrastructure and the number of vehicles. We have certainly seen a bit of that recently, and we will perhaps continue to see it for a number of months or more, but what is interesting is that the new zero-emission vehicle mandate allows us to trigger billions of pounds of potential private investment, as I have mentioned. That is a world-leading intervention by Government, and I think it will pay long-term dividends in supporting the expansion of the electric car fleet.

Mary Glendon: EV charging in the north-east is falling behind the rest of the country. Most of the stock are older, much slower charging points that often do not work, and the ones that do are often at capacity. Will the Minister commit to working with Transport North East and our councils to ensure that owning and charging an electric vehicle continues to be a possibility in our region?

Jesse Norman: The point of the LEVI fund is precisely to create an equitable spread of public charge points around the country. The north-east is not badly served in the overall numbers per head of population, but we can always do better. I would be happy to meet any local organisations that are committed to that agenda, as the hon. Lady has suggested. She will know—if she has not done so, she can check in the transparency records—that we have been very active in dealing with local authorities, motorway service operators, charge point operators and others with an interest in this area.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if local authorities were to look at their byelaws, that would enable EV charging gullies to be facilitated for those who do not have off-street parking? That would have a huge impact on the roll-out of EV charging infrastructure.

Jesse Norman: Yes.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I associate those on the SNP Benches with the Secretary of State's comments on the horrendous rail incident in India.

Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and I visited the Cromarty Firth, Aberdeen and Orkney to see the real progress in Scotland's renewables and transport decarbonisation sectors, including the public charger roll-out, where Orkney has the highest number per capita in the UK—four times the English rate outside of London—and Scotland has twice as many rapid chargers per head. Surely that shows the fundamental role of Government in driving transport decarbonisation. The low numbers in England outside of London highlight the danger of leaving it to the market.

Jesse Norman: I do not accept the premise of that argument. We have discussed it in the Select Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) was right, because he highlighted the different technologies that can be used rapidly to extend charge points, including gullies and pop-up charge points. We are in the process of rapid expansion and change, and the House would expect that to continue. The amount of private sector investment that we have already triggered or will be triggering through the mandate once it is on the statute book will drive that process still faster.

Gavin Newlands: What the Minister says ignores the reality that the gap between Scotland and England on chargers is widening, rather than narrowing. What we have seen in Scotland is a party that believes in the power of Government to benefit transport. We have EV infrastructure outstripping England, a publicly owned rail service scrapping peak-time fares, many times more zero-emission buses ordered and on the road, and active travel spending increasing to more than £300 million while budgets here are butchered. Is it not time that the Government admitted that the Thatcherite deregulation model has failed completely and instead got to work helping the state to build a transport network fit for the 21st century?

Jesse Norman: I do not accept that at all. It is inevitable with a change of this magnitude that it will be essential for state interventions to trigger private investment. That will go in the first instance where it can trigger additional growth in the market. We use the LEVI fund and other mechanisms to ensure equity across the country.

Avanti

13. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the service delivered by Avanti's rail timetable (a) now and (b) at the launch of that franchise. [905171]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Avanti began operating in December 2019 and within 16 weeks had transitioned on to an emergency measures agreement due to the covid-19 pandemic. Since then, the service provision has adjusted to align with demand and to balance taxpayer and passenger needs. I welcome recent performance improvements, with Avanti-caused cancellations down from 13.2% in January 2023 to 1.4% for the month of April.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer —[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I was shouting to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) not to come past the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) when he was in the middle of a question. Try again, Mr Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant: Take 2. Mr Speaker, you might disagree with the Minister's answer and say that the reliability of Avanti is still not that good. Nevertheless, my question is about services from Lichfield Trent Valley station. I wonder when services can be restored whereby we have a decent service on Sundays, particularly early Sunday evenings, both down to Euston and to the north. That used to exist before covid, but those services are no longer on the timetable.

Huw Merriman: Normal service resumed after a passenger crossed the line of sight in front of my hon. Friend. Anything that deprives my hon. Friend, and indeed his constituents, of the ability to get down from Lichfield is something that I will have to look at and help. I am meeting the managing director of Avanti today, as it turns out. I will raise my hon. Friend's point and happily write back to him and do my best.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): ScotRail, the Caledonian Sleeper, LNER and now TransPennine Express have all been nationalised. Increasingly, that is clearly the model that will deliver the reliable train services that customers need. What steps is the Minister taking to monitor the impact of nationalisation and whether it ought to be rolled out to the other franchises?

Huw Merriman: The steps I am taking on monitoring are looking at being able to put those operations back to the private sector. That is our preferred model. On TransPennine trains, I had a very good meeting with the interim chief executive, and I thank him for the work he is doing to stabilise. A plan is being looked at that will be delivered by next month, I believe. We currently have a situation where 50% of drivers are not trained up. What that tells us is that we need a lot more co-operation with the unions to get our drivers trained so that they can drive trains across all routes.

Topical Questions

T1. [905182] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): We know that buses are a social and economic lifeline for millions across the country. That is why we are keeping fares down and keeping vital bus routes open. We have extended our popular £2 bus fare cap until the end of October, followed by a £2.50 cap until November next year. On top of the £2 billion in support we have provided to the sector since the pandemic, we are investing £300 million to support essential services and routes for the next two years. This is giving the sector certainty, helping people with the cost of living and delivering against our priority to halve inflation, as well as protecting the vital role that buses play in growing our economy.

Greg Smith: Overcrowding on Chiltern services from stations such as Haddenham and Thame Parkway and Princes Risborough has become beyond unacceptable. That will only get worse if Chiltern is forced to discontinue the Class 68 loco-hauled trains, as expected. Will my right hon. Friend agree to enable the continued use of these trains until Chiltern can complete its full planned fleet renewal?

Mr Harper: I am able to tell my hon. Friend that officials in the Department are already working with Chiltern on looking at how we deal with those issues. I know that the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), will be delighted to meet him to give him more detail of the work already under way so that we can deliver a better service for his constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Due to the UK's out-of-date and inefficient airspace, designed in the 1960s, the average flight from Luton to Jersey emits 24% more carbon than necessary. Modernising UK airspace is the quickest and most effective way to save carbon in the UK aviation sector. The process is so slow and bureaucratic that it is going to be the 2060s before this is sorted. Is it not time the Secretary of State stepped up to the plate?

Mr Harper: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of airspace modernisation, which is exactly why we are getting on with it. I have had recent discussions with National Air Traffic Services on the work it is doing and discussions with the Civil Aviation Authority. That work is under way, and we are looking at it in the UK, but also working with our international partners to make sure this plays a part in decarbonisation. It was something I discussed in the US when I co-chaired a summit with the US Transportation Secretary, and we talked about these issues with important players in the aviation sector globally.

T2. [905183] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): As railway ridership returns to pre-pandemic levels, we need an efficient approach to railway finance. Can my hon. Friend say when he intends to reunite cost and revenue, so that that continues to drive up demand and provides an efficient method?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): My hon. Friend is right to point out that we currently view costs as sitting with the DFT and revenue as sitting with the Treasury. This can make it harder to increase services, even when extra revenue can be assured, because costs at the DFT cannot increase. He can be assured that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I spoke yesterday about how we can grow services and revenues with one profit and loss statement. I am also working with the train operators to amend their contracts, so they can be the parties that take the risk and get a greater share of the reward.

T5. [905187] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Current regulations on hydrogen transport and storage are preventing world-leading renewables innovators such as the European Marine Energy Centre in Scotland from using surplus energy from tidal turbines to produce

green hydrogen and export it off-island? Will the Department work with the Competition and Markets Authority to review these regulations and ensure that Scotland's green industrial revolution is not hampered by Westminster's regulatory dead hand?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As the hon. Lady will know, I have already outlined the support that we have been giving and the warm interest we take in hydrogen, so I am very interested to hear what she says. If she could bear to send me the details, I will make sure that I or the relevant Minister responds to her.

T3. [905184] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): The cut to air passenger duty was a welcome boost for domestic aviation and for facilitating the growth of regional airports, such as Blackpool. Following this success, will the Government consider introducing public service obligation routes from destinations such as Blackpool to support tourism and economic growth?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We had a Westminster Hall debate on this a few months ago. As he will know, the UK policy on public service obligations is to protect existing routes in danger of being lost, and the DFT jointly funds routes into London from Newquay, Dundee and Derry/Londonderry. Lord Hendy's independent Union connectivity review has now been lodged. We have welcomed it, and we will continue to consider the ways in which PSOs can help the Government to achieve regional connectivity needs.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): British Transport Police highlighted that instances of sexual harassment and sexual offences on public transport have soared by a shocking 175% between 2019 and 2020. We need our women and girls to feel safe to use public transport, and to use it so that we can tackle the climate emergency. Labour is committed to halving violence against women and girls. When will the Government match that commitment and make sure that our women and girls feel safe to use public transport?

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady is right to focus on this. That is why the Government published our cross-Government "Tackling violence against women and girls strategy", which the Department for Transport is fundamentally involved with. Since 2019 the BTP, which the hon. Lady mentioned specifically, has enhanced its approach to combating violence against women and girls, complemented by the BTP chief constable's personal commitment and drive on this subject.

T4. [905185] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): North Devon's pothole group recently made national news and, while much work is being done, our roads are still more pothole or patch than road in far too many places. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that local councils are spending their pothole funding effectively and, in particular, that rural road surfaces are improving?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend might know that I visited Devon in a previous incarnation as roads Minister precisely to look at its innovative work on potholes. She will also be aware that the Government are investing £5 billion in local highways maintenance

outside London, with the mayoral combined authorities already receiving CRSTS—city regional sustainable transport settlement—money. It is up to each local highway authority to decide how best to spend that money, but of course we do expect them to be able to account locally and we also think about how roads are surveyed and assessed and how well they are being treated as assets by those authorities.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): With Luton Town being promoted to the premier league last week, many fans will be travelling by train, including from London clubs such as Arsenal. However, as the Minister knows, Luton station is sadly not accessible for many people with mobility issues, and while he has confirmed Access for All money is forthcoming to put lifts in the station by next year, what recent conversations has he had with the Sport Minister, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), regarding accessibility of the rail network for travelling sports fans?

Huw Merriman: I congratulate Luton Town. As the hon. Lady knows, my family are big supporters; they have been there through the bad times and they will be there in the good ones as well. I also thank her for showing me around Luton station. I am committed to ensuring that Access for All is delivered at that station on time; any attempts to push back will not get signed off by me. On her campaign on the leaky roof on platforms 1 and 2, which she showed me, the work will start in August and complete in early 2024—I thank her for that.

T6. [905188] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I have heard concerns from many constituents who are business users of Heathrow airport that it is now by some margin the most expensive airport in the world. Will my right hon. Friend consider looking at the regulatory model, bringing it more into line with other airports in the United Kingdom to ensure that its charges become much more competitive in future?

Mr Harper: Recognising Heathrow's significant market power, it is economically regulated by the Civil Aviation Authority, including capping Heathrow's charges. The CAA published its 2022 to 2026 settlement decision in March. The Competition and Markets Authority is considering appeals against that decision and I hope my hon. Friend will recognise that I cannot comment on that ongoing process. Separately, the Department aims to publish the independent review of the CAA by the summer and will consider any economic regulation-related recommendations at that time.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My constituent Vance applied for a medical driving licence in April 2022; 14 months later, after delays, he has been told he needs to reapply. This is having a direct impact on his job. Why is any constituent experiencing such delays, and can the Minister explain what is being done to address them?

Mr Harper: Obviously that specific case should not have happened. If the hon. Lady sends through the details, I will make sure that the roads Minister looks at it in detail. Generally, medical cases are taking longer to get sorted out than general cases following both the

pandemic and industrial action, but we are well on our way to getting that on track. I will, however, make sure the roads Minister looks at that specific case.

T7. [905189] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): Junction 11 of the M65 currently only allows traffic to join going eastwards towards Colne, where the motorway ends, and not westwards towards the M6, opening up the whole country. The result is a majorly congested Burnley town centre and a limit to economic opportunity. Could my right hon. Friend set out what funding opportunities are available for a viability study into a westwards slip road?

Jesse Norman: In 2021, we asked National Highways to undertake a study looking at possible interventions on or around the M65 at Colne. That study focused on localised congestion pinch points on that road, which is owned and managed by Lancashire County Council. It concluded in 2022, and the findings were handed over to the council and Transport for the North. It is for them to decide what further action they may wish to take as a result, but I know they will, and they certainly should, attend closely to what my hon. Friend said.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. There is real frustration because the Secretary of State and the rail Minister will not talk and settle the dispute between the trade unions and the operators. No talks have been held since the beginning of the year. When I speak to the rail companies, they say they want to do a deal and they believe that there is a pathway to end the dispute. When I speak to the trade unions—ASLEF and RMT—they say the same. So why will he not get round the table and end the dispute?

Mr Harper: As I said, the table, which the hon. Lady refers to, has an offer on it. All it requires is for the RMT—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on the Front Bench says that they have not accepted it. The members of those unions—the members—have not been given the opportunity to vote on it. The deal is on the table. The union leaders should put it to their members and ask them what they think.

T8. [905190] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to Sheringham and seeing the A148-Holway road junction for himself, the congestion at that important junction into Sheringham, which is a key tourist destination in my constituency, and the rat-running in the neighbouring towns and villages. May I ask the Secretary of State to squeeze the Transport Department's coffers just one last time to find some important money to try to improve that junction?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he has said. I am sure that the roads Minister will be happy to meet him to discuss that further. I understand that Norfolk County Council has completed the feasibility study into the improvements at that junction and has committed funds to continue the development of the scheme. That puts Norfolk in a strong position to submit a bid, should funding opportunities arise. I know that he will press that case strongly.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): A simple question for the Transport Secretary: are the Government committed to building a third runway at Heathrow—yes or no?

Mr Harper: As the hon. Lady knows, the decision about whether to build a third runway is one for Heathrow. The funding has to come from Heathrow. She knows that if, at some point in the future, it wants to proceed with that, a significant process has to get under way. She would not expect me to express an opinion on it because there is obviously a clear judicial process to follow, but it is up to Heathrow to make the first move and we wait with interest to see whether it does so.

T9. [905191] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): National Highways has already done a lot of research into a safety package on the A38 from Carkeel to Trerulefoot in my constituency. I thank it for that. I saw the aftermath of one of the frequent accidents just one month ago. We need this urgently. Please can the Secretary of State look again at this?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend very much for her question. She knows, and I have already said, how important the safety of all road users is to the Government. This part of the A38 has a high collision rate and we want to address that with local authorities. A package of safety measures between Carkeel and Trerulefoot was announced as a pipeline scheme in the second road investment strategy for delivery in the future RIS. National Highways consulted on proposed safety improvements and continues to develop its plans in the light of feedback received. We will encourage it to accelerate that work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of the anecdotally large number of learner drivers who deliver pizzas and that sort of stuff? They have learner plates. They have had no training. Is he worried? We have all heard anecdotally that there are lots of casualties and deaths. Has he any hard facts on that?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue and it is very good to see him back in his place. It is difficult to make policy based on anecdote. If he has specific examples and evidence, I would be delighted if he wrote to me or the roads Minister, and we will of course look into the serious matters he raises in the House.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Roadworks that continually reappear on the same stretch of road at multiple locations are a major cause of congestion across the towns and villages in Erewash, particularly in Long Eaton and Sawley. What steps is my right hon.

Friend taking, in conjunction with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to ensure that utility companies better co-ordinate their work schedules to minimise disruption to road users?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that that can be a complete pest. Over the last few years, the Government have taken some action to address that. Utility companies have a right of access to highways to install and repair apparatus, and we rely on them to do so in many ways. The Government introduced a number of initiatives, including the development of Street Manager and regulatory changes, which are all designed to improve the efficiency of how such works are carried out and co-ordinated.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, I often hear from stakeholders, both business and civil society, about their frustration over the lack of direct flights between the UK and Malawi. I appreciate that that is largely a commercial decision for operators, but what role can the Department for Transport play in bringing together interested parties to discuss what options might be available?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman put his finger on it: it is largely a commercial decision. If regulatory issues or other issues are preventing that from happening, I would be delighted to look into those. If he raises them on behalf of the APPG, I would be delighted to hear from him, but those are largely commercial decisions for airlines and airports to take.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that road congestion is bad for the economy, bad for the environment and bad for the mental health of motorists? To that extent, why are the Government pursuing policies that are making road congestion worse rather than better?

Jesse Norman: There are a range of independent estimates of the impact of road congestion financially. They range between hundreds of millions of pounds and billions of pounds; my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are not taking any action to increase congestion. Many schemes, for example active travel schemes, which are regarded by some—by some—as schemes that increase congestion, actually reduce it. He will notice, however, that some schemes put in place under the emergency active travel fund two or three years ago during the pandemic have been revised. I think local authorities are coming to realise that those were somewhat inexpeditiously put in place and we hope they will continue to do so.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): To ask the Leader of the House if she will give us the forthcoming business.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 12 June will include:

MONDAY 12 JUNE—Consideration of Lords message to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion to approve the draft Public Order Act 1986 (Serious Disruption to the Life of the Community) Regulations 2023, followed by a general debate on the risk-based exclusion of Members of Parliament.

TUESDAY 13 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Procurement Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 14 JUNE—Opposition day (10th allocated day, second part). Debate in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced, followed by a general debate on defence policy. Hon. Members have been asking for a debate in Government time on both Ukraine and NATO. Both issues will be in scope of this debate.

THURSDAY 15 JUNE—General debate on Pride Month, followed by a general debate on Government policies on migration. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 June includes:

MONDAY 19 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

It was incredibly frustrating to see this worn-out Tory Government shut up shop and clear out of here before 2 o'clock on Tuesday. The House has regularly risen early for months because of thin Government business, at least down this end—in the other place, they seem to be clogged up. How are Tory Ministers spending their time? Clearly not delivering in their Departments. Are they racing home to watch daytime TV instead? Has the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) been watching too much “Escape to the Country”? I hear he is planning a chicken run to a rural so-called “safe” seat in Oxfordshire. Does the Leader of the House fancy her chances against the “Eggheads”? Perhaps she can try to raise some money to cover the extortionate cost to the taxpayer of the former Prime Minister’s legal fees.

The Government ought to be using the precious time they have in this House to pass laws that will make people’s lives better. They have the power, but why are they not using it? Have they just given up? Why did the Leader of the House not use Tuesday to bring forward the much-needed transport or schools Bills? Everyone in this House knows the damage that 13 years of Tory Government have done to our transport and education systems. Will they not at least try to fix them?

The Government could have also brought forward their long-promised Mental Health Bill. The Committee that studied a draft version published its final report way back in January—six months ago—and there is still no sign of a Bill. Has the Health Secretary even read that report? Do Ministers support calls for stronger measures, or not? Will the Health Secretary come to this House and answer MPs’ questions, or not? People are worried sick about the state that this Government have left mental health services in. Could the Leader of the House tell us whether she will announce a Mental Health Bill in this Session, or will the Tories really leave vulnerable people waiting even longer to receive the care they so desperately need?

Every week, it is left to Labour to bring forward a plan. This week, we called for the Government to introduce Labour’s plan to recruit thousands of mental health staff, to provide access to specialist mental health support in every school and to establish open access mental health hubs for children and young people, paid for by closing tax loopholes. What do Government Members have against any of that? Where is their plan? They had one, and they scrapped it.

As well as failing to bring forward new laws to help people with mental health problems, Ministers are failing to put into practice laws already passed. Let us take Seni’s law, set out in a private Member’s Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) five years ago and passed unanimously. It is intended to monitor the disproportionate use of force and to tackle dangerous restraint in mental health settings, but the Government still do not seem to have made it a reality on the ground.

The Government have promised progress for years. Why are they still failing to protect mentally ill people properly? Could the Leader of the House please tell us when she will announce that they will? Could she help the shadow mental health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), to get answers to questions she has put to Ministers about meetings that they have had with mental health trusts where there are reported abuse scandals? She has asked six times. I know the right hon. Lady takes the issue of answers very seriously, but Ministers have failed to give my hon. Friend a decent answer, so could she ask her Health colleagues to respond with an answer that those people who have suffered terrible abuse deserve?

The Government have scrapped their 10-year mental health plan and have talked about a Mental Health Bill that it is nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, waiting lists soar and people’s lives are damaged. Ministerial incompetence on mental health is a symbol of their approach in every Department and on every policy. We have a Prime Minister so out of touch, out of ideas and out of steam that he cannot even fill up a parliamentary day, breaking promises and letting people down. Meanwhile, Labour will work flat out on our plan to improve mental health care and to make the lives of people everywhere better.

Penny Mordaunt: First, on behalf of the House, I congratulate West Ham on their tremendous triumph yesterday. It is great to see so many happy fans.

The hon. Lady focused some of her remarks on mental health. She knows that this Government have vastly improved and raised the profile and status of mental health, and are delivering an extra £2.3 billion to

the annual mental health budget. The Mental Health Bill is not nowhere to be seen; it has had scrutiny in the Joint Committee and that has just completed. She knows that I will announce business in the usual way, but the very serious issues that she raises about the treatment of particular people in inappropriate care settings will be addressed by some of the provisions in the Bill and I hope to update the House about that in the coming weeks.

I take issue with the hon. Lady's assertion that in every Department we are not using our time well and we are not delivering for the public. On legislation, this week we passed the British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Bill, and next week we will be debating the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the Procurement Bill. We have introduced 40 Bills so far, including legislation to tackle illegal migration. We should all thank their cocoa-fuelled lordships for sitting very late last night to get that Bill to make progress.

Outside this Chamber, we are delivering and using our time well. On our mission to stop the boats, we have discovered this week that crossings are down by 20%, some 33,000 crossings have been prevented and Albanian small boat arrivals are down by 90%. We are a whole year ahead of meeting our manifesto commitment to recruit 26,000 more primary care staff, delivering on two of the priorities of the Prime Minister and the people. The hon. Lady mentions education. Statistics out today show that nearly 48,000 full-time equivalent teachers joined English schools in the academic year 2022-23, meaning there are 2,800 more teachers in classrooms now than last year.

Labour Members are billing their party as some kind of dynamo, standing up for hard-working families, but they have consistently demonstrated their lack of support for hard-working families—not so much up the workers, as stuff the workers. There has been no condemnation of hard-left unions co-ordinating strikes that are bringing misery to millions of British citizens, and no condemnation of the extreme protest tactics of Extinction Rebellion or Just Stop Oil, who get in the way of hard-working people trying to get to work, collecting their kids from school or getting their loved ones to hospital. Labour Members have consistently voted to weaken the Public Order Act 2023 and voted against protecting the public. While we have been strengthening police powers to lock people up, Labour has been promoting the merits of people locking-on. Labour has always got in the way of people going about their business, and it has turned the nanny state into an art form.

Today, where Labour is in power, it is getting in the way again. In Wales, rather than helping people to get a GP appointment, the Labour Government are trying to stop people from buying a meal deal. In London, the Labour Mayor is frustrating businesses and hiking household taxes through the ill-thought out, unravelling ultra-low emission zone scheme. Labour is an obstacle and a blocker—a load of old bollards.

If Members of the shadow Cabinet really want to disprove that and, as the hon. Lady suggests, show they are on the side of hard-grafting people and their families, they should do three things: they should stand up and condemn the process of Just Stop Oil, hand back all Labour's associated donations, and make their 34th policy U-turn of the year by reversing Labour's illogical stance on North sea oil and gas that is a barrier to our national

security, growth and investment, increasing household incomes and our ability to cut emissions. As I say Mr Speaker, a load of old bollards.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware that there are more than 16,500 new cases of skin cancer in the UK every year, largely because of unprotected exposure to the sun? Is she further aware that high-factor sun creams are subject to value added tax at the point of sale? Can we have a Government review, followed by a statement, into the desirability of exempting high-protection sun creams from VAT to encourage greater use?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that very good suggestion. One of the advantages of being outside the EU is that we now have complete control of our fiscal policy, and this is a great example of what we could do. I shall certainly ensure that the Secretary of State for Health and the Chancellor have heard his suggestion today, and I encourage him to raise it at the next health questions, which is on 11 July.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It was announced in the Scottish Parliament yesterday that Scotland's deposit return scheme has had to be delayed until October 2025. That is the latest estimate of how long it will take England to finally catch up with the devolved Governments and introduce its own scheme. Some would call this dithering and delaying, and I know that that is what a great many environmental organisations think.

Keep Britain Tidy estimates that every day of delay leaves an extra 140,000 cans and bottles littering Scotland. This delay, forced on Scotland by the UK Government's refusal to grant an exemption under the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, means that tens of millions of those items will be littering Scotland's lands and seas for many months to come. After several years of discussion with Scottish businesses and, indeed, nearly two years of discussion with the UK Government and officials under the common framework set-up, and with no justification offered for the refusal to agree to the exemption, the Secretary of State for Scotland swooped in at the last minute, like some sort of toff Tarzan, to squash the scheme—many examples of which can be seen across the world—and demanded that glass be removed from it, thus forcing Scotland to wait for England's scheme to become operational. Given that no regulations outlining how England's scheme will work have yet been laid, the estimated delivery date of 1 October 2025 in England looks optimistic, to put it kindly.

Once upon a time, we supposedly had the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world. Now we are not permitted to run a packaging recycling scheme. Will the Leader of the House perhaps permit a debate on devolution and its future, given that her Government apparently intend to continue to intervene and claw back to the centre powers that the people of Scotland wanted to be devolved to their Parliament? Can devolution now work only if the devolved and Westminster Governments are in complete agreement? Is that really what the people of Scotland voted for in 1997 in their

[Deidre Brock]

devolution referendum? If the UK Government are prepared to intervene on a packaging recycling scheme, what confidence can we have that any of our Parliament's policies will not be struck down in a similar way?

I have further questions. Why were so many MSPs and MPs in the right hon. Lady's party enthusiastic about including glass in deposit return schemes previously—commitments to that were even included in the manifesto on which she stood—and what exactly has changed their minds? Acting on the advice of which bodies or individuals did the Secretary of State intervene, and with which environmental organisations did he discuss this before he intervened? Why has the inclusion of glass apparently been permitted for the scheme in Wales? I would be very grateful for some answers.

Penny Mordaunt: I shall be brief. The Secretary of State for Scotland is having these discussions with the Scottish Government first because he is standing up for the interests of Scottish business, which the SNP is not, and secondly because the scheme devised in Scotland will actually reduce recycling rates. As the hon. Lady will know, the delay in the scheme has been caused by the Scottish Government's not engaging with the UK-wide scheme that would need to be devised because of the UK internal market. She need only go and listen to businesses in her constituency to understand their concerns about the Scottish scheme, and to hear their calls for compensation from the Scottish Government because this issue has been handled so poorly, and because of the investments they have had to make only to have the rug pulled from under their feet.

I also noted this week that the Auditor General for Scotland has revealed that the auditors are unable to account for billions of pounds' worth of covid-19 business support grants that were handed to the Scottish Government, because of gaps in data. The SNP has made it impossible for the auditors to understand fully how £4.4 billion in grants and business reliefs were distributed between March 2020 and October 2021. I say thank heavens for the Secretary of State for Scotland, because he is standing up for the interests of the businesses and residents of Scotland.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): As this is Child Safety Week, will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the Child Accident Prevention Trust for its outstanding work to protect children, and, in particular, the support it has given the Harper-Lee Foundation, which campaigns for button battery safety, by raising awareness of the danger of swallowing button batteries? Will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging the Government to bring forward the product safety review and the vital legislation that is necessary to ensure greater product safety for all button battery-powered products, and will she make parliamentary time available for a debate on issues of product safety in the context of risk to children?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on this incredibly important issue, and also thank the family of her constituent who was sadly lost because of an accident with button batteries. She will know that the Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business is chairing a cross-discipline working group to bring together

all the players who can raise awareness of the risks. The Office for Product Safety and Standards commissioned a fast-track business standard for button batteries that was published in 2021, but there is more to be done, and I shall certainly ensure that the Minister has heard my hon. Friend's remarks.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and the Backbench business on 15 June. If the Committee is allocated the time, on 22 June we will have debates on the infected blood inquiry and on funding for the prevention of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, or FOP, which is a distressing ailment. On Thursday 29 June, if allocated the time, we will have debates on the UK fishing industry and on artificial intelligence.

The Backbench Business Committee understands that estimates debates are to take place in early July, and the deadline for submitting applications to the Committee will be Monday 19 June. Applications can be submitted online or on old-fashioned paper forms, and staff in the Table Office can provide advice. Applications for estimates debates can be submitted by individual Members, Select Committee Chairs or Select Committee members on topics relating to their Committee.

Through my work on the Education Committee, I have become aware that 92% of the 7,200 or so deaf children under the age of five are not gaining access to auditory verbal therapy, and that the UK has only 27 auditory verbal therapists. Can we have a statement about what the Government intend to do to recruit and train more auditory verbal therapists to rectify this injustice for our young deaf children?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful advert for the forthcoming business, which sounds very good indeed. I am sure many Members will be grateful for the chance to discuss the infected blood inquiry and progress against compensating all those affected and infected.

I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Education has heard his remarks about provision for deaf children. It is a subject close to my heart, and it is incredibly important that we provide opportunities for all sectors to ensure they have appropriately trained people in their workforce.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): On Tuesday, a Dunstable GP practice was telling me about patients who missed hospital appointments because their letters did not arrive, but that situation pales into insignificance compared with what is happening in Leighton Buzzard, where some constituents have not had post for six weeks. Despite the excellent efforts of the postmen and women, with whom I have been out on their delivery rounds, the management of Royal Mail in Leighton Buzzard is failing utterly. What can the Government do to ensure that my constituents have a decent hospital service, can get to their medical appointments on time, receive cheques through the post and get a proper postal service?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about what has been happening in my hon. Friend's constituency. I will ensure that both the relevant Ministers hear his worries

about the poor service they are getting from Royal Mail. Given that situation, it is critical that healthcare is not relying on letters to notify people of appointments. There is of course the NHS app, which is good progress, but many people, particularly older people, will not have a smartphone, so picking up the good old-fashioned telephone is certainly an option they should consider. I shall make sure that both Ministers have heard his concerns.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have a debate about legal aid for visa and asylum applications? I know that other hon. Members are finding it impossible for constituents to get a solicitor to assist them when they are entitled to that support. Perhaps Ministers could then explain how cutting off support and aid for people who need that advice reduces the backlog we are all struggling with, both in the Home Office and in our constituency offices.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a very sensible point, and I would be happy to make sure the Home Secretary has heard his remarks.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): May we have a full debate on the World Health Organisation? There are a number of issues about which many of us are concerned: the potential international treaty, the potential regulations and the discussion about international covid passports. The House ought to have an opportunity to express itself on some of these issues.

Penny Mordaunt: That is an excellent topic for debate. There are many aspects to this, and of course it plays into the Government's programmes on patient records and other things. I will make sure the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard my hon. Friend's suggestion, but he will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way—he has heard a fantastic advert from the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee—and I am sure such a debate would be well attended.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government have excluded NHS contractors from the latest pay award given to NHS workers. NHS contractors in my Bath constituency will miss out on £2,000, on average. Can we have a statement from the relevant Minister on why healthcare contractors have been excluded from the pay uplift?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important point. Given that the next Health and Social Care questions are not until 11 July, I will happily write to the Secretary of State on her behalf.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): New research shows that the UK's birth rate is continuing to fall. At the same time, Fertility Network UK suggests that 3.5 million people are struggling with fertility, which is why I have launched my fertility workplace pledge to encourage employers to have a more progressive policy when it comes to fertility. Will my right hon. Friend consider giving Government time for a debate on fertility issues, particularly as we mark World Infertility Awareness Month this month?

Penny Mordaunt: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for the work she is doing for her constituents and, more widely, to raise awareness of this important matter. She

makes an excellent suggestion for a debate. Of course, it is not just about healthcare; it is also about things like housing policy. One reason why people are delaying having children is because they are trying to get on the property ladder beforehand. I will make sure the relevant Minister has heard her remarks, and I congratulate her on the work she is doing.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Recent figures from the North East Child Poverty Commission show that, over the past nine years, more than 50,000 babies, children and young people have been pulled into poverty by successive Conservative Governments, yet the north-east has fantastic potential. We have great universities, fantastic start-ups, highly productive manufacturing and access to almost unlimited clean energy. Can we have a debate in Government time on an industrial strategy to realise the north-east's economic potential, for the benefit of our young people and working families?

Penny Mordaunt: I will make sure the relevant Minister has heard the hon. Lady's request. If she were to apply for a debate, I am sure it would be well attended. Indeed, I recently spoke from this Dispatch Box about the investment going into that part of the United Kingdom. She will know that we have the £94 billion cost of living package to alleviate the strains that households are under at the moment, but she will also know that, compared with 2010, we have 1 million fewer workless households, which is the best way to lift people out of poverty.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Tomorrow some of us will be celebrating the 40th anniversary of our first election to this place. Will my right hon. Friend give Government time for a debate on the comparison between the quality of public services in 1983 and the quality of public services today, and on the impact on those public services of the more than 20% increase in population since 1983?

Penny Mordaunt: I feel that those in the Press Gallery are now producing statistics for my hon. Friend's 40 years—on the length of time he has spoken in private Members' Bill debates and so forth. On behalf of us all, I say happy 40th anniversary to him for this week, as it is a tremendous landmark to have achieved. He makes an excellent suggestion for a debate. On the state of public services and their ability to cope with the population size, I can tell him that every time Labour has left office it has left the country in a worse state and every time a Conservative Government have left office they have left it in a better state.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Labour-run North Lanarkshire Council is moving early years practitioners down from grade 9 to grade 7. They have been given the option either to take a pay cut of up to 30% or move to another job within the council. Not only will that have a detrimental impact on children and families, but it will push many early years practitioners, who are predominantly women, into financial hardship. I have met constituents who are deeply worried about the future. Given those concerns, will the Leader of the House make Government time for a debate on this alarming situation, which is fire and rehire?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me say two things on this to the hon. Lady. She will know that local government financing and allocations, and the budgets for that, are a matter for the Scottish Government. But where the UK Government can assist is in having been clear that threats of dismissal and re-engagement should not be used as a negotiation tactic. Dismissal and re-engagement should not be considered in that light and the Government have taken action on it. We have published a code of practice, which is currently going through a consultation, and it sets out employers' responsibilities when seeking to change contractual terms and conditions. Once it is in force, an employment tribunal will be able to increase an employee's compensation by up to 25% if the employer has unreasonably failed to comply. Obviously there will be a debate in both Houses of Parliament on that in due course, and I hope she will take part in that. We plan to bring forward a negative statutory instrument to give people confidence that they can stand up to these kinds of tactics.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): When will the Government bring forward the single-issue Bills they have promised to replace the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill with, so that we can see an end to live exports for slaughter and have a crackdown on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend speaks for many Members and many people around the country who care deeply about animal welfare. She will know that we are committed to bringing forward these measures. She knows that I will say that we will announce business in the usual way, but I hope that for some provisions in the Bill, for example those on primates, we will be able to do this more swiftly than would happen through the passage of the Bill.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): This week is Carers Week, when we acknowledge and recognise the tremendous work done by unpaid carers, week in, week out. Unfortunately, I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are now unpaid carers, having previously been paid carers until the vaccine mandate. Given that we now know that the mandated medical treatment does not prevent the transmission or contraction of the virus, may we have an apology and a statement from the Government, not only to my constituents, but to the 40,000 other professional carers who have been forced from their jobs on what is obviously a false premise?

Penny Mordaunt: I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks. The care workforce is under tremendous pressure, with an enormous number of vacancies at the moment. He will know that the Secretary of State is looking not just at what we can do to bolster that workforce, but at the status of that job and the support people have in it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday, no fewer than three 24-inch mains water pipes burst in my constituency, causing extensive flooding, traffic chaos and a widespread lack of clean water across my constituency. The good news is that two have been repaired today, but the third repair is still outstanding. That comes on top of the chaos that has been caused by

Affinity Water replacing the water mains, supposedly as an improvement. So may we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the action being taken across the country to replace outdated water mains, so that the chaos that ensued in my constituency is not spread across the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear about this ongoing issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns about this, as the next departmental questions are not until 6 July. I just wish to put on record my thanks to all those who are working in his constituency to make sure that vulnerable people in particular are looked after at this time.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Can we have a debate, please, about the Crown Estate? It took ownership of a canopy by some shops in Little Sutton in my constituency, although it claims that it does not actually own it, because it does not want to repair it. However, it still owns it in the sense that it would charge the council £5,000 to take over responsibility for it. At the moment, no one is taking responsibility for it, and it is dangerous. We are in this silly legal lacuna where no one seems to want to deal with the problem. Given that the Crown Estate gives hundreds of millions of pounds a year to the Treasury, it seems ridiculous that we are in this state, so I wondered whether we could have a debate on how the Crown Estate actually operates.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We could have a debate about that, but I suggest another course of action, which is that I will write to ask the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to give him some advice on how this situation can be resolved. Whether it is the situation that he describes or dilapidated buildings that cannot be redeveloped or sold by the owner, we have to find ways around these tricky, knotty problems, and I would be happy to try to assist him to do that.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In the weeks since the BBC announced cuts to local radio, there have been many events and questions in this House and elsewhere. Sadly, however, that seems to have had little effect. If we are to retain the BBC as a national broadcaster, perhaps it is opportune now to have a debate about the role and the financing of the BBC. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on that in Government time?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that this is a matter of huge concern to many Members across the House and their constituents. As I have said previously, local radio is not just a lifeline in communities, but fundamental to scrutiny and therefore the functioning of our democracy, which matters to all of us in this place. I suggest that my hon. Friend raises this matter again at the next Culture, Media and Sport questions, which are on 15 June. Certainly, local radio is one thing that people really look to the BBC to provide for our country.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I commend the House of Commons Commission for the thorough consideration that it has given to the topic of risk-based exclusions and the report that it published this week

with recommendations for how we can improve our internal procedures, including better alignment with the criminal process, to ensure that Parliament is a safe working environment, and that safeguarding measures can be put in place around those under investigation while serious allegations are considered. This is not a party political issue but a House issue, so can the Leader of the House explain why Monday's debate will be a general debate on risk-based exclusions and not a motion on the adoption of these recommendations in her name, and can she tell us how much longer we can be expected to wait for long-overdue progress?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right: this is a matter for the House. I thank all members of the Commission and the staff of the House who have worked on the report, which included a consultation with Members, and brought forward these proposals. What is critical is that it is the House that decides. There have been requests, including from three Committees of the House, that we debate these proposals. Certainly, it is the intention of both the Commission and myself to bring forward a motion following that debate. There is time to do that before the summer recess. I am sure that all members of the House want to improve our practices, but it is important that Members of Parliament are allowed a say on that and that we arrive at a scheme that is not just the best it can be, but welcomed by all Members.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): First, may I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for barging in earlier without being aware of who was speaking?

Belper leisure centre in my constituency is under financial pressure, mainly due to increased energy bills. The leisure centre also provides sports facilities and exam spaces for the local school and is a real community hub. May we have a statement about Government support for leisure centres and how the Government are working with local councils and energy companies to keep these crucial community hubs open?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and many activities are supported by buildings such as the one she describes. I would suggest that she raises the matter at the next Energy Security questions on 4 July, but she will know that we are providing the energy bills discount scheme, which provides a baseline discount on energy bills to non-domestic customers, until 31 March next year. We recognise the importance of leisure centres in communities, which is why we have announced more than £60 million of new funding for public pools in England. That will be very welcome to a lot of leisure centres.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): You have been very generous to me this morning, Mr Speaker, and I am very thankful. Does the Leader of the House agree that, with the decline of print newspapers in regions and towns, it is vital that the BBC maintains good coverage of local and regional politics and news? Has she seen what has happened in my region around Leeds, with the decline of and cuts to Radio Leeds and television coverage? May we have an early debate on the importance of regional and local coverage to local communities?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman echoes the concerns raised by many Members of the House about the decisions the BBC is taking. If he applied for a debate, I am sure it would be well attended, but again I shall make sure that the relevant Secretary of State has heard his concerns.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I very much welcome the work the Department for Education has been doing to improve the situation on special educational needs and disability school places. I have heard a good deal from the headteachers of Sunshine House and the Eden Academy in my constituency, and I have heard the same from many other hon. Members: there is an acute short-term problem affecting the availability of special school places. Is it possible to have a statement from the Government so that Ministers can set out the measures being taken to address that short-term pressure and indicate when the measures consulted upon will feed through into a new system to ensure that every child with SEND has the school place they need?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. It is vital that every child is able to reach their full potential and the Government are committed to that. He will know that every local authority in England will see a minimum per-head increase of 9.8% to their total needs allocations for 2023-24 compared with the previous year. We are also investing £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to create new places to improve existing provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities who require alternative provision. It is an incredibly important matter. On the issue of short-term costs, I shall make sure the Secretary of State for Education has heard my hon. Friend's comments today.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Can we have a Government statement on the asylum backlog? My constituent is from a prominent Iranian family; one brother is an international referee and another is a former Iranian politician, and both brothers are in exile. My constituent had to flee for her life, literally with the clothes on her back. Her children are still in Iran. There has been no movement on her case and she is in the backlog of asylum seekers, but we urgently need a decision. Will Leader of the House raise the matter with her colleagues in the Home Office, and can we have a statement from Government on the matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about this case. Following business questions, I will certainly ensure that the Home Secretary is aware of such cases. If the hon. Lady passes me more details and reference numbers, I shall include those in the letter. I remind her and all Members of the House that the Home Office is running bespoke surgeries for such cases. If she has any difficulty in accessing them, please let me know and I will address that. I announced in the business a debate on 15 June in which she might also raise her issue.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I had the pleasure of attending a surprise party for Special Constable Brian Hewlett at the Sub Rooms last week. Brian has undertaken 50 years of public service as a special constable in Stroud—50 years of volunteering alongside his work

[*Siobhan Baillie*]

and family commitments—and thankfully, he will continue. All six Gloucestershire MPs, the police and crime commissioner Chris Nelson, and Chief Constable Rod Hansen are huge champions for special constables. We know what they do locally and around the country. Will my right hon. Friend consider whether Parliament can hold an event or debate to show support for that vital part of our police force?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that I speak for all Members of this House when I say thank you, Brian, for a lifetime of service to your community. What an achievement; what a service. It is an incredibly important role, not just for the knowledge that those individuals build up in their communities, but for the trust and rapport that they build. I think that that would be an excellent subject for a debate. I hope that Brian and all his colleagues will be having a good old knees-up this week.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): On the last day before recess, the House was due to debate the important topic of tackling Islamophobia, which we have not had the chance to do in the Chamber since 2019. Unfortunately, following a raft of ministerial statements, including some that did not tell us anything new, the debate had to be cancelled owing to the lack of time. Will the Leader of the House urge her Government to demonstrate their commitment to tackling that insidious form of hate by bringing forward a debate in Government time on tackling Islamophobia?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall certainly ensure that the Home Secretary hears the hon. Gentleman's remarks. We are committed to tackling that scourge. He will know the other options that he has to apply for a debate, including the advert from the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, and I encourage him to do so.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): I have received a joint letter from the rail users associations of Merseyside, Cheshire, Shropshire, Wrexham and Flintshire confirming what my constituents and I already knew: Transport for Wales, which is owned by the Welsh Labour Government, operates a north-east cross-rail service that is “overcrowded, using dirty old rolling stock, and fraught with severe delays, cancellations and poor passenger communication”. The associations conclude that Transport for Wales has failed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people of Wrexham deserve better than cattle class?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about this ongoing issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. Her constituents deserve better. She will know that since 2010, we have spent on average over 25% more in real terms every year on support for the railways than the Labour Government did. I am very sorry to hear that the Labour Administration in Wales are letting people down, but I know that the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), is planning to have a meeting with the Welsh Deputy Minister for Climate Change, under whose remit this comes, to see what can be done to improve the services. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) for her work to try to rectify this sorry situation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Might we have a debate in Government time, to be answered by a Treasury Minister, on the budget available for future farming support payments? The current settlement runs only until 2024. The Leader of the House will know that agriculture, of all industries, needs long-term certainty, especially as we redesign the systems for delivering that mechanism. The Government talk a very good game about the importance of farmers and crofters in our food security, but we need to hear from the Treasury whether they will put their money where their mouth is.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. He will have heard the announcement that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made this week with regard to all aspects of rural life. Clearly, in arriving at that plan, she has been speaking frequently with the Treasury. I shall make sure that both she and the Treasury have heard the right hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In the light of the Prime Minister's stated ambition that all pupils should study some form of mathematics until the age of 18, can a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to explain the progress on that? May I suggest that the Department for Education looks at working with external providers such as the UK Mathematics Trust and the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, which have demonstrable success in promoting mathematics to those at all levels?

Penny Mordaunt: This is very important and is clearly a priority for both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education. My hon. Friend will know that they have convened an expert advisory group, and I think that the examples he gave would be of great interest to them. I shall make sure that the Secretary of State has heard of his particular interest, and I encourage him to raise the matter with her on 12 June.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): First, let me join the Leader of the House in congratulating my many friends and relations who are supporters of West Ham United, which I note is another successful team with a Scottish manager.

What happened on Tuesday was obscene. The House rose less than three hours after proceedings commenced because the Government could not table enough legislation, yet there are dozens of private Members' Bills scheduled for debate on 24 November—to name two, the Food Poverty Strategy Bill and the Workers (Rights and Definition) Bill. Will the Leader of the House take it into consideration that if the Government do not have enough legislation to put to the House, there is enough legislation proposed by Members to be debated and discussed in this Chamber?

Penny Mordaunt: With regard to West Ham, there are many successful Scottish managers, but, alas, not in the Scottish Government. There are also many good private Members' Bills and topics for them, and I know that people are looking at the fourth Session as well. As I said in my opening remarks, we have introduced 40 Bills in this Session, and we continue to make progress.

As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we have also made time for private Members' Bills, and we have supported and backed many of them passing through this House.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I recently attended an event to celebrate the 80th anniversary of St John Ambulance in Halesowen, where I met young volunteer first aiders, as well as speaking to Judith Morris, who has been an inspiring and long-standing advocate for St John Ambulance in Halesowen. May we have a debate about the important role that St John Ambulance plays in many of our communities across the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for making that incredibly important point. I am sure that all of us across the House value the work that St John Ambulance does for the NHS and elsewhere in our communities. We should not forget its assistance during the vaccine roll-out and in placing volunteers in NHS hospitals to undertake a range of clinical and administrative tasks. It is an incredible organisation and one of the things we think about when we think of the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom. I thank my hon. Friend for enabling us all to say congratulations and thank you to St John Ambulance. I hope that the unit in his constituency will be having an appropriate celebration for its 80th year.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Crown post office branches provide a range of vital services to local communities, but sadly many are at risk of closure, with the House of Commons Library suggesting that nine branches were closed between 2020 and 2022 alone. Thankfully, in Stockport our Crown post office was saved from closure, but elsewhere, closing flagship branches, getting rid of experienced staff and putting counters in the back of other shops is not the plan for growth or innovation that the post office network so desperately needs. The Communication Workers Union's "Save our Post Office" campaign has rightly called for a halt to the closures and a new strategy for the post office network as a matter of urgency. As such, will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the future of Crown post office branches and the impact that they have on high streets such as mine in Stockport?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important matter: this is a critical service for many communities. He will know that the Government have brought forward both funding and support to enable local communities to retain such facilities that are not viable on their own. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise this matter with the Secretary of State, but I will also make sure that they have heard his remarks today, to see whether there is any further advice that they can give him in retaining that important facility for his constituents.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Parents in Erewash tell me that while they fully respect the rights of trade unions to campaign on behalf of their members, they want classrooms to remain politically impartial. Can we have a debate in Government time so that we can discuss the increasing politicisation of our children by the NASUWT and other teaching unions through sham campaigns, such as the one I recently received on schools-based counselling?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes: those episodes are thankfully rare, but they are very disturbing when they do happen. My hon. Friend will know that we have published clear and comprehensive guidance that should help those working with, and in, schools to better understand their legal obligations. It is not helpful to children's education if they are distracted from curriculum activities by such forms of protest and indoctrination. I think it is an excellent topic for a debate, but I also encourage my hon. Friend to raise the issue at the next Education Question Time on 12 June.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Tomorrow is 9 June, and that means the Blaydon race. Thousands of runners will be gannin' along the Scotswood Road, along the route set out in the famous Geordie Ridley song, "The Blaydon Races". I wish all the runners the best of luck, and thank the race organisers, the Blaydon Harrier and Athletics Club, for making sure that this great tradition continues. It is important that we keep our local cultural and sporting traditions, so can we have a debate in Government time on how best to do that?

Penny Mordaunt: I speak on behalf of everyone in this place in sending our thanks to the organisers and giving our best wishes for a successful race, which is not only a fantastic sporting and fitness event but a tremendous cultural and heritage one in the hon. Lady's constituency. If she were to apply for an Adjournment debate on the topic, I think that it would be well attended.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My constituent Teagan Appleby is one of nearly 50 children who are reliant on medical cannabis to manage their severe epilepsy, although only three children have had access to medication on the NHS since it was allowed, due to a logjam between the Department of Health and Social Care and local and national NHS services. Time is running out for Teagan, whose private doctor is retiring and consequently she will no longer be able to get that medication through private prescription. May I ask my right hon. Friend for a Government statement setting out what steps will be taken to urgently address this issue, which is of great concern across the House for those who have young constituents like Teagan who rely on access to medical cannabis for severe epilepsy?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about this case. My hon. Friend will know how to apply for a debate, which I am sure that many Members would want to attend, but she is right to say that this is a time-sensitive matter for her constituent. I know that the Department of Health and the Care Quality Commission have been working with private providers to ensure continuity of care for patients affected by the retirement of their current prescriber, so I will write today to the Department and ask that officials immediately contact my hon. Friend's office to see whether the work they have been doing can assist her constituent, who should have access to the medical care they need.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): New figures published this morning show that almost a third of teachers quit within five years of qualifying. The Government miss their own teacher training targets so often that they are not worth the paper they are written on. Our children are being let down as a result, and

[Munira Wilson]

millions are being taught by teachers who are not qualified in their subjects, particularly in maths and physics. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, so that every child has the opportunity to learn from a great teacher? It is the very least our children deserve.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right that every child should have the benefit of excellent teaching, and part of that is ensuring that we have the right number of teachers and in particular that they are teaching their specialist subjects. She will know that teacher numbers are up 2,800 on last year, and the figures out today show a positive trend. It is not just about those numbers but retaining teachers longer, for the wealth of experience they bring to the classroom. Teacher numbers are being increased not just through our moves to address workforce issues but through the reforms that we have brought into schools.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): In Blackpool, Windmill House retirement complex residents have seen their weekly service charge rise from £17 to £51—an increase of 200% for the elderly residents, most of whom are on a fixed income. That has caused significant hardship and has left some relying on charity to get by. The Government have promised further reform in this area, but can the Leader of the House indicate when such legislation is likely to come forward? Can she speak to her Cabinet colleagues about the need to incorporate controls on communal service charges as part of any changes?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that I will announce further business for this House in the usual way, but he raises an incredibly important point. He may well be aware—perhaps it would be worth his talking to his local authority about discretionary housing payments—that these matters are being looked at by the Secretary of State to see what further protections we can give to such tenants. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks today. He will know that the next departmental questions will be on 10 July.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Despite strong opposition in South Shields to 5G masts, which are deeply unpopular, local views are being completely ignored due to Government-led permitted development rights. Can we please have a statement from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities explaining why the Government always favour private developers over the voice of local communities?

Penny Mordaunt: I do not have the details of the case that the hon. Lady refers to, but I will contact the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to see whether its officials can provide any guidance or advice on what she can do to ensure that she represents her constituents. Far from what she claims, this Government have done a tremendous amount—enabling neighbourhood planning forums to be established and giving them legal weight is just one example—to ensure people can not only have their say on particular developments but get involved in the design and planning of major developments from the off.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know of the importance of good broadband connectivity for our constituents and the businesses within our constituencies. The new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has announced a rural connectivity champion. This House has not been given any updates since the Prime Minister announced the new Department of what the champion will do, or indeed what the Department plans to do with its budget to improve connectivity. My deindustrialised Ogmore constituency is full of valleys and rolling hills and also has poor broadband connectivity. Can the Leader of the House find time for the Secretary of State of the new Department or a Minister to come to the House to set out what they will do to tackle the ongoing problems of poor broadband connectivity?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that broadband has been a huge focus, particularly in rural areas and areas that have not historically been well served. It has been very much part of the work that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has done and announced in her plans to support such communities. The next questions to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology are on 14 June, and I encourage him to raise the matter there. He will know that it is a priority for the Government, and we are investing billions in ensuring that everyone in the UK can access high-speed broadband.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In her last statement, the Leader of the House announced that there would be 10 sitting days in September between the summer and conference recesses. Has she given any consideration to doing something innovative with that time—for example, virtual or hybrid settings, or perhaps meeting outside London—because that would allow restoration and renewal to proceed a little bit more smoothly and it would allow us to pilot some more 21st-century ways of conducting our business?

Penny Mordaunt: For this year, we are not able to do that. In future years, we may have an R and R programme that might enable us to remain in this place, which I know is a concern to many people. Because of the new technology, we have many other options at our disposal—for example, if we wanted to extend the time people could work on this Chamber, which is an option that I know all those involved in R and R are considering. This year, there is not the need to do that or the forewarning to be able to do it, but I know the hon. Gentleman will continue to press to ensure that we do R and R in the most sensible and practical way possible.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): During my recent visit to West Middlesex University Hospital, I met an amazing group of women working there who between them have experienced the many and varied symptoms of the menopause. They told me that, because of the excellent workplace-based support they get, they no longer feel they have to leave their jobs or go part-time, or in other ways flatline their careers and thus their contribution to the NHS. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on the menopause and the impact it has on women in work, and therefore the impact it has on the economy and our public services?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate all those whom the hon. Lady describes on their work to support women in the workplace and to enable them to thrive while continuing to work. She will know that the Government have appointed a menopause champion, and a large part of their role is looking at precisely the interventions that employers can make to support women in work. It is about time that we shone a spotlight on the good work that is going on to encourage other employers to follow suit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The kidnapping, murder and abuse of Yazidi women and girls carried out by ISIS or Daesh was a genocide. It was brutal, violent and horrible, and some of the stories, photographs and videos are the stuff of nightmares. That was really bad, but I want to share a good story, if I may, because just this week six Yazidi women were rescued from Islamic State captivity in Syria and reunited with their families. That was on 3 June—this Saturday past—in Erbil. Despite this piece of good news, there are still some 2,700 missing Yazidi women and children, who were abducted by Islamic State in 2014. That was nine years ago and they are still missing, so questions must be asked. I genuinely appreciate the efforts of the Leader of the House and others in the House who do things to help. Will she facilitate a meeting with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to discuss recent efforts in finding those 2,700 women and girls and uniting them all with their families once again?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for raising an incredibly important point. We know, from those who have been rescued, the appalling fate that awaits people who have been kidnapped and held as sex slaves by ISIS, and many have attempted suicide rather than face the ordeal that lay ahead. What the hon. Gentleman has done today—as well as asking me to facilitate that meeting, which I shall undertake to do—is to remind all people that we will never take our eyes off these women until we have managed to get all of them back home. It was also very good of him to share with us that good news, which I also saw this week, of the group of individuals who were rescued and are now back with their families. That is what we want for all of them, and we in this place will not take our eyes off them until that is the case.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I and my office have been supporting the family of my constituent Gary Watson Shearer, who went missing while on holiday in Lanzarote in March. They are at their wits end. Although there has been engagement with the British consulate, the last update was in April

and there does not seem to be much in the way of progress at present that Gary's family have been made aware of. Will the right hon. Lady give her colleagues in the FCDO a nudge on Gary's case and also make time for a debate in this place on the consular support available to our constituents?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that the hon. Gentleman has used the consular services, as have many other Members, and they do an excellent job, as I know from my experience of working with them. They are obviously there in the immediate aftermath of a particular incident, and it is very much down to our staff in-country to ensure that he and others are being updated on such cases. I will make sure that the FCDO has heard his concerns today and hope he will get an update, and we all pray for the family that it is a good update soon.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In 2017 the National Library of Medicine published a paper considering the challenges for radiology in the UK post Brexit, which stated that

“the uncertainty and speculation surrounding Brexit is unlikely to be beneficial to the recruitment and retention of EU doctors, including radiologists and potential radiologists.”

Today, as the Tories and Labour cling to Brexit, we see huge shortages of radiologists, which is severely impeding cancer treatment across the UK and costing lives. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out any concerns she may have about the impact of Brexit on our NHS services across the UK, which is actively preventing us from saving the lives of cancer patients?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this topical matter, because there are some figures and a report out today specifically looking at radiology. She will know that we are increasing the size of the workforce. It is one of our priorities and a manifesto commitment. As I said in my opening remarks, in primary care we have already hit our manifesto commitment of recruiting an additional 26,000 people into the workforce; indeed, we have exceeded it—it is close to 30,000 as of today.

Specifically on radiology, this has long been an ongoing issue and it predates Brexit. It is about people with particular individual qualifications. We can take the workforce from other nations, as the hon. Lady knows. I do not think her linking this specifically to our leaving the trading bloc of the EU is correct, but I know the Secretary of State is very focused on the issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Leader of the House for responding to business questions for an hour and 10 minutes.

Points of Order

11.47 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is about communication today between the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and the Home Secretary. To give a quick recap, on Monday the Home Secretary gave what I understand to be inaccurate information to Parliament when she claimed that the asylum decision backlog is down by 17,000 since the Prime Minister's statement. That contradicts what the Home Office's published statistics say; they seem to make it very clear that the "asylum initial decision backlog"—it uses those precise words—has increased from 131,292 to 137,583 for the main applicants since the end of November and from 160,919 to 172,758 for total applications in the first quarter, which is clearly an increase. The shadow Home Secretary raised this with the Home Secretary first in the House on Monday, and the record was not corrected by the Home Secretary then or since, to my understanding. My right hon. Friend then wrote to the Home Secretary this morning.

Mr Deputy Speaker, have you received any notification from the Home Secretary of her intention to correct the record since Monday's statement, and can you confirm that the ministerial code requires that

"Ministers should give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity"?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for forward notice of her point of order. In response to question No. 1, no; and to question No. 2, yes. However, as she knows—this has been noted before—Ministers are responsible for the content of their answers, and it is therefore not a matter for the Chair. Those on

the Government Front Bench will have heard her concerns and the Table Office can advise further on how she and other Members may pursue the matter.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 16 October 2019, the Government published their annual update to the rail network enhancement pipeline. Regular RNEP updates are crucial for certainty for the rail industry and for our communities, who are desperate to see improvements in their local rail infrastructure. In September 2020, the then rail Minister confirmed that the RNEP would be updated "on an annual basis" and that

"An update of this will be published following the Spending Review."

That was the November 2020 spending review.

In fact, through research by Ross McLaren and Holly Gosling in my office, we have discovered more than 40 subsequent occasions where Ministers have stated in Parliament that the RNEP will be published "very shortly", "as soon as possible", "in the near future", "in the coming months", after spending reviews or financial statements that have long come and gone, or similar. It is coming up to four years since the last annual update, and the House is still being informed—including this morning—"shortly" by Ministers. Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek your advice on what more I and other Members can do to ensure that Ministers stick to what they have committed to in their answers in this hallowed House and finally publish the annual RNEP.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for forward notice of his point of order. It certainly gives a new interpretation to the word "shortly." However, I am afraid that I will have to give him a similar response to that I gave to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire): those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he has said and I hope that they will bring it to the attention of the relevant Ministers. The Table Office will help him to pursue the matter in other ways, should he not be satisfied.

Backbench Business

National Carers Week

11.52 am

Dame Caroline Dinéage (Gosport) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered National Carers Week and respite for carers.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us time to debate in the House today the important issue of unpaid carers. I thank, in particular, those Members who supported my application for the debate, including the right hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for St Albans (Daisy Cooper).

As all hon. Members and those watching the debate will know, it is taking place during Carers Week, which is held each year to raise awareness of those caring unpaid for family and friends who are living with a disability or who are frail or unwell. It is led by Carers UK but supported by Age UK, Carers Trust, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Oxfam GB, Rethink Mental Illness and the Lewy Body Society. I encourage everyone who does not already know to go and find out more about the brilliant work of all those organisations.

The latest census data from 2021 shows that millions of people—in fact, 5.7 million people across the UK—are currently providing some form of unpaid care for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, mental health or an addiction, cannot cope without their support. The majority of people providing that care are women. Indeed, many of us may be personally caring for someone, or will have someone in their family, or will know of friends or neighbours, who go to great lengths to support people they love. There are virtually no families untouched by this responsibility across the country.

I speak today as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers. I am a former Minister for care and had responsibility for unpaid carers when in Government. However, my first experience of this came when my mum was a carer for my grandmother, who was living with dementia. At the same time, I had just had my first baby—he is now 20. My mum was attempting to support me in bringing up a small baby and my grandmother who was living with dementia. She was part of the generation of sandwich carers we see across the UK, who are sacrificing their own health and wellbeing, their own relationships and their own profession to show such love and dedication for someone else.

We know that caring can be an incredibly profound experience. For many carers it is a very positive experience that enables them to build a very special bond with those they care for. In the vast majority of cases, it is driven simply by love. But we also know that it can take its toll on their own health and wellbeing. Caring can take such a different variety of forms. It can be anything from really intimate personal care to quite complex healthcare, right the way through to the emotional support of being a stable companion and providing

encouragement to the person they care for. The care can be utterly lifechanging for those who receive it. One person said to me:

“The difference she makes to my life is unbelievable. She has given me back the freedom to actually go out and enjoy my life.”

However, we also know that caring can be extremely complex, and there is no denying that it can be exceptionally challenging as well. Indeed, too often the efforts that carers go to, to keep those they love safe and well, leaves people exhausted, burnt out and struggling to live a life beyond their caring responsibilities. As a result, many carers are extremely concerned and worried about the future. Beverly told me about her caring responsibilities and the impact they have on her life. She said:

“I am a full-time carer to my son who has Down’s syndrome and my husband who has Parkinson’s. By full time, I mean every hour of every day, day and night. I do it because I love them and I want them to have as good a life as possible. It is a never-ending round of jobs like cutting meals, making sure meds are taken, washing, appointments, making sure they are appropriately washed and dressed—and that is without having elderly parents to support. The sad thing is that you also forget to look after yourself.”

That is one of the biggest messages I want to get across today. Many carers like Beverly find that their relationships are impacted by their caring responsibilities because of a lack of support and recognition. That can lead to social isolation and mean that carers who are struggling to balance paid work and unpaid care have to leave the labour market or reduce their hours of work.

There are also significant financial costs associated with caring. Carers often use their own incomes and savings to pay for support services and care equipment for the people they care for. We also know that carers can face poorer health outcomes than non-carers, with a high proportion struggling with their own physical and mental health problems, and experiencing very low levels of wellbeing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She is right that there are so many unpaid carers across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. My brother was involved in a motorbike accident some 19 years ago, and my mother, my wife and my son all look after him. Conservative estimates say that £162 billion per year is saved through unpaid care. That is just one example of the vital nature of carers. The hon. Lady refers to the impact on those who care: the pressures psychologically, financially, emotionally and physically. Does she agree that some consideration must be given by Government for respite care? I know how important that is to some of my constituents. I suspect she will confirm that when she replies to me, but I think something needs to be done there.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Respite care comes up time and again as one of the big asks for unpaid carers. They want to carry on doing the role they are doing. They deeply love the people they are caring for. They take a huge amount of personal responsibility and pride with the care they are giving, but they need that little bit of support. Around the time of covid, in particular, we saw many, many unpaid carers going on for months, years even, without the ability for any kind of respite. The figure he quotes is crucial: £162 billion a year is the value that unpaid carers are saving our health and care system. That is an incredible amount of money. It is like a whole

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

separate, second NHS, saving that amount of money. The huge pressures placed on the other NHS we have result in delays for unpaid carers in obtaining the primary and secondary healthcare appointments that they need. The record demand for our social care services means that carers are not getting the support that they need.

I want to spend a little time exploring some of those challenges in more detail. Other Members across the House will add their own voices. As I noted earlier, many carers are struggling with poor mental and physical health. According to Carers UK research, one in five carers says that their physical health is bad or very bad, 30% suffer from poor mental health and over a quarter say that they often or always feel lonely. Carers provide many hours of support for the people they care for, but very few are able to take a break from their caring. That results in tiredness and, in some cases, exhaustion and burnout. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, worryingly, 41% of carers have not taken a break from their caring role in the last year. A carer called Anton told me about the strain that caring is placing on him:

“It is hard, often draining and mentally and emotionally painful work, bordering on damaging. Due to my responsibilities and the amount I am depended on, I am often anxious, feel hopeless and depressed.”

Carers are not getting the support that they need from our health and social care systems, as both systems are under intense and increasing pressure. Many carers have experienced delays in accessing healthcare appointments and services. One fifth of carers who request a GP appointment have to wait more than a month to see a doctor, and over a third have had to wait more than a year for specialist treatments or assessment. That causes additional stress and anxiety, and results in many feeling isolated or forgotten about.

This year, only a quarter of carers said that they had undertaken a carer’s assessment in England—a statutory right under the Care Act 2014. Of those who received an assessment, many were concerned that it did not lead to any improvements in the support provided to them. Could the Minister outline what she is doing to ensure that those carer assessments are not only conducted but conducted properly and that the outcomes are delivered? In fact, 39% of carers said that they did not even know what a care assessment was—that is the severity of the problem. A carer called Trevor told me:

“I get no support whatsoever. It has taken nearly 4 years to get a carer’s assessment from the Local Authorities which is now imminent. I have no expectations whatsoever.”

What is the Minister doing to communicate with local authorities to make sure that those important carer’s assessments take place? Debbie contacted me to tell me:

“I’ve had no support whatsoever. Support seems to consist of ticking a box to say I’m a carer but nothing more.”

It is just not good enough.

I want briefly to touch on the financial impact that caring can have. The cost of living means that carers currently face unprecedented demands on their finances. Concerningly, more than half of carers say that they are extremely worried about managing their monthly costs. A quarter told Carers UK that they are cutting back on essentials such as food or heating, and over three quarters said that the rising cost of living is the main challenge that they will face in the coming year. Many have been

desperately trying to find ways of saving money, but that can be difficult because, quite often, the people they are caring for need life-saving care equipment that requires energy, or they need to ensure that the person they are caring for is kept warm. David told me about the financial impact that caring was having on him:

“I have been a full-time carer for my wife for over 10 years, and I’ve found that the money I get doesn’t even cover energy bills. It’s a constant struggle: all unpaid carers want is enough money to pay our bills and still have something left over to buy things when we need to. We are saving the country a lot of money by doing what we do and some recognition would be appreciated.”

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this crucial debate. The other day, I had the pleasure of visiting Tŷ Hafan, the children’s hospice of Wales, in my constituency. I heard many similar stories to those she is reporting, about how people are struggling with the cost of living, particularly if they are having to run expensive medical equipment, given the associated energy bills. It is brilliant that Tŷ Hafan provides not only crucial respite for families and those they support directly, but support and advice on the cost of living.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: That is absolutely right. The Government have spoken about a social tariff for energy, but identifying who the carers are and how they can access that support is vital.

Gary told me about the financial struggles he has because of caring:

“After giving up a reasonable salaried job to care for my wife, we fell into severe financial hardship and were resorting to food banks. When the cost of living crisis happened, it was so bad I had to take up part-time taxi driving, which takes me away from my care role, in order to survive, but I can only earn so much due to the limits imposed or lose the carer’s allowance.”

That is adding additional stress and complexity to his life.

Supporting carers to stay in or return to paid work is essential. We want to ensure that carers can live a life free from poverty in older age, but 75% of carers who are working alongside their caring responsibilities are worried about juggling work and care. Increasing numbers of employers are recognising the importance of supporting carers in the workplace, and it is vital that they maintain flexibility so that people can continue to do their incredible juggling acts.

Nicola told me that she had to give up her career as an embryologist to care for her daughter, who has Angelman syndrome. She said:

“We have no family support, no help from the council and my daughter is awake for hours in the middle of the night, which means that we are unable to sleep and are completely exhausted. The only income I now receive is carer’s allowance. We solely rely on my partner’s income, which covers our bills. We have already moved to a cheaper house, but it is still extortionate as we live in Surrey and my partner has to commute into London daily.”

Lucy, who cares for her disabled son, who has cerebral palsy, told me:

“I have had to give up my job as a company director as his needs and required medical operations means I cannot keep a job any longer. I have gone from having a £40k+ job and am now claiming carer’s allowance.”

Finally, more needs to be done to support and help carers to recognise themselves as carers. Many are not doing so, which means they are missing out on the

support they need. Research that the charities involved with Carers Week released on Monday found that 73% of people in the UK who are providing or have provided unpaid care in their lifetime—roughly 19 million people—have not identified themselves as carers. Research also shows that half of all carers take over a year to recognise that they are in a caring role, with over a third taking over three years to recognise themselves as carers.

That is particularly pertinent to young carers, who may not know that they are carers. In many cases, their situation can be misinterpreted. Schools can perceive young carers to be bad students because they are not paying attention, when in many cases they are just extremely tired and stressed by their caring responsibilities. Schools need to go much further to identify young carers in their midst and to support them.

In cases where a young person is supporting a parent with mental ill health, there is a stigma attached and they do not want to tell their friends. I remember meeting one young gentleman at a carers' festival that is run every year, which is a wonderful way of supporting young carers to live life like normal young people and enjoy themselves. He told me that his mother had made many attempts to take her own life and that, as a very young child, he had to get used to phoning 999 for the ambulance to take his mum away and save her. He never told his school about this because of the stigma attached to it; he felt deeply isolated and ashamed. We need to double down on our efforts to ensure we identify young carers in schools.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is very generous. Figures mentioned in the press last week indicated that some 25% of those who care have mental stress, depression and concerns themselves. She has outlined that from a young person's point of view—what she says clearly illustrates the need for Government to grasp the role of carers and the impact that role has on them.

Dame Caroline Dinenege: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the mental pressure put on carers because of the responsibilities they take on, but also because of the perceived lack of support or respite. It is important that we recognise that that can mount up and overwhelm people, and that they can experience burn-out and ill health.

I want to recognise the work of Governments across the UK and the range of actions they have taken to provide carers with more help and support. In England, the Government aim to support carers primarily through adult social care reform, but also provide support through the Better Care Fund. In the context of reform, I was pleased to note that there is a specific chapter on support for unpaid carers in the White Paper "People at the Heart of Care", which states that the Government will

"build on the foundations of the carers action plan"—which I published when I was Minister for Care—"to set out a new strategic approach".

I look forward to hearing more about that. Perhaps the Minister will give us further details about the timescales. I should also like to hear more about the £25 million investment that the Department of Health and Social Care has pledged to make in support of unpaid carers. I understand that the details will be announced shortly,

but given that it is Carers Week, I should be grateful if the Minister could indulge us and give us a sneak preview of what might be coming up.

I should like now to think back, briefly, to the support that the Government provided to help carers through the pandemic. A number of measures were introduced, including a highly effective identification programme. The Government worked with local authorities, GPs and local carers' organisations to identify new carers and ask them to come forward for the covid vaccine, for which they were prioritised thanks to fantastic lobbying work by Carers UK and the Minister—who was also the Minister at that time, although there have been a few bumps in the road since then. It is great to see her back in her place. The programme demonstrated an ability to identify carers that does not seem to be moving on into everyday life, and I should like to see that continue. The Government also relaxed some of the rules applying to claims for carer's allowance, and I should like to see that continue as well.

Further significant steps have been taken in the last year. The Carer's Leave Act 2023, which gained Royal Assent only last month, will provide dedicated employment rights for carers for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), my hon. Friend, on her work in securing the passage of her private Member's Bill, because the Act is a game-changer.

Despite those successes, however, I believe that much more needs to be done. Carers have contacted me to let me know about key areas in which they wanted more support. If the House will indulge me for a little longer, I will run through some quotations. Bryony told me that she wanted carers to be given more financial support:

"Carer's Allowance should be higher to reflect the impact and reasons it is claimed. I didn't choose not to work; I didn't choose to lose a well-paid career. I will always choose my son, but the financial burden is destroying families."

Tracy talked about the need to be able to take a break from caring:

"Respite is essential. If carers reach burnout, the person they care for could end up in care sooner. If you support the carer and they feel valued without having to worry about finances, they would be less stressed and able to cope day to day."

Rebecca called for greater recognition for carers:

"I feel we are overlooked by all the groups in society. It makes you feel bottom of the pile in everyone's priorities."

Sarah said that she needed better signposting to the support available to help carers with their responsibilities:

"It would be fantastic if there was a directory of support and benefits that are appropriate as soon as a diagnosis is recognised. For years we didn't claim Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance for our daughter because we didn't know about it. For over ten years I didn't know I was entitled to Carer's Allowance. I also didn't know for the last three years my daughter was entitled to elements of Universal Credit. This would have helped us as a family and taken the stress and pressure off for myself to be able to 'fight' in other areas of my daughter's life."

The testimonies that I have shared are my reason for being here today, and the reason I support the call from the charities that are backing Carers Week for the Government to establish a cross-departmental ministerial group to focus on the help that carers need. I was delighted to learn earlier this week of the Minister's commitment to establishing just such a group. Carers' issues do not fall solely within the remit of the Department of Health and Social Care; they are everywhere, involving

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

everything from energy prices to the circumstances of the young carers we have spoken about, carers in employment and carers' benefits. The establishment of the ministerial group will ensure that carers' needs are understood and responded to at the highest level of Government, and will improve ministerial oversight of policies and measures that support unpaid carers.

It is my hope, and that of the all-party parliamentary group on carers, that this work will lead to the development of a full and financially supported national carers strategy. Such a strategy would help to ensure that we went further in respect of a range of measures to help unpaid carers, including improved data sharing to ensure that carers are identified and support and entitlements are not missed; better support for and identification of carers at key transition points—for example, when people move from children's to adult's services; more funding for social care to ensure that unpaid carers are given the support that they need once they have been identified; and a review of carers' financial support and benefits, including carer's allowance, to ensure that they are fit for purpose and prevent financial hardship.

I want to encourage all those in the House today, and those watching the debate, to involve themselves in the activities taking place during Carers Week, and to reach out to the thousands of people in each of our communities who do so much to support the people whom they love. I also want to encourage all Members who have not already done so to join the all-party parliamentary group—I hope you do not mind the quick advertisement, Madam Deputy Speaker—which I co-chair with Baroness Pitkeathley. We have some exciting plans for the coming year.

Let me end by saying what I say every year. While Carers Week is an important opportunity to recognise, for one week in the year, the extraordinary lengths to which carers go, we must also recognise that they go to those lengths every single day. Every week should be Carers Week. Day in day out, year in year out, carers work to ensure that their loved ones are cared for, are safe, and lead the best lives that they can. That is something that happens 52 weeks of the year.

12.15 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is good that the hon. Member for Gosport (*Dame Caroline Dinenage*) has secured this important debate, because opportunities for the House to debate the difficulties faced by unpaid carers and to recognise their contribution are always valuable. However, this cannot be a recognition exercise alone. For too long carers have struggled to get by with little support from the Government, while at the same time providing many hours of highly skilled work. They have been worked to the brink for too long, and many now say that they are fed up with warm words. One unpaid carer, Rachel Adam-Smith, said:

"I cannot believe I am 19 years into my caring role and nothing has changed—other than the fact that I look more exhausted and feel more defeated.

We are given no time to rest, to look after our own health, to take a holiday or even to have a bath. We are all human, none of us are superhuman but unpaid carers are treated as though we are. We aren't."

Rachel asks:

"Will it ever change?"

Carers are right to feel disappointed and angry with the Government. As we heard earlier, research by Carers UK shows that a quarter of unpaid carers are cutting back on essentials such as food, and more than three quarters of carers said that the rising cost of living was one of the main challenges they would face in 2023. Gaddum, a charity in Salford, delivers the carers service contract for Salford City Council, which covers my constituency, and it shared with me some insights from a survey of the carers using its services, carried out in February this year. The survey found that 42% of carers' finances had been negatively affected by their caring commitment, and 84% of carers' emotional health had been negatively affected. One unpaid carer told Carers UK:

"To date I have sold both of our pensions, shares and insurances to maintain our living standards. They have all gone now so I had to start claiming Universal Credit last year. I have nothing left to sell and I am anxious that we are going to live in poverty for the rest of our lives."

It is clear that the system of support for carers is not currently working. The financial situation is desperate for too many carers, and the direction of travel for Government policy is deeply concerning. Instead of helping unpaid carers with their unprecedented financial pressures last winter, the Government changed the arrangements for the warm home discount so that nearly 300,000 people with disabilities and their carers were no longer able to claim it. This spring they announced that they would reduce the already pitiful pot of money assigned to social care reform by at least £500 million. Support from the Government is falling away just as more and more carers fear having to cut back on essentials such as food and electricity.

The financial pressures resulting from those and other decisions taken by the Conservative Government have put a real strain on the mental health of carers. Gaddum has told me that carers' own mental health has been the issue most frequently discussed through casework in the last few years. As the campaigner and unpaid carer Katy Styles recently warned, there is now a risk that carers will become cared for themselves. She said:

"Not only will local authorities and Government bodies be looking after the people that they care for, but also carers who are in a really bad way."

The We Care Campaign, which Katy founded, does crucial work in amplifying the voices of unpaid carers. We Care is campaigning for more financial support for carers and to secure funding for carers' breaks. The campaign is also pushing for longer-term solutions, including to the social care crisis, and a crucial national carers strategy.

As the right hon. Lady mentioned, the Government have failed to publish a national carers strategy. They consulted on one in 2016, gaining a lot of responses, yet ultimately the strategy was delayed and then abandoned. Some 6,500 unpaid carers contributed to that consultation, giving up what little time they had to invest their energies in providing details of their day-to-day caring roles. It was dismissive in the extreme for the Government to drop the proposed national strategy. Carers who had contributed to the consultation felt extremely angry. Katy Styles said at the time that:

"Whilst unpaid carers spent precious time informing a Strategy; that time and effort was wasted as that Carers Strategy was apparently scrapped. That's how much carers' lives matter.

A national strategy would set the tone on how society should value and support carers. Without a strategy; carers have no hope of being valued and supported.”

Nothing has changed in the past five years to give carers hope of being valued and supported. The 2018 to 2020 “Carers Action Plan” was a flimsy document shamefully void of funding and ambition. We have had nothing of any substance since then.

It is worth remembering that the national carers strategy published under a Labour Government 15 years ago was launched not by a junior ministerial group, as I think is being proposed in this cross-departmental roundtable, but by the then Prime Minister, and signed by all Secretaries of State. That commitment shown by Labour at the time was vital, because I understand that Care Ministers struggle to get that cross-departmental aspect—we have heard about how many Departments are involved.

The other thing is funding. When the strategy was updated in 2008, the last Labour Government pledged £255 million for new commitments to support carers. That included £150 million to increase significantly the amount of money provided by central Government for breaks from caring. The Carers Trust reports that unpaid carers consistently tell it that they value breaks and respite very highly. Carers say that taking a break from caring is beneficial for their health and wellbeing and can allow them to continue in employment. Yet funding for respite care has dried up since Labour’s national carers strategy, with the funding no longer earmarked for breaks as it was up to 2010. The current Conservative Government’s plan in the 2021 social care White Paper for five days of unpaid leave from care is woefully insufficient. It was also disappointing that the Government recently rejected the Lords Adult Social Care Committee’s recommendation on ringfenced funding for breaks. Carers Trust is now calling for a statutory right to respite breaks for unpaid carers across the whole UK.

Carers in Scotland have access to a national scheme giving unpaid carers access to breaks, and Wales will launch a national scheme in June. There should be a national scheme in England too, with local carer organisations as key partners, and it should learn from Carers Trust Wales when designing breaks for unpaid carers. A Carers Trust survey of over 2,500 unpaid carers found that 53% of respondents said a break from caring is what would make the biggest difference. Despite that, research from Carers UK shows that a quarter of carers have not had a single day off from caring in more than five years.

For many, unremitting caring takes a toll on their mental and physical health. Both the GP Patient Survey and 2021 census data show that carers are more likely than those not in a caring role to have a long-term health condition or to have reported “very bad or bad health” and to feel isolated and exhausted. Both studies also showed that the more intense a caring role is in terms of the hours of care provided, the more likely it is that carers will have poorer health outcomes.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence systematic review of evidence on carers breaks found that carers value breaks for a range of reasons: practical, emotional, social and psychological. For some carers, the break has value beyond its allotted time. For instance, looking forward to a break can have the same effect as the break itself. The importance of breaks is to be part of a

whole-family approach and as a break from the caring routine, not just having time away from the person. Some carers prefer a break with the person they care for, or as a whole family, but just not when they have to do all the caring.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a crucial point. This is exactly what I saw recently at Tŷ Hafan in Sully in my constituency, where there is the option of hotel accommodation for the whole family on site near the person for whom they are caring, but without them having to undertake the full responsibility for care. A pristine natural environment also provides opportunities for the whole family to relax and get some quality family time together while having a break from their responsibilities.

Barbara Keeley: I thank my hon. Friend; that will sound very good to other carers.

Breaks can have a vital preventive role, sustaining the caring relationship and preventing carer stress, crisis and breakdown. There are key points where, if practical support and information had been provided, the negative impact of caring may be reduced. Breaks can reduce loneliness and isolation, enabling the carer, and the person they care for, to stay connected to family, friends and the things they enjoy.

We must face the fact that there has been a decline in the funding used to support carers breaks. Analysis by the Nuffield Trust of short and long-term data shows that 24,000 fewer carers were receiving breaks in 2020-21 than in 2015-16—a decline of 42%. It is no wonder that so many unpaid carers are exhausted. Claire, a carer from my constituency, told me that in order to attend the carers networking event in Parliament yesterday, the cost of alternative care for her mother was £33 an hour. She told me that there should be an alternative because the excellent Humphrey Booth Resource Centre in Salford has a four-bed unit for people with dementia. However, it cannot be used to offer respite care for Claire’s mother because it has been taken over to help with hospital discharge issues.

Another major issue facing many carers is that GPs and other NHS staff treating the person they care for often know nothing about their caring role, meaning that carers are not offered the support to which they are entitled, as we have heard. Another carer from Salford called Justine, whom I met in Parliament yesterday, told me that at the start of caring for her mother, who has dementia, she was offered no help or advice and did not know where to turn for support. Even when she asked social services for help, turnover of staff meant that different people were asking her to fill in the same forms again and again and that assessments were being done again and again. Justine said:

“You feel like you are treading water all of the time.”

Analysis by the Nuffield Trust shows that there was an 11% drop in the five years to 2020-21 in the number of carers in receipt of direct support. That is the equivalent of 13,000 fewer carers being given the choice and personalisation that direct support is designed to offer. That downwards trend is reflected in local authority gross expenditure on services for carers, which reduced by 11% between just 2015-16 and 2020-21. That has meant a reduction in the support offer available to carers. Local authorities provided fewer direct support

[Barbara Keeley]

payments and directed 36,000 more carers to information and advice only—that is all they got. Carers have since reported finding it harder even to access adequate advice and support, and satisfaction with carer support services generally is declining—hardly surprising.

Carers organisations know that proper identification of carers by the NHS would mean that carers could be supported much more effectively. Identification of carers is something I have campaigned on for many years. In 2012, I brought in a private Member's Bill on the identification of carers that would have created a duty on the NHS to identify carers and to promote their health and wellbeing. The then Care Minister in the coalition Government would not support my Bill. Indeed, there is so much that could have been done in the past 13 years to avoid the appalling situation that too many unpaid carers now find themselves in, which has been made worse by the cost of living crisis.

We are here today because this is Carers Week, but care does not stop when Carers Week ends. The Government must urgently bring forward a long-term plan informed by carers and understood at the highest levels of Government. Ministers must learn to listen to unpaid carers—not just this week, but every week—and value their lived experience and insights. The We Care campaigner Katy Styles said that there are so many issues for the millions of carers whose voices she tries to amplify, but only a few of them were able to meet MPs yesterday. Katy told me:

“It's a battle and a fight for everything. It's grinding us down.”
We cannot continue to leave carers without proper support.

12.29 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing this debate. She is passionate about ensuring that we highlight the challenges carers face, and that we recognise the contributions they make to families and communities throughout the UK. I pay tribute to her excellent work as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on carers.

In National Carers Week, it is only right that we reflect on and appreciate the 5.7 million carers in our country, while exploring what more we can do to support them both financially and practically. We also have to recognise that the number of carers will only increase. Life expectancy continues to increase as more people live longer with more health conditions and as children survive with conditions that, in previous generations, might have meant they never survived the womb, let alone birth—they are now living for maybe decades, and their parents have to provide most of the care.

Yesterday I was honoured to meet Age UK, the Carers Trust, Oxfam GB, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Rethink Mental Illness and the Lewy Body Society at the National Carers Week parliamentary reception. These organisations are vital in supporting carers across the UK, and I pay tribute to their professionals and volunteers for the support they provide.

I understand, on a very personal level, the difficulties that being a carer brings. So many women, as my hon. Friend mentioned, have caring responsibilities—we know that women make up the majority of carers. Many of us

are employed and keeping down jobs, and we often had our children later in life, so our caring responsibilities come at a time when our children need us, particularly as teenagers, and our parents need us because they are reaching an age at which they may have health issues. We are the sandwich generation, as is now well known. Believe me, I know it is not an easy task to juggle all these responsibilities.

I have personal experience, as I supported my mum when she was looking after my father after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and I saw the mental, physical and financial toll it took on her. What I take away from that personal experience is that caring is really, really lone, and it was particularly lonely during covid. I cannot imagine how it was for the millions of people who were isolated at home and having to look after a family member with a condition such as Alzheimer's. The thing about Alzheimer's is that we lose our loved one twice. We lose them as the Alzheimer's and dementia progress, and then we lose them when they die.

I remember looking after my father for a week in August 2021, when my mum had a week of respite care. It was one of the hardest things I have done in a long, long time. I was trying to juggle my parliamentary work at the same time. Thank goodness for test cricket and the Hundred, because my father was an avid cricket fan all his life. When I was looking after him, we had the India test during the day and the Hundred in the evening, so that kept me sane. I do not know how the amazing carers across the country cope.

Because of my own experience, and because of speaking to so many carers across the Cities of London and Westminster, I was proud to support the Carer's Leave Act 2023, which was introduced by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). I was delighted to sit on the Public Bill Committee, and I congratulate her on the Act receiving Royal Assent. It will make such a difference, as it means unpaid carers will now be entitled to at least five extra days off a year, helping more carers to stay in employment. According to Carers UK, 600 people a day leave work due to care duties, and the Act recognises that those people need the flexibility to take time off work for their loved ones.

In 2020, more than 7 million people in employment had the added responsibility of unpaid caregiving. Of course, those combined work and care responsibilities can lead to people getting very little rest, which explains why 71% of carers report having poor physical or mental wellbeing, according to the Mental Health Foundation. That is why I fully support the Government's “Next steps to put People at the Heart of Care” report, which includes a £25 million funding package for unpaid carers, although I would obviously like to see that funding increase.

We must also remember that many carers are too young to be employed. I take this moment to recognise the role played by young carers, of whom there are approximately 800,000 across the UK, which is a staggering number. These children—they are often very young children—and young adults embody compassion, responsibility and maturity beyond their years. On average, young carers devote around 17 hours a week to their caring duties, according to Carers UK. Just imagine the sacrifices they make. Their selfless acts of love go unnoticed by many.

I was first exposed to this issue when I worked at the Children's Society and was responsible for publicising a report on the lifetime effects of being a child carer.

The report's findings remain with me, because being a young carer has not only an immediate effect but a long-term effect on things like education, attainment and even personal and social confidence. I remember speaking to people who had taken part in the report—they were men and women in their 30s and 40s—and they still lived with what they called the shame of not being able to take friends home because they were embarrassed about what might be at home if their mum, as it usually was, had mental health issues, or of not being able to go to birthday parties or be proper teenagers with their friends because of their caring responsibilities. It has a lifetime effect on people's confidence and life chances.

That being said, I am proud of the Government's work to support young carers. Obviously there can always be more help, but through the extension of education, health and care plans to 19 to 25-year-olds, for example, thousands of families across the country have seen increased support.

I, like many Members in the House today, have spoken of the incredible sacrifice made by so many unpaid carers, whether financially or personally, but in National Carers Week we must not forget the professional care sector. We often speak about NHS doctors and nurses, who are so important, but the value of social care sector workers cannot be overestimated. I take this opportunity to thank our professional carers who support our loved ones in care settings and in their own homes. I saw that directly in how the outstanding carers looked after my father with such respect, love and devotion at the Bellavista care home in Cardiff bay before he passed away last year. My mum was a hairdresser working in care homes and day centres, and I used to help her in the summer holidays, so I saw the vital respite care that the Ely day centre in Cardiff gave to so many families.

Across the country, we see fine examples of sacrifice, love and selflessness every day, which is why it is so important that we have such debates—again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport for securing it—to recognise and thank the carers, and particularly the unpaid carers, across the UK. It is also why I fully support the Government's new support for carers such as the 2023-24 better care fund, with £327 million earmarked to support local authority health and care services, including providing carers with advice, support, short breaks and respite services. It is so vital to ensure that we provide respite for carers.

I know at first hand how important this extra funding will be. When I was a council leader, approximately 40% of our annual budget was spent on adult social care, so we need to continue funding councils in this vital work. I also note what my hon. Friend said about the need to undertake care assessments a lot quicker and in a much more caring way. I hope the Minister has taken note of that comment, too.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I hear what my hon. Friend said about young carers. Does she recognise that there is a problem in identifying all young carers and that we must do more to identify all those who are providing that care service but going totally unnoticed in society?

Nickie Aiken: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and completely agree with him on that. Part of the problem, particularly for young carers, is that they are embarrassed, but they may also think that they could be

taken into care—I fear for them on that. They think that because they are having to look after a parent, a social worker and local authority will perceive that they cannot cope. That is the last thing that any family needs to think about. When I was the children's services lead at Westminster City Council, I did a lot of work with young carers and we had an amazing support network in Westminster for young carers. They can be so young—as young as eight or nine—and it is therefore important that we identify them. We must also give them and their parents assurances that this is not about taking them away, but about giving the children and the parents the support they need.

I am also glad to see that the Minister is due to hold a cross-Government roundtable with other Ministers to make sure that carers' needs are recognised not just in social care, but in every aspect of their lives. That is a theme we have discussed today. This is about not just the daily grind of caring—the responsibilities and the tiredness—but the financial and other help that is needed.

Making sure that carers are recognised in health, social care and education is a priority, along with helping people to recognise themselves as carers so that they can tap into local carers networks and apply for the financial support that is available. That will be crucial for carers across the UK. That is why I look forward to continuing my work with the Government to ensure that all adult unpaid carers and young carers across not only the two cities of London and Westminster, but the whole country, are supported financially, emotionally and physically. We owe them all a huge debt.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is obvious to the House that we have plenty of time this afternoon and there is not enormous pressure. I certainly do not wish to impose a time limit on speeches, but all so far have been longer than they ought to have been. I ask Members to keep speeches to under 10 minutes, because this is not the only debate today; another debate follows and it is fairly heavily subscribed. What Members have to say can usually be said pretty well in under 10 minutes, rather than in well over that.

I call Wendy Chamberlain.

12.42 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on securing this debate and on the work she does as chair of the all-party group on carers. The debate is testament to the work done by her and by other Members in the Chamber who have direct experience or have been involved in this space for some time. I have been on a bit of journey since securing a slot in the private Members' Bill ballot and taking forward my work on carer's leave. I wish briefly to pay tribute to a number of groups I have met while doing that. In St Andrews, we have a group, supported by Fife carers, called the CRAP Carers—compassionate, responsible and patient carers. It is a remarkable group, mostly made up of women—the hon. Lady mentioned how many of our carers are women—and they do incredible work to support their loved ones. I also want to highlight Fife Young Carers, which sadly lost its chief executive officer, Kirstie Howell, last month. I pay tribute to her and the work she did.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

It is estimated that Scotland has up to 800,000 carers. My husband is one of them, as he looks after his mother, although he continues to refuse to recognise himself as such. The hon. Lady referred to a number of the challenges they face and the statistics on that. According to Carers UK, 45% of carers are currently unable to afford their monthly expenses and 83% are worried or extremely worried about managing them in the future. One of the most distressing things for me is that a third of carers are spending more of their money on products that they use for care, such as incontinence pads. The money is not coming to them from elsewhere and they are having to use their own resources for those things. Three quarters of carers receiving carer's allowance or the carer element of universal credit are worried about energy bills and other bills, and are concerned that they will be unable to heat their home to a safe level. We know, and have discussed in this House many times, that it costs even more money to be disabled, and a number of people care for those with disabilities. We need to be aware of that.

We must not forget our young carers. We are waiting for the census results in Scotland, but the census in England and Wales shows that about one in 21 of our 16 to 24-year-olds are carers. They face difficulties with finances and accessing education. During my work on my Carer's Leave Bill, I became concerned that we could create conditions where young carers will never have the opportunity to enter the workplace, particularly given the cliff edge that carer's allowance presents.

I wish to highlight the story of one constituent, who wishes to remain anonymous, as it demonstrates some of the challenges. She cares for her elderly mum, who has Alzheimer's, mobility issues and long-standing mental health issues. There is live-in care, but she still spends hours on care and care-related administration. Another source of guilt for carers is that they are spending so much time on the admin associated with caring that they feel they are not getting the opportunity to do the caring. Nursing visits happen unannounced, so they do not have proper information and she does not have the time to arrange to be there sometimes. Telephone appointments with GPs and hospitals are not at definite times. She describes putting her camera and mute on during Teams meetings to answer calls, rather than miss an appointment; that is a difficult balance for carers who are working. She says:

"Personally, I have felt unable to commit to a full time workplace based job for a very long time because I feel I would end up letting my employer down as care stuff with mum takes up so much time or I would end up too ill to work myself. It's not actually being present for Mum physically in our situation that takes the time now but the admin and domestic and financial matters and dealing with health professionals and issues arising with carers that takes time every day. To have enough flexibility at the moment I work several part time short contract jobs and so lack job security and have a lower income."

We know that women in retirement face challenges because they have lower pension contributions to access, and these kinds of situation embed that. My constituent has described wanting to go back into full-time work and starting the process, but she has had to withdraw because of her mum's health. That risk of leaving the workforce is high. I struggled to find constituents who would benefit from my Bill because many who were caring had already left employment. I am delighted to

see my Bill become law, because for the first time unpaid carers have employment rights, but there is much still to do. I still think that carer's leave should be paid, because carers need and are entitled to it.

We need to think about putting in place more carer-positive policies. I have been encouraged by my work with Carers UK and the positive employers it works with. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who is in her place, and I are Carer Positive-recognised businesses in Scotland; we went through that accreditation process. This would be a great thing for other parts of the UK to look at. I thought I was a good employer, but having to think about how I would approach certain circumstances made me consider how I can be more proactive.

On carer's allowance, a quarter of carers receiving carer's allowance or the UC element are using food banks to manage. Over the past 12 years, carer's allowance has increased by only £15.20 per week, and there is also a limit on how much people can work. I met young carers earlier this week, and the limit while in education is 21 hours per week. The new T-levels, which the UK Government describe as a "gold standard" for young people, involve more than 21 hours a week. People doing T-levels who are caring will, therefore, be unable to claim carer's allowance. The Scottish carer's support payment is being rolled out in Scotland, and a number of the challenges I would raise in respect of carer's allowance are being examined there, but, as always, we can do more.

Too many carers receive little or no wraparound support. We must not forget those who are full-time carers and unable to be in employment or education. In many ways, it feels like they have been forgotten. A statutory guarantee for respite breaks for unpaid carers is important: I have been contacted by several constituents who have highlighted the importance of respite, particularly for those who are sandwich carers. One said to me that, looking back on caring for her elderly mother over the course of her own retirement,

"it was the respite we missed and desperately needed more than anything at the time. We missed doing things together in our latter years, and nothing can bring those years back."

I wish to highlight two places in my constituency. There is the Rings, near Chance Inn, where Moira and her team provide holidays for those who want to take breaks with their loved ones. The facilities and the efforts and care they provide are huge. Then there is Homelands in Lundin Links. What has been highlighted to me is that a number of our big hotel chains do not necessarily have all the disabled access and facilities that carers need to be able to take their loved ones on holiday, and to give them that degree of respite that a holiday would give. We should be requiring our hospitality services to do more. Again, I highlight the really good work of Euan's Guide—basically, it is a Tripadvisor for disabled people—which I worked with in my previous job at Diageo. It provides an opportunity not just for disabled people to provide comments on facilities, but for businesses and organisations to talk about what they are doing.

To keep to your timescale, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will just mention briefly that my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) tabled an amendment to the Health and Care Bill that would have put a legal duty on the NHS to identify unpaid carers. Sadly, that did not receive Government support. I also highlight the previous private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley).

There is a huge gap between the number of people who are seen to be providing care, or who have provided care, and those who see themselves as having done so. As a result, Carers UK estimates that 19 million people are missing out on support. I hope that my Act will start some of those conversations, so that people recognise that they are caring. Another issue is ensuring that it is not just people doing the physical care on the ground who are seen as carers. I highlight the admin issue here.

Finally, I highlight the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on carers and care workers, which, as well as reforming social care, would require the Government to carry out an independent assessment of support available to unpaid carers, including financial support and employment rights. The Government may not support it, but, hopefully, with the work that they are doing on the cross-Government ministerial group, they will recognise that there are elements of it that they can take forward.

I thank everybody in the House who has helped me to bring my private Member's Bill forward. I thank, too, all the organisations that have engaged with us. The Bill is very much a first step, and I am sure that all of us here are thinking about what we can do next.

12.52 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will try to get through my 10-minute speech as rapidly as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I chair a group of unpaid carers, and have been doing so for the past 18 months. They are all Labour party supporters. It is a Labour carers group because we seek to influence our own party's policy. It is not set up on a sectarian basis; it is just that that is the motivation for our coming together. I wish to report back on some of the issues that have been raised in our discussions, and they reflect much of what has been said already.

One key issue is ensuring that carers are properly recognised. Recognition should then lead to the assessments. The reports that we get are that it is almost impossible in some areas to secure an assessment. We have to be honest in this debate. I am not trying to be party political here, but this is, I am afraid, about the cutbacks in local government. Councils are not capable of undertaking the assessments themselves, because of the loss of staff over recent years. Unfortunately, lack of assessments means lack of access to services themselves. That lack of a passporting mechanism is causing incredible suffering.

Another issue is that, even where there are assessments, there is a real concern about the lack of fully trained staff in the range of specialisms to deal effectively with the people involved. What that means is that the assessments are sometimes crude—this is not a criticism of the staff—and do not reflect the reality of what is needed. Again, this comes back to the resourcing of both the local councils and the NHS.

The other issue is exactly as reflected in the debate so far, which is that unpaid carers are often living in absolute poverty. Many of them have given up their own careers to care. They do so willingly, because they want to care for their loved ones, but at the moment many of them cannot survive on the benefits that they are receiving. We are grateful for the meetings that we have had with my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). The request of many in the group is

clear: they want a real living wage to reflect the care that they provide. In the short-term, a measure that could be introduced fairly rapidly is at least for the carer's allowance to reflect other caring allowances, such as maternity leave. Benefits in the past have been linked to earnings, but, because of the break with earnings, some benefit levels have been undermined over the past 20 to 30 years. If this carer's allowance had kept pace with earnings, it would be double what it is at the moment, which would be somewhere near to the levels of maternity leave payments.

The other issue that has come up in our discussions is the plight of external carers. There is almost a sympathy for them—or an empathy with them—from the unpaid carers. As has been said, carers who go into homes are underpaid, not recognised and often disrespected. We must acknowledge that care has largely been privatised, which means that many of the workers are on very insecure contracts. The result of what I can only regard as exploitation is that they cannot provide the care that is needed in many instances, or that they struggle to do so.

I will not dwell too much on the issue of respite, which has been covered. None the less, the lack of access to, and the withdrawal of, respite in many areas because of cutbacks is causing real concern. The Government could focus on that as a priority in the development of their initial strategy.

Another concern, which is heartrending to hear about, is from those carers who are elderly or getting on. They are worried about the succession planning of care for the children or the people whom they care for when they are no longer around.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Primodos case highlights the tragedy that our constituents face? I have constituents who have suffered at the hands of Primodos and they are genuinely concerned as they get into their elderly years about how they will be able to care for their children, while the Government remain intransigent and refuse to support them.

John McDonnell: I am glad that the hon. Member has raised that issue. I have constituents in the same situation, and that overhanging worry has come out in our conversations. People worry about what happens when they are no longer here, or are not capable of caring. Having some form of succession plan in place is critical.

Briefly, there is a demand from the group that I work with—I think this is felt across the political spectrum—for an independent living and national social care service. The argument is that this should be based on the NHS principles: free at the point of need and paid for directly through taxation. The proposals that I have heard so far, including those from the Fabian Society which were published today, are somewhat limited and do not live up to the challenge that we face. They are somewhat anaemic.

We must be honest with everybody about the scale of the costs involved and how that can be funded. I am happy to run through a whole range of taxation measures, but I shall just put on the table equalising capital gains tax with income tax, which, the TUC estimates, would provide £17 billion. That would cover the cost of introducing social care and independent living services. That requires

[John McDonnell]

political will and political courage, so there is the potential to go forward and form a cross-party alliance to secure a future for social care and support for unpaid carers.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on securing this debate. After the session yesterday where we met the different caring organisations, I would say that, if anyone wants any motivation, all they have to do is sit down with a few of those carers to realise how urgent and how desperate the situation is at the moment—and what willingness there is across this House to secure quite radical transformative change on the issue.

1 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I echo what he said about how moving and inspiring it was to speak with unpaid carers yesterday in Parliament. I agree that even the briefest of conversations with an unpaid carer leaves us in no doubt about the urgency of the situation and the importance of ensuring better support for them.

I will keep my comments brief, as other hon. Members have already outlined the importance of this debate far more eloquently than I could, but there are two points I would like to impress upon the House. The first is that unpaid carers, as well as caring for their loved ones, make an incredible contribution to society, one that I think we need to value more. The second is the need for us to bring about a situation where they are given better financial and practical support.

Others have already mentioned the urgency of the situation, not least due to the rising cost of living and the financial pressures that that is imposing on many families and unpaid carers. In my own constituency, sadly, 72% will be off the mains gas network and reliant on heating oil, for example, to keep their homes warm. For those with caring responsibilities, it is essential that they are able to heat their homes, not just through the harshest of winter months, but through the shoulder months. They already have to pay a great deal more than some of their neighbours who do not have the same requirements and caring responsibilities.

Hannah Bardell: My hon. Friend spoke about the importance of local organisations. Will he join me in congratulating Carers of West Lothian, which celebrated its 30th anniversary this year? The group does incredible work in my constituency and truly is the backbone of our community.

Ben Lake: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and I congratulate the group in question. In Ceredigion I know there are many charitable organisations that do great work supporting unpaid carers, as indeed do local authorities. My own county council does its very best to ensure that the unpaid carers it is aware of are given advice, support where possible, and resources so that they know of the various types of practical and financial support available to them.

Such initiatives are important; in a place such as Ceredigion it is estimated that more than 7,000 people are unpaid carers, equivalent to 10.5% of the population,

and they make an incredible contribution. Other hon. Members have mentioned the value in financial terms of the contribution that unpaid carers make to the health and social care system. In Ceredigion alone, our unpaid carers make a contribution worth some £700 million a year. That is an incredible contribution and, to be frank, it ensures that local health and social systems do not collapse under the rising demands they face.

Nevertheless, as has been mentioned, some 73% of those who are caring or who have provided care in their lifetimes do not identify themselves as unpaid carers. That means it is difficult to understand truly how many are in need of support, whether financial support or respite and other practical measures. I very much support the calls of other hon. Members for measures that will force public authorities in particular to seek out and identify unpaid carers in the realms of both education and the NHS. If we do not know how many people living in our communities are unpaid carers, it is difficult to effectively plan for services such as respite and day centres. I know from speaking with unpaid carers in my constituency that those are vital lifelines, but lifelines that, sadly, are being cut back.

I will end my comments by dwelling a little bit on financial support for carers. We have heard about the ways in which the rising cost of living is having a serious impact on their finances and how many unpaid carers are deeply worried about their financial prospects. Just under half already say that they are cutting back on essentials. We also know that more and more unpaid carers are having to spend their own money and resources to procure essential items, such as incontinence pads and other equipment, for their loved ones. I think most hon. Members in this debate would agree that those types of supplies and equipment should be provided by the state and not something that carers should have to dip into their own savings and resources to buy.

I also want to point out the inadequacy of the carer's allowance. One important thing we should bear in mind about the structure of that allowance is that the thresholds imposed mean that many people are not eligible for or entitled to the support, despite the fact that they give hours and hours of unpaid care every week. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington also outlined the inadequacy of the current level of the payment itself.

In a poll conducted by YouGov earlier this year, some 84% of those asked thought that unpaid carers should receive additional financial support. There is clearly widespread public support for increasing the support given to unpaid carers. When we consider the £162 billion contribution that unpaid carers make every year just across England and Wales—£700 million in Ceredigion alone—it is high time we looked again at carer's allowance and the direct financial support that they are given. They give so much to society; it is now time for society and the state to pay them back.

1.6 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I hugely congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on securing this really important debate and on the work she does with the APPG.

Here we are again in National Carers Week, and things have not improved tremendously since the last time we had this debate in Westminster. Carers UK wants this week to be about communities across the UK coming

together to recognise the huge contribution that unpaid carers make to society. Politicians—that's us—employers, that's us as well; health and social care services; businesses; education providers and members of the public all have a role to play in raising awareness of caring and making sure carers are able to access the information and support they need.

Like many others here in the Chamber, I went to the parliamentary reception yesterday, where I met Karen, among others. Karen told me her story and how she gave up a high-flying job with a really good salary, right at the start of the pandemic, to take care of her mother. She did so willingly, but it was a full-on job—in fact, so full-on that she did not have time to apply for any kind of carer's allowance. Three years on, she finds herself almost bankrupt and in danger of losing her home. I think that shames us all. I pay tribute to Karen and folk like her, who are taken for granted. They save the economy billions of pounds and they do not always come out of it well enough, even though they have done the very best they can.

I also pay tribute to two organisations in my constituency, Lanarkshire Carers, which works in Motherwell and Wishaw—it has just been recognised as an exemplary Carer Positive employer in Scotland, which is fantastic news—and North Lanarkshire Carers Together, which attends the regular meetings of the poverty action network that I have set up locally. Both organisations do such immense and positive work to signpost carers, helping them to get money and respite, ensuring that they are included, providing short breaks—afternoon caring time—and even just allowing paid and unpaid carers to talk to others, which is a huge help.

Wendy Chamberlain: I, too, visited Lanarkshire Carers over the recess, in neighbouring Hamilton, and I heard about the exemplary award and the innovative ways in which they have approached things since the pandemic to ensure that they reach out to carers. They are a best-in-class organisation, and the hon. Lady is very lucky to have them.

Marion Fellows: Oh, I know. I thank the hon. Member for her intervention and for the Carer's Leave Act 2023, which she piloted through Parliament—it will make a difference. I ask the Minister to please listen and give carers some money for the five days off to which they will now be entitled.

Last month, the chief executive officer of Carers Trust told the Work and Pensions Committee that, as Members have noted:

“Carer's allowance is devolved in Scotland, so there has been a big focus on increasing the adequacy of the benefits. Part of that has been around focusing support on 16, 17 and 18 year olds who are unpaid carers. There have been financial payments, payments of £300”—

quite a lot of money for a young person—

“to allow them to access broader life opportunities, given so much is not open to them.”

They also get a Young Scot card, which gives them free transport, discounts and other things. It also looks as if the Scottish Government will remove the 21-hour rule for study, and I hope that the UK Government do not intervene against that, because it is important. A young carer needs the opportunity to enhance their education and better equip themselves for further work.

In Scotland, we really try to support and help carers. We know how much they contribute to our economy. It has been estimated that there are about 800,000 carers saving the economy £3.1 billion a year—that is an enormous amount of money. We also have to face the fact that most carers are women, and that leads to lower pensions. The gender pay gap already means that women do not get as good a pension as men, but the fact that more women than men take up caring responsibilities mean that they are being hammered twice.

The Scottish Government are very keen on stakeholder engagement. As with the national care strategy that they recently announced, nothing is done without talking to stakeholders. I am very proud that one of my former employees, Sophie Lawson, is working on a Scottish Government initiative on this topic—good luck to her. Sophie works for the Glasgow Disability Alliance, which has done a lot of good work with carers.

I have been the SNP's Westminster disability spokesperson since 2020, but appallingly, it was only last year that it really dawned on me that there is a huge link between people with disabilities and carers, and how much we all owe to carers, who help the most undervalued groups in our society. Unpaid carers cover all parts of society, but they can often be marginalised. That is where local organisations are useful. I know that is happening all over the country.

One thing that I hope the Minister will recognise is that 29% of carers in the most deprived areas across the UK care for 35 hours a week. There is a real link between ill-health, poverty and the fact that so many people have to give up work to care for their loved ones. There is also real stigma, as has been mentioned. Many people who are cared for do not recognise that they are being cared for, and that can prevent their carers from accessing organisations and help from other people.

I am aware of the time that I have taken, so I will finish. I hope the Minister has listened very carefully to everyone in the Chamber, and will consider what is happening in Scotland. This is an important issue, and it needs to be addressed, especially now, during this cost of living crisis.

1.15 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I am very pleased to speak in the debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege) on securing it. I always feel privileged to speak on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, but this issue is close to my heart. Across the country, millions of us are doing what any daughter or son, husband, wife or partner, mum or dad would do when someone they love is sick, frail, elderly or disabled: look after them the very best we can.

It can be hugely rewarding to care for the person who means so much to you and who has helped you so many times. But it can also be a terrible struggle: trying to hold down your job, or travelling up and down the country, while battling to get your mum or dad out of hospital; spending hours arranging seemingly endless NHS and care appointments on the phone, wondering why on earth no one else seems to be talking to each other; searching for the right home care, or a care home that you can actually trust; and figuring out what help, if any, you or the person you are caring for are entitled to, financial or otherwise. The pressure, stress and, often, guilt, can wreak havoc with your own physical

[Liz Kendall]

and mental health. The financial costs can be ruinous, too, especially if you just cannot make it all work and have to quit your job. Most of the time, you just feel ignored or invisible—not just to all the different services that you are battling with, but in your workplace and in wider society.

Hon. Members have spoken powerfully about their and their constituents' experiences, about what needs to change to improve the lives and life chances of Britain's amazing army of unpaid carers, and about the need to better recognise and improve support for the physical and mental health of family carers who are battling to see a GP, or anyone else. They are not even getting the statutory assessment to which they are entitled under the Care Act 2014, not least because of the cuts to local government services. There is a real need for breaks—not just physical breaks from caring, but something for carers to look forward to and to help them keep going. Many carers face poverty: a quarter have to cut back on the essentials of life and people sell everything they have just to try to keep the show on the road.

The real implications of providing care when young include the sacrifices you make of your hopes and dreams, and the shame that you feel, which often never leaves you. On finding out who is a carer in the first place, let us be honest: most people do not think that they are a carer—they are just trying to be a good son or daughter, husband or wife—but without that recognition, they will never get any help.

Those issues are not new, but they are growing. After 13 years of failure on social care reform, on top of covid and the cost of living crisis, the pressures on families are becoming unbearable. However, the argument that I will make is not the moral case for transforming support for unpaid family carers, although that is a case in which I firmly believe; it is the economic case, particularly the need for us to start to see a decent social care system as part of our country's economic infrastructure, not just as a vital public service.

We live in the century of ageing and, as we all live for longer, more and more of us are going to have to work and care for longer. Almost 5 million people are already juggling work with caring for an older, sick or disabled relative. That is one in seven of all workers and it is only going to increase. The burden often falls on women, especially those in their 50s and 60s. The latest census shows that one in five of all women aged 55 to 60 are caring for an older or disabled loved one. That is a staggering figure that has received far too little attention to date.

The fact that our care system is stretched to the absolute limit means that 2.5 million unpaid carers have had to give up work or reduce their hours because they cannot get the help they need. Let us look at the increase in economic inactivity in over-50s since the covid pandemic, which there has been a lot of focus on. We know that the primary reason for this increase is poor physical and mental health and the increasing waiting lists in the NHS, which are now at a staggering 7 million. The second biggest reason, which no one has mentioned so far, is caring responsibilities.

Being forced out of the workplace is not good for families, especially in a cost of living crisis. It is not good for women and women's equality, because women

in their 50s and 60s are in the prime of their lives, with all the experience and knowledge they have. It is not good for businesses, which need to draw on the talents of everyone in our country in order to succeed, and it is not good for our economy, especially when the UK is stuck in a doom loop of low growth, poor productivity and ever higher taxes. If we want to help the over-50s to stay in work or get back into work, I suggest that the Chancellor spends a little more time focusing on the broken care system and a little less complaining about people spending too much time on golf courses.

We know that decent public services require a growing economy to put the money in, but the truth is that a growing economy depends on decent public services too. In modern Britain, social care and, I would also argue, childcare are as much a part of our economic infrastructure as the roads and the railways, and they should be at the heart of our economic policy and strategy for growth.

That is why Labour has made improving care one of the four missions of our industrial strategy—we understand that it is central to the workforce and economic growth. We are calling for a 10-year programme of investment and reform. That must include a new deal for the paid care workforce. We are never going to help family carers unless we have enough properly paid staff and tackle the record vacancies and high turnover rates. We need to have a much more joined-up system of health and care, so that families do not have to battle their way around the system, and a big shift in focus towards prevention and early intervention, to help people stay living fit, well and healthy at home for as long as possible.

We also need proper support for unpaid family carers, so that they can better balance work and family life, including improvements in flexible working and care leave. Opposition Members will remember that Labour women in the '70s and '80s argued that childcare was vital for children, the workforce, the economy and women's equality, and that is the case we are making on social care too.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will agree that sometimes politics seems very frantic, with things changing day by day, but sometimes I think it is all so unbelievably slow in understanding how the world has changed around us. My mum often says to me, "Why are you so surprised that there are so many of us olds? We've been born a long time." That is true. We need to wake up to these changes and understand just how important a decent social care system is for families, the NHS, women's equality and our wider economy too. The last Labour Government had a national carers strategy signed up to by senior Cabinet members at all levels, looking at all the things that impact on family life. I urge the Government to commit to that strategy today.

1.24 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing the debate, for her powerful opening speech and for all she does as chair of the APPG on carers. This week is Carers Week—a chance to recognise and focus on carers—but as every carer knows, if you are a carer, every week is carers week. I pay tribute to carers and young carers across the country for what they do, caring for loved ones, whether

it is their mum or dad, brother or sister, a neighbour or their child, who will often be grown up, day in, day out, all year round.

Over 4 million people in England are unpaid carers. For some, caring may be a few hours a week helping a relative or neighbour with things they cannot do themselves or providing companionship. For others—in fact, nearly one in three, according to the latest census—caring means over 50 hours each week looking after someone. It is not just a full-time job, albeit unpaid, but how they are spending their lives.

My hon. Friend drew on her expertise, as a former Care Minister, and her personal experience. She spoke about how few families are untouched by caring responsibilities, about the sacrifices that carers make and how they are driven by love, but also the problem of exhaustion and burn-out for carers. She talked about the importance of identifying carers, especially young carers. She spoke powerfully about children with experience of dialling 999 because of a parent needing an ambulance but not telling anyone because of the stigma, particularly due to a parent's mental health needs.

My hon. Friend asked whether we could build on some of the things we did for carers in the pandemic. I know, as I was Care Minister at the time, how incredibly hard the pandemic was for many carers, how isolated many felt and how many felt they did not have the support they needed. I know how difficult it was to work out how we could support carers during the pandemic, but we managed to do some things, such as identifying carers we prioritise for the covid vaccine. I will take away her request to look at how we can build on the things we did in the pandemic.

I know that the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) is a committed campaigner for social care and carers; we often speak in the same debates. She spoke about some of the financial difficulties for carers, the importance of cross-Government commitment to carers, and carers needing breaks and time off from caring.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) spoke about her personal experience of caring for her father. She talked about the loneliness and isolation but how cricket helped, which made many of us smile. She talked about young carers, how the sacrifices they make are often not appreciated and the long-term effects of being a young carer.

I pay tribute to hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for her very important work in steering the Carer's Leave Bill through Parliament. She spoke about things that employers can do more broadly to support carers and the opportunity of being a Carer Positive employer. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said that he chairs a local carers group, and I give him credit for that, whether or not it is a Labour group. That is a very important thing to do, bringing carers together to support one another and listening to what help they need. He spoke about the difficulty for carers in getting assessments. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) spoke about the cost of living and the cost of heating homes for carers, particularly in his constituency, where many carers are off grid and use heating oil.

We also heard briefly from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell)

and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). That level of Back-Bench interest in this topic on a quiet Thursday in Parliament shows how strongly people feel, rightly, about the need for support for carers in our constituencies. We also heard from those on the shadow Front Benches, the hon. Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows).

I know, from my own experience and from my family, that caring is something we do because it feels the right thing to do. We might not have a choice or not feel we have a choice, but nor can we imagine not doing it—not caring for the person we love. For many people, it is something that just happens to them: they become a carer without really realising it. Suddenly, they are spending hours caring—perhaps all their waking hours, and often in the night as well—without realising that they have become a carer, and without knowing that they might need support or, indeed, that they could get it. That is why recognising carers and helping them recognise themselves is important in its own right. There is a good reason why recognising and supporting carers in the community is the theme of this year's Carers Week.

Local authorities, the NHS, schools, universities, all public services, and indeed companies need to continue to improve how unpaid carers are identified, recognised and supported in our communities. This Carers Week, I have had meetings with more than 30 unpaid carers, young adult carers and representatives from unpaid carers' organisations, and both as Care Minister and in my life outside politics, I meet carers all the time—remarkable carers who have shared their stories with me. Those are so often stories of how hard it is to be a carer, although it is also really good to hear some positive stories. For instance, some employers are really supportive of carers and their caring responsibilities. However, sadly, that is not always the case; in fact, just on Tuesday, one carer told me that she is thinking about giving up her job due to a lack of support. Many hon. Members have spoken about that issue today.

On the important issue of juggling employment and caring, I want to highlight the Carer's Leave Act 2023, which received Royal Assent on 24 May. Eligible unpaid carers will soon be able to take a week's flexible unpaid leave each year. I am so pleased to see that Bill pass into law to help carers who are juggling work and caring.

This week, I also spoke to another carer about the challenges they are facing in getting the professional care and support they need. That is one reason why the work we are doing on reforming the adult social care workforce is really important. I say to carers, "Please keep on speaking up. Keep on telling your stories, for other carers and to make sure people know what it is to be a carer. None of you are alone."

In April, we published our reform plan, "Next steps to put People at the Heart of Care". The enormous contribution of unpaid carers is reflected in that plan, and in writing it, we were thinking about carers as well as those they care for. This financial year, £327 million of the better care fund has been earmarked to provide short breaks and respite services for carers, as well as additional advice and support. We are finalising plans for how we will deliver the additional sum of up to £25 million that we committed to carers in the White Paper, and I will be sharing those plans shortly. I know it is taking time, but I do really want to get it right.

[Helen Whately]

The Health and Care Act 2022 includes provisions for the Care Quality Commission to assess the performance of local authority delivery of adult social care duties. That duty has gone live as of 1 April with our new assurance framework, which will provide a clear assessment of how local authorities are meeting their statutory duties, including those relating to carers, such as whether local authorities are undertaking their assessment of carers' need for support and then meeting the needs that are identified. That will address one of the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport, along with other Members: how we make sure carers get the assessments to which they have a statutory right, as well as the support they are identified as needing.

We are working with NHS England to streamline the ways in which unpaid carers are recorded in GPs' health records, and we have written to all GPs in England to communicate improvements to how that is carried out. Crucially, that identification of individuals with caring obligations extends to young carers. Questions designed to identify children and students caring for family members have been added to the school census, and that important data has been published today. We are also making progress on our plans to transform social care data, better joining up the care to people, including support to unpaid carers as well as those they care for.

Meanwhile, we are taking steps to design a new survey to capture the wide range of experiences and needs of unpaid carers across England, and to commission a valuation of the support provided to unpaid carers through the better care fund, including carer breaks and respite. It might seem obvious, but different carers want different things, so it is right that we take steps to understand and build the evidence base of what works and what matters when supporting carers.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: I am really sorry, but I have but a minute left—Madam Deputy Speaker has confirmed that. However, to address the points that the hon. Lady made in her speech, I assure her that not a penny has been taken away from funding for adult social care; in fact, more money is going into adult social care, thanks to the record funding of up to £7.5 billion over two years that we announced in the autumn statement. A crucial part of our adult social care workforce reforms is our reform of the professional care workforce: developing social care as a career for the professional workforce, developing the career pathway and investing in qualifications for that workforce. That is very important to unpaid carers, because the top issue often raised with me by the unpaid carers I talk to is the difficulty of accessing professional care.

To close, I want to say as Minister for Social Care that I care, and I will continue to champion carers' needs as part of the work I do across Government. I am

delighted to announce that I will be convening a roundtable of Ministers to work together across our Departments to identify, recognise and support unpaid carers. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made contributions on this important topic today, as well as Carers UK for its work this Carers Week and its year-round advocating for carers, and the other campaign groups involved in this week, including Age UK, the MND Association, Rethink Mental Illness, the Lewy Body Society and Oxfam. Finally, I say thank you to all carers.

1.35 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I reiterate my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to have this debate today. I thank both the Minister and the Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), for showing that they both understand and care about this issue. I also thank all the Members who have taken part: the hon. Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken).

Many Members shared their own personal experiences; I kicked off by talking about mine, when my mum cared for my grandmother who lived with dementia. I think it is only now that I am probably at a similar age to my mum in that caring role that I fully understand what she was going through and the toll that it would have taken on her own wellbeing. I put on record today—because I have never had the opportunity to do so—my thanks to her, and to the 7,000 carers in my constituency of Gosport and the millions across the UK. They deserve our thanks.

In many cases, what those carers do is so invisible. I know that they do not do it for thanks—they do it because they love the people who they care for—but that does not mean that we should take it for granted. It means that we need to recognise them and value them, and to put our money where our mouth is when we do that. It means that we need to provide them with support, funding and respite, and with everything they need to continue doing their role, because it is thankless and hard. I know that they probably would not have it any other way, but that does not mean that it should be done for free. The final thing I will say to the Minister today is that we need a national carers strategy to bring together all that good work, and to demonstrate to carers that we do care.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I know that the young people from Balby Central Primary Academy will have enjoyed the contributions made about carers, particularly young carers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered National Carers Week and respite for carers.

Council of Europe

1.38 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, since you are yourself a former member of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe.

When I look back at my time as leader of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, my hope is that the future will judge us on the basis of more than that the approach we have adopted was just a pleasant idea, and then we can all slip back into anonymity.

At the Reykjavík summit of the Council of Europe, the final declaration said:

“We will work together to protect and promote the three fundamental, interdependent, and inalienable principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights, as enshrined in the Statute of the Council of Europe and in the European Convention on Human Rights.”

It spoke of how fundamental the values and aims of the Council of Europe are to us as a country, and how they influence every level of government. The UK willingly signed up to that declaration. It is partly to make that very point that after every plenary session of the Council in Strasbourg I submit a list of written questions on each of the debates we have had, to make sure that they are discussed and known to Government Departments, and that those Departments have the chance to respond. As the Prime Minister said in his speech at the Reykjavik summit,

“the UK may have left the EU, but we have not left Europe. We remain a proud European nation and we must work together to defend the values we all hold so dear. The Council of Europe, with its huge reach, has such a vital role to play.”

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I am hugely encouraged to hear the hon. Gentleman’s rhetoric and about the work he has done. The only country to have left the Council of Europe is Russia. There is talk on the Government Benches about leaving the Council of Europe and indeed the European convention on human rights. Does he agree that Russia is not company that the UK should look to keep?

John Howell: I agree with the hon. Lady, and if she waits a little, she will hear some other excellent news from that summit.

Talking of the spirit of freedom in Europe, the PM went on to say:

“The Council of Europe has nurtured that spirit for three quarters of a century.”

We are proud to offer it our support, and we are proud that the UK has signed that declaration. I thank all who have served and all who do serve as members of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe. As one Cabinet member put it, we do a lot of the work without fanfare and with no praise, to the extent that in this country few have heard of the Council of Europe, and those who have mostly think it is part of the EU. How sad that for much of the UK, Europe has come to mean nothing more than the EU, and not the wider Europe of 46 countries.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although we have left the confines of the EU, we did not leave Europe? We remain a European country, and the Council of Europe gives the United Kingdom the opportunity to maintain our relationship with not only EU member states, but the whole of Europe, and to lead discussions and decision making on common issues regarding democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

John Howell: I thoroughly agree with that, and as my hon. Friend knows I support that in everything I do in the Council of Europe. I try to interest the Lobby journalists here in the Council of Europe, but I probably fail for the very reason that they see “Europe” in the title. I make a plea to any listening now: the Council of Europe is not part of the EU. It looks after human rights, the rule of law and democracy across the wider Europe, and it should be paid attention to.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Howell: I will, but this will have to be the last time.

Hannah Bardell: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman giving me his last intervention. Does he agree that the process of Brexit, the run-up to that and the narrow-minded and negative narrative that has pervaded the UK press have had a profound impact on our societies in how we talk about and view Europe? I agree with much of what he is saying, but I am sure he will recognise that some of that has come from those on his Benches. We need to work together to promote the work of the Council of Europe and to make sure that everyone, from the schoolchildren in our constituencies to civic leaders across the UK, understands the power and importance of its work.

John Howell: I agree with that, and I will come on to say a little more on that in a moment.

Many of the current delegation have not been members for long, but while we are there, we will play our full part in working with the Council of Europe to take forward its aims and values and to make sure they are part of the system we all work in. We need to be wary in particular of the activities of the far right, is out to infiltrate our political groups.

The Council of Europe has just completed a summit, only the fourth it has held in its history. Some members of my political party were sceptical about it; I was not. For an organisation that does not put its head above the parapet often enough, it was a great success and it has shown what the Council of Europe is about. It was attended by our Prime Minister, and the declaration was signed by the UK. The declaration commits the UK to upholding the activities of the European Court of Human Rights and the European convention on human rights. It states:

“We reaffirm our deep and abiding commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as the ultimate guarantors of human rights across our continent, alongside our domestic democratic and judicial systems. We reaffirm our primary obligation under the Convention to secure to everyone within our jurisdiction the rights and freedoms defined in the Convention in accordance

[John Howell]

with the principle of subsidiarity, as well as our unconditional obligation to abide by the final judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in any case to which we are Parties.”

It goes on to state:

“Our European democracies are not established once and for all. We need to strive to uphold them each and every day, continuously, in all parts of our continent. The Council of Europe remains the guiding light that assists us in fostering greater unity among us for the purpose of safeguarding and realising these ideals and principles which are our common heritage. We reaffirm our commitment to developing mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of our cultural diversity and heritage.”

As Lord Kirkhope said in the other place, let us ensure that international agreements such as this are honoured.

When the UK last held the presidency of the Council of Europe back in David Cameron’s time as Prime Minister, we initiated what has come to be called the Brighton declaration, which was a reform of the system of how the Court operated. The Brighton declaration wrote the principal of subsidiarity and the importance of domestic courts into the convention. If only people had read that before the recent fuss, it would have made life easier and simpler.

Of the things that the Council of Europe does that I most value, the two most prominent are election observation and monitoring. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe does election observation, but that does not make what the Council of Europe does any less important. I pay tribute to colleagues who put themselves into difficult situations to ensure that elections are free and fair. It is a two-stage approach. The first question is, “Is the environment in which the election takes place free and fair?” In the case of Turkey, I would argue that it was not. The fact that many of the President’s rivals had been arrested suggests that. The second element is, “Is the process used for people to vote free and fair?” In one case, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we found that those elected to open the polling booth turned up with a hold-all full of pre-filled polling cards in favour of the pro-Iranian candidate. They were promptly arrested.

I praise the role of rapporteurs, whose presence in pre-election missions is critical. A good rapporteur who knows the territory well and can get into the detail is a necessary requisite for that. That is not always the case with all rapporteurs. Many have a thin and superficial knowledge of the country they are reporting on.

One of the most potentially useful things I have done as a rapporteur for Turkey is to visit the human rights prisoner, Osman Kavala. He was—I should say is—a prominent businessman and philanthropist. He also has a link to this country, where he was on the faculty of the University of Manchester. When I visited him in a Turkish high-security prison, where he has been imprisoned for more than five years in pre-trial detention, I saw a man who showed no resentment for how he had been treated. I hope that now the elections are over, President Erdoğan will pardon Kavala and release him. He is of course not the only human rights prisoner in Turkey, but he is the epitome of all the others.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene. In the case of Turkey, a country that he and I care about, what influence

and power do we have when he sees something that is palpably wrong, apart from publicising it? Do we have any more power in the Council of Europe than that?

John Howell: We have a tremendous amount more power, and that power lies in the personality of the rapporteur and what they want to do. They can do that by talking diplomatically to people there, rather than banging the table and demanding that something be done.

There was an idea at the summit to appoint a new commissioner for democracy. I confess that I was interested in the position for myself, but unfortunately the idea was placed on the back burner and not taken forward, which I think is a shame. Right across Europe, we see a backsliding on democracy that is very worrying. The appointment of a commissioner for democracy would have helped to prevent that.

What impact does the Council have on our domestic legislative agenda? Let me give two short examples—the Istanbul convention and the Lanzarote convention. The Istanbul convention sets out the protections that are required for women in cases of violence and domestic abuse. It is a landmark convention, and I am pleased that, after lobbying by me, we have signed it—in part, but being able to sign it in part is important. This so distinguishes the way the Council of Europe works from the way that the EU works. It is characteristic of the convention system used by the Council that conventions are put together right across the nations of Europe, and it is the choice of every country to determine which bits should apply in their own country.

The Lanzarote convention is a comprehensive treaty that does a great deal to put in place the international co-operation required to protect children’s rights. I would add a third example, which is the Venice Commission’s work to establish the principles under which ombudsmen work and are appointed. The all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution looked at that yesterday, with a representative from the United Nations also saying that it has adopted the Venice Commission’s principles.

What good does the Council of Europe do? Critics say that it is nothing but a talking shop. Well, perhaps, but I would strongly argue that it does much more than that through the work of the Assembly, the Committee of Ministers, the Court, the anti-corruption activities of the Group of States against Corruption, the anti-human trafficking work undertaken by the group of experts on action against trafficking in human beings, and the work of the Venice Commission in strengthening democratic institutions. All of these deliver tangible results across member states.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for his leadership of the delegation, and for the huge amount of work he puts into the Council of Europe. He leads a commission that has ended up with the Council agreeing to the principal of ecocide being recorded in international and national law. Would he care to reflect on how we can encourage national Parliaments to take more seriously agreed declarations that come from that source, which will help us all to have a stronger environmental protection law?

John Howell: I agree with the right hon. Member. I am trying very hard to persuade this Government to accept that there is such a thing as ecocide, and that it

should be included in descriptions of how the world operates. I am having difficulty with that, but I shall continue to try. I think it is a very good point.

I am a convinced multilateralist, and although multilateralism is under attack everywhere at the moment, I simply do not believe that any country can make a go of everything by itself. That means having somewhere where ideas can be talked about and discussion can take place, and that is what the Council of Europe does.

What has this delegation achieved? It is down to this delegation that we expelled Russia from among the Council's members—the first international organisation to do so. It is down to this delegation that we lobbied the Turkish delegation to persuade President Erdoğan to admit Sweden and Finland to NATO, a move that I must admit has worked better in the case of Finland than that of Sweden. It is down to this delegation that the UK Government and the Opposition are supporting the membership of Kosovo. These may all be examples of soft diplomatic power, but there is nothing wrong with that.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all members of the delegation for the work they do. I would also like to thank Sandy Moss, our excellent permanent representative in Strasbourg, whose work on the summit was masterly. I would like to thank our equally masterful secretary, Nick Wright, and his team, without whom we would be in deep trouble and with whom I very much enjoy working.

If there is one message from this it is: let us all follow the vision set out for the Council at the summit, and let us make that summit a reality.

1.54 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to take part in this debate. As I said in my intervention, I commend the work of the delegation. I would like to endorse everything the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) has said about the work of the support team—Nick Wright and his staff—who are fantastic in ensuring that things happen, and that the delegation gets there and takes part in the debates.

Being relatively newly appointed to the Council of Europe—I only came on to the delegation since the last general election—I have to say that most people have no idea what the Council of Europe does. Whenever I mention to people locally that I am going to an event at the Council of Europe, they say, “I thought we’d left all that behind”, and I have to explain that it is actually something different from the EU. It is often just simply not understood. The stuff that comes out of it is often not very much debated here either, so it is good that we have a main Chamber debate on this today. The examples the hon. Member gave about the Venice Commission, the Istanbul convention and other conventions are very important, and I think we need a system in which the Government respond, in the way they are required to respond very publicly to Select Committee reports, to give the same emphasis to issues that come from the Council of Europe, which I think would make it more important.

I want to make a few quick points, Madam Deputy Speaker, but could I first crave your indulgence for one moment? Tomorrow is 9 June, which means that it is 40 years since I was first elected to this House. I just want to put on record my thanks to the long-suffering and very wonderful people of Islington North for electing

me all those years ago and for continuing to elect me to Parliament. My dedication is to them, and to serving them to the best of my ability in dealing with the housing, immigration, planning, environmental and other issues that I deal with. I just want to use this opportunity to put that on record and to thank all of them.

The declaration that came out of the Reykjavik summit is obviously extremely important, and it is very much dominated by the situation in Ukraine. Russia leaving the Council of Europe was a huge event, for obvious reasons. I think it was the first time any state has left the Council of Europe. I fully understand why—I fully understand what happened, and I absolutely and totally join everyone else in condemning the invasion of Ukraine by Russia—but we should also be aware that Russia leaving the Council has denied all Russians any access to the European convention on human rights and the relative protections they could try to obtain from it. I also fully acknowledge that there have been huge difficulties in Russians getting justice following decisions made at the European Court of Human Rights or through the convention, but we just have to be aware that it is a Europe-wide convention on human rights, and we want everybody to abide by it and to abide by the decisions of the Court.

All the Council of Europe sessions over the past two years have been very much dominated by Ukraine, and that is absolutely understandable. As I have said—and I repeat it—I totally condemn the Russian invasion and occupation of part of Ukraine. I would hope that at some point in the future the Council of Europe can become an agent that helps to bring that war to an end, because at some point there will have to be negotiations. At some point, there will have to be a peace process and at some point—I hope very soon—those who have been wrongly taken to Russia will be returned and there will be a process of dealing with the victims of war, wherever they are from and whatever they have suffered as a result of it. I believe that the Council of Europe has a role in that and a role in bringing people together, and I hope we can achieve that.

One issue the hon. Member for Henley brought up, and I would like to raise it as well, is the European convention on human rights and the role of the European Court of Human Rights. Page 4 of the declaration states:

“We reaffirm our deep and abiding commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights...as the ultimate guarantors of human rights across our continent, alongside our domestic democratic and judicial systems.”

It was obviously extremely difficult back in the 1940s to draft the European convention on human rights and to establish the Court, because we were dealing with fundamentally different legal systems across all the member states, with very different perceptions of the separation of political and judicial powers. So it is a wonderful achievement that the European Court of Human Rights exists at all.

From its inception, the Court was part of our domestic law, and from the Human Rights Act 1998 its caselaw was absolutely part of our law. Therefore, when an injunction was granted to prevent an individual being removed to Rwanda by the UK Government, I was surprised that so many Members of this House and the Government reacted with horror and anger at the alleged interference of the European Court of Human Rights in domestic law. It is not interference; it is absolutely

[Jeremy Corbyn]

part of our domestic law. We need to think a bit more deeply about the passage through this House of the migration Bill, which itself does not meet the human rights declaration required of all legislation anyway. If we are in breach of a convention that this country was a party to in 1949 and has been a member of all that time, and we appoint judges to the European Court of Human Rights, we should have more respect for it and understand what it is saying and trying to do.

Hannah Bardell: The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful and important point. Does he agree that it is cynical and desperate of this Government to use their appalling Rwanda policy and a very reasonable judgment by the Court, to which we send judges and have signed up, in order to undermine the authority of that very Court?

Jeremy Corbyn: I could not agree more. Britain was an early signatory and, indeed, provided many of the people who wrote the declaration and established the Court in the first place.

I also accept that there are problems in the administration of the Court and difficulties in getting cases to it. There are thousands of people across Europe who have different issues that they believe should be dealt with by the Court. I remember doing an advice bureau one Friday evening some years ago, and I counted the number of people in my constituency alone who felt that their injustice deserved the attention of the European Court of Human Rights. I thought, “Well, if we multiply that by 650 in Britain and then multiply that by 23, we get an awful lot of people.” Obviously, it is not that simple. People cannot just go there; they must first go through all their national legal processes. But there is still a substantial backlog and we have had useful meetings with the administration and the chief of the Court to try to understand the process they adopt, the analysis they make of all cases and how they are dealt with.

The Court’s judges are, after all, elected by the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and we vote on them. The only criticism I would make is that the appointments committee spends a lot of time interviewing the applicants and forms a view on them and issues a declaration, while the rest of us get often substantial biographical details of the individual but it is very hard to understand from that what their legal approach and attitudes actually are, so it can be difficult to decide who is an appropriate candidate. We could be slightly more open about that and perhaps spend a bit more time on the appointments, because it is pretty fundamental appointing a judge for nine years to the European Court of Human Rights, which can have an effect on the lives and liberties of citizens all across Europe. Criticisms of the Court and of any legal decision are normal—we make them all the time—but we must accept that we and our legal system are very much part of that process.

I say that because there are voices, mainly in the Conservative party, that would like us to leave the European convention on human rights entirely and keep calling it interference with domestic law. I want to put it on the record that I strongly think we should remain in the European convention on human rights and understand and respect the law that goes with it.

The fact that the injunction granted was on an immigration issue also demonstrates the importance of immigration issues to the Council of Europe. I am a member of the migration Committee, and we have raised a lot of issues about pushbacks against refugees trying to enter particular countries—pushbacks by Greece, by Turkey and, indeed, by this country in the English channel. It is an uncomfortable truth that there are 70 million people around the world who are refugees seeking a place of safety. Some of them are coming into Europe and some of them are in Europe, and the media and cultural approach towards refugees is appalling in many cases—it is quite shocking.

I have been to Calais and talked to people there. They are desperate and poor and confused, and they are victims: victims of war, of human rights abuses and of environmental disaster. They are seeking a place of safety. One day they will be our neighbours, our doctors and our teachers, and we need a better and different approach to adopting and treating refugees in our society. If it is an uncomfortable wake-up call from the Council of Europe, then so be it; I think that is a good thing.

I am very happy to serve as part of the UK delegation on the Council of Europe, and all Parliaments have politically diverse delegations in order to bring up the many issues that need to be raised there. I am pleased that we are having a debate on this today, but one message that could come out of it is that we want the Government to be more responsive to issues that come of out of the Council of Europe, and that the House should automatically have a main Chamber debate at least once a year to go through the main issues arising from the Council of Europe, as we are doing today. If we want to live in a continent of peace, with protection of the environment and of human rights, this is an opportunity and a place where all those countries can come together at parliamentary level to try to achieve those kinds of changes.

2.7 pm

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate our delegation group leader, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), on securing today’s debate on the work of the Council of Europe. I am delighted to be a very active member of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and I have been to Strasbourg and Paris multiple times, including just after Easter, to support our work.

It is important to consider the origins of the Council of Europe. The context of today reminds me how incredibly important they were. It was founded after world war two, in 1949, to ensure that such a tragedy would never happen again. Today, as we have war right on the border of Europe, there has never been such an important time for us to have a place for speech and dialogue with our neighbours. The United Kingdom has always been at the heart of the conception of the Council of Europe, right from Sir Winston Churchill’s initiation to the signing of the treaty here in London.

So I strongly believe that although the UK is no longer part of the European Union, we remain an important part of the work of the Council of Europe and, of course, Europe as a geographical region. Member states in the Council of Europe have committed to upholding our three core pillars of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It is very clear that Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine violated these values, and

I welcome the fact that Russia was excluded from it in March last year. It had seriously violated article 3 of the Council of Europe statute that all member states must accept the principles of the rule of law and the enjoyment of all persons within their jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This is why the work of the Council of Europe is so important. If there was ever a time for us to be protecting and upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law, it is now. That is why I was so delighted that our Prime Minister decided to join the Council of Europe summit in Iceland last month. It was the fourth summit with Heads of State in the Council of Europe's history, and it comes as no surprise that the focus of the summit this year was the Council of Europe mission in the light of new threats to democracy and human rights, and of course to support Ukraine. I note that our Prime Minister signed the Reykjavik declaration, which restated that we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. It states:

“Without accountability, there can be no lasting peace and we support the principles for a just and lasting peace as outlined in President Zelensky's Peace Formula.”

Sally-Ann Hart: When our Prime Minister attended the Council of Europe summit in Iceland recently, he raised the massive issue of illegal migration, which is affecting the whole of Europe, not just the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK has a vital role to play in discussing illegal migration and encouraging European leaders to ensure that our Governments and institutions work together to stop illegal migration and the humanitarian disaster that it is causing?

Theo Clarke: I absolutely agree. I sit on the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, so if my hon. Friend waits a few more minutes, I will add some remarks to those of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

One tangible outcome of the summit was agreement on the register of damages caused by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. For me, that was a really important outcome. The objective is to document the damage, loss and injury being caused by the Russian war of aggression. I would like to see that register of damage used as an impactful tool to hold Russia to account. I reiterate that the declaration condemned the aggression in the strongest possible terms and called on the Russian Federation to cease the aggression immediately and to withdraw its forces completely and unconditionally from the internationally recognised territory of Ukraine.

We have recently seen the devastating social and environmental consequences of these attacks. I am sure that in the last few days we have all seen in the papers the attack on the dam in Ukraine, although Russia has not accepted responsibility for the attack. The social and environmental damage now spans to three villages, which are completely submerged underwater with flooding up to their roofs. It has resulted in the evacuation of thousands of people. Just today, the death of at least three people has sadly been reported as a result of the flooding and the spill-over. For me, this is an example of where the humanitarian disaster could be growing. It is therefore even more important that we as an international community come together to support these humanitarian responses.

When we consider examples such as the collapse of the dam in Ukraine, one issue that comes to mind is that the Council of Europe has proposed the register of damages, but what happens if Russia does not claim to be the perpetrator or claim responsibility? What happens if there is insufficient evidence to prove that an attack came from Russia? To what extent can we use the register of damages to ensure compensation for those victims? I hope that the Council of Europe will further define that and work on this issue.

I have long been a passionate supporter of Ukraine. Just last year at No. 10, I met with colleagues and a number of Ukrainian MPs to hear from them at first hand about the devastation in their country. I am proud that on our migration Committee we sit with Oleksiy Goncharenko, a Ukrainian MP, and hear from him directly about the values of democracy.

I turn to the impacts on my constituency. We are all aware that Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine has resulted in nearly 8 million refugees being recorded across Europe. First of all, I wish to thank so many British families across the UK for welcoming such a huge number of Ukrainian refugees to their homes. I am delighted that in my constituency of Stafford we have had the highest number of refugees come to settle in our town. I note that Staffordshire-based companies—even JCB—have generously offered homes to 70 Ukrainian refugees across the county. I hope that other companies will follow suit and show their philanthropic support in that way.

The UK has provided tremendous support for Ukraine. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office recently granted £2 million in aid to the HALO Trust, and I have seen for myself the fantastic work that that charity does to ensure that, by being demined and decontaminated, Ukraine can be rebuilt.

On my most recent visit to Strasbourg, as part of the UK delegation for the April part-session, I was delighted to attend a debate looking at political strategies to prevent, prepare for and face the consequences of natural disasters. The debate was focused on the recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria. It was shocking to hear that more than 53,000 lives have been lost.

Even though that disaster was nearly 2,000 miles from London, I was so pleased to see that that was not an obstacle to support from our Government. The FCDO was quick to step up and respond by providing £3.6 million to UN partners in Turkey and £3.8 million to the White Helmets in Syria. One of my observations from that visit to Strasbourg was that, when the Council of Europe comes together and member states agree, there is so much that we can achieve. I was so pleased to hear that all member states are committed to helping Turkey and Syria in a time of need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) mentioned the Council of Europe's Committee on Migration, Refugees And Displaced Persons. I have been on that committee for the last three years—since my election—and we are always discussing the incredibly distressing stories that we hear of forcibly displaced people around the world. There are about 100 million currently in that situation. A number of those refugees are now in Europe and, of course, trying desperately to come to the UK. One of the things that we raised was the UK Government's vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which, together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has committed to rehoming

[*Theo Clarke*]

20,000 Syrian refugees fleeing conflict, violence and persecution. I am proud that in my constituency Stafford Borough Council and our county council have been working together to support Syrian refugees through teaching English, organising social activities and building friendships.

The committee has also touched on Afghanistan, the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and the huge number of internally displaced people, such as women and children. I am pleased that the UK Government have schemes such as the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. I am very proud that the UK is a compassionate and generous country. I have always been a huge supporter of our overseas aid budget. It is important that we are stepping up in times of need to support each other.

Lastly, I thank the Council of Europe because I am a recent mum—I have just returned from maternity leave—and the Council of Europe bent over backwards to accommodate me to bring my baby to the Council of Europe. I acknowledge its work and encourage other politicians who are new mums. We do not have to choose between a career as a politician and being a new mum—we can do both.

2.17 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this important debate. I am a proud member of the delegation to the Council of Europe—it is a real honour—and thank him for all the work that he does. The delegation is cross-party and comes from both Houses, so we are working collaboratively—work that people outside the House do not see. When we work together, we achieve better goals and better outcomes for all of us.

The Council of Europe was established following the end of world war two to promote democracy and protect human rights and adherence to the rule of law in Europe. The UK was one of the 10 founding signatories to the Council of Europe statute, and the UK continues to play an active role in all parts of the organisation. The role of promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law is so important because that is what we are here to do.

Since the Council of Europe's creation, it has adopted more than 200 treaties and conventions, with the best known being the European convention on human rights. The ECHR is an international treaty between states of the Council of Europe. The United Kingdom was one of the states that drafted it and was one of the first states to ratify it in 1951. That is really important. Some MPs have raised concerns about the ECHR's impact since the rights set out in the convention were incorporated into British law by the Human Rights Act 1998. Some interpretations of that by British courts and the European Court of Human Rights have led some MPs to call for the UK to leave the ECHR altogether. That would be completely the wrong thing to do. The most notable and recent of those cases was when the European Court of Human Rights blocked a deportation flight to Rwanda in 2022.

I am a proud Welsh Italian. I have had the opportunity to travel across Europe and across the world, and I am a languages graduate. The opportunity to be a part of the

UK Parliament delegation and to speak Italian and French with our counterparts is a great honour. The work we do is reflected in committees, as it is in this House. I sit on the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media. Only last week, we held a session here in the UK Parliament on protecting human rights in sport, moderated by Lord George Foulkes of Cumnock, who is a great person and politician to have on that committee. It was heartbreaking to listen to Olivia Jasriel, the founder of the Olivia Jasriel Foundation for athletes, and Patrice Evra, the former Manchester United captain and French international, who, like Olivia, is an abuse survivor. They both campaign against abuse in sport and beyond.

These are domestic and worldwide issues around sport that impact directly on our lives, and the lives of our constituents, in particular young people. How governing bodies are held to account is very important to me. I have spoken in this House about misogyny and sexual abuse in sport. In the wake of what has happened in UK gymnastics, Yorkshire cricket and—I have spoken on this before—Welsh rugby union, the work of such committees is relevant to everybody and needs to be spoken about.

I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Henley for his work on the Istanbul convention, which is very important to all of us across the House. The UK delegation has done some great work on that and I thank him for it, because tackling violence against women and girls is at the heart of everything I do. I am also pleased that the UK delegation supports Kosovo's application for membership of the Council of Europe, so I thank him for his work on that, too.

I also thank some really key players: Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, who I have already mentioned; my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who leads the Labour delegation; and Lord Griffiths of Burry Port. I think the hon. Member for Henley would agree that they are the glue that holds the delegation together, with their expertise and knowledge. I thank Nick Wright and his staff who support us; they are absolutely wonderful.

The whole delegation, including those here today speaking in this debate, are very proud to be part of the Council of Europe. I am very proud to be a part of it and we should talk about it more in this House. We may have left Europe, but the UK Parliament delegation is still extremely relevant and a big player in the Council of Europe.

2.23 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing the debate on this matter, on which I know he holds passionate views. I pay tribute to the outstanding work he does on behalf of our delegation and on behalf of the Council of Europe to promote human rights, as well as the election work he does in other parts of Europe. I pay huge tribute to his brilliant ability.

The Council of Europe is the European continent's leading human rights organisation. Set up in 1949, it upholds human rights, democracy and the rule of law across continental Europe. I am proud that the United Kingdom was a founding member and was at the centre of proceedings at the treaty of London, which led to the formation of the Council of Europe. In fact, former

Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill first suggested the idea of a Council of Europe in a radio broadcast in 1943, while war was still raging in Europe.

Our membership of the Council of Europe is vital. As the Prime Minister stated recently at the Reykjavik Council of Europe summit:

“the UK may have left the EU, but we have not left Europe.”

It is vital to remember that. Our membership of the Council of Europe is more vital than ever. It increases the effectiveness of the Council of Europe, I believe. Our influence as a cross-party delegation—from both Houses, as the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) said—allows us to protect the UK’s goals in Europe on improving human rights, democracy and respect for the rule of law.

The Council of Europe truly brings European states together. It is obviously much wider than the 27 states of the European Union. The Council of Europe is made up of 46 members, including Georgia, Turkey and, of course, Ukraine, to name but a few. I was pleased to see that Russia was very quickly and decisively expelled following its illegal invasion of Ukraine last year.

Earlier this year, I was proud to be selected to be a member of the UK’s delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In January, I went on my first trip and attended a part-session of the Assembly. In that sitting, the issue of gender-based violence was at the heart of many of the debates. Unfortunately, those rights are still under threat in parts of Europe. The key principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law have been tossed aside by Putin because of his illegal invasion of Ukraine.

I must say that I was struck by the courage and bravery of the Ukrainian parliamentarians I met in Strasbourg. So many had risked their lives to get to Strasbourg, and the testimony they gave to us privately, as well publicly in the Assembly, was heartbreaking. It goes to show how important institutions such as the Council of Europe are when the Ukrainians, who are in the grip of a vicious war, still see the importance of attending the Council, and its ability to unite Europe against oppression and violations of international law.

It was not lost on me that, in the light of Russia’s brutality, my first speech in the Palace of Europe, where the Parliamentary Assembly sits, was on preventing sexual violence in conflict. These are vile and cowardly crimes that are often overlooked, so I was glad we had a debate on those particular war crimes, which highlighted sickening records of widespread sexual abuse by Russian troops, with victims ranging in age from four to 82, according to investigators at the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine. Ukraine’s Prosecutor General has also chronicled more than 88,000 alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity to date, including atrocities such as the 440 civilian bodies found in a mass grave in a liberated city. Unfortunately, those numbers are likely to increase substantially as more areas are liberated by Ukraine and inspectors gain access to the scenes of those crimes. The Council of Europe will play a massive part in ensuring those crimes are recognised and the perpetrators brought to justice.

During my speech at the Council of Europe, I outlined the UK’s strategy on sexual violence in conflict, which has been meticulously developed by experts, academics and non-governmental organisations to tackle all forms of conflict-related sexual violence. I was pleased to

share the strategy with the rest of the Parliamentary Assembly. The current situation in Ukraine, as well as events in too many other countries, including Afghanistan and Ethiopia, make clear that this issue is very much alive.

In the debate, I called on all members to join me in standing up for the rights of women and girls around the world. Indeed, the Council of Europe has a history of working to prevent gender-based violence, with campaigns against gender-based violence going back to the 1990s. The Council of Europe’s flagship gender-based violence treaty is the Istanbul convention, also known as the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The convention is the first legally binding instrument that creates a comprehensive legal framework and approach to combating violence against women. It is focused on preventing domestic abuse, protecting victims and prosecuting accused offenders.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Member is quite right to refer to gender-based violence and violence against women. In that interesting debate, a lot was said about education, particularly of women in schools. The point I made, and I am sure she would endorse, is that it is also about educating young boys about their attitudes towards women, so that we do not bring up another generation of young men who feel it is okay to be abusive towards women.

Nickie Aiken: The right hon. Member will hear me say exactly that later in my speech: if we are ever to resolve violence against women and girls, it is about education of girls and boys. We cannot do one without the other.

The convention does so much for ensuring that we put preventing violence against women and girls at the heart of everything we do, and ensures that such violence is seen as a human rights issue and as discrimination. States that ratify the convention—I am proud that we as a nation are one of those signatories—must criminalise several offences, including psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence including rape, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. The scope of that must not be understated. The convention states that sexual harassment must be subject to

“criminal or other legal sanction”.

It also includes an article targeting crimes committed in the name of so-called honour. I see no honour in any crime committed against a woman or girl.

During my trip to Strasbourg I spoke on the important role that men play in preventing violence against women and girls. I was interested to hear from delegates from all over Europe how they recognised the importance of education and changing attitudes on gender-based violence for boys and girls, as the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) just highlighted. I found that incredibly refreshing; it gave me renewed hope that organisations such as the Council of Europe can make a difference to improving the conditions for all women and girls across Europe, and will serve as an example to the rest of the world.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the European Court of Human Rights. In Strasbourg we met the UK judge on the Court, Judge Tim Eicke, in a worthwhile and fascinating meeting. Perhaps most interestingly, we

[*Nickie Aiken*]

discussed how few UK cases taken to the Court are upheld. In 2021, the Court dealt with only 215 applications regarding the UK. Of those, 205 were declared inadmissible. Only seven judgments were made, finding only one violation of the European convention on human rights. We should all be proud of that record. Meeting individuals such as our judge highlighted the work that the Council does to safeguard human rights for all member states.

I hope to go to Strasbourg again in a couple of weeks for the next session—slip permitting—where I hope to speak on more crucial issues such as public health and human rights. I look forward to continuing the UK's leadership on human rights, democracy and the rule of law as a key member of the Council of Europe. I also look forward to meeting more of my European counterparts to discuss how we can continue to work together to improve people's lives across Europe, sharing our own experiences and knowledge.

Let me conclude with a quote from one of the founding fathers of the Council of Europe, our own Winston Churchill:

“The dangers threatening us are great but great too is our strength”.

Wise words, and why we must remain a member of the Council of Europe.

2.34 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Let me give huge thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing this debate. He is far too modest to tell us just how much enthusiasm, drive and determination he puts into his leadership of the UK delegation. He is a great support to so many of us in the Chamber.

My appointment to the Council of Europe was my first appointment by the Government. I remember in those pandemic times working from home, and taking a call from the Chief Whip, thinking, “What I have done wrong?”, only to be told that I would be asked to join the UK delegation. Like many Members here, I did not know a great deal about what the Council of Europe did, but since then I have been totally enthralled by it, as hon. Members will hear in a minute. In those first 18 months of the pandemic, any new Member from the 2019 intake probably struggled to work out quite what was going on, as nationalities from all over Europe were beamed into Chambers. It took quite some time to understand quite what was going on.

It was at that time that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), our previous delegation leader, took me under his wing. In a matter of just a few months he decided to put me forward for a rapporteurship, which, thankfully, I did not get, because the subject matter was something that I had absolutely no idea how to contribute to. That is the beauty of the Council of Europe: it broadens our horizons, opens our eyes and enables us to learn so much more about our fundamental laws, democracy and human rights.

My right hon. Friend explained, “Don't worry. The d'Hondt system means that you will get the next rapporteurship that comes up.” I had no idea what the d'Hondt system was but, sure enough, my Christmas present in December 2020 was that I became the first of the 2019 intake to take on a rapporteurship. I took a great deal of pride in

that, because it got a lot of prominence: track and trace applications, and the ethical, cultural and educational challenges. At the time, when covid was still spreading and we were using contact tracing apps to monitor the spread of the virus, the issue of how we use that data was giving huge rise to conversations not just in our country but all over Europe.

That position took me to Paris and to Strasbourg. Perhaps one of the most memorable moments of my time in Parliament was the ability to stand up in the Hemicycle in Strasbourg and present my report, which was unanimously adopted. As many Members have said this afternoon, we simply could not do our work without the incredible help from Nick Wright and his team. For me, Silvia Arzilli was a huge help in getting an enormous amount of work over the line. The officers we have in our UK delegation are fantastic people.

Why am I saying all this? As has been repeated this afternoon, the rule of law and human rights are fundamental principles in our democracy. They are the very principles that underpin not just our rights in this country but the Council of Europe. As many people have said, when we talk to constituents about work on the Council of Europe, they look at us slightly quizzically and say, “Didn't we leave that?” I explain that we left the political union with the European Union, but we did not leave the work that we do within the Council of Europe.

It is quite true that there is more that unites us than divides us. The ability to work cross-party on the Council of Europe is one of the most attractive things about it. It offers the ability to talk for a time outside this Chamber with people in a more relaxed environment in Strasbourg, and fundamentally we work together. Many constituents do not see that side of our democracy.

We were one of the founding members of the Council of Europe in the 1940s. Our membership continues to demonstrate just how important we still are in the Council of Europe, and our international standing. Being on the UK delegation has opened my eyes, and I have enjoyed it a great deal. Listening to debates about human rights and refugees was somewhat of the inspiration, when the Ukraine war started, for my being the first MP to open my doors to a little family from Kyiv, who have been with me for 14 months. In my previous role, before I had any political ambitions whatsoever, I would perhaps not have considered that, but being thoroughly engrossed in the work of the Council of Europe and its role with human rights has changed my views and thoughts, as anybody who sits on the Council of Europe will understand, once they have worked with it for a few years.

As I finish, I pay one last tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley. He is far too modest to comment on his role in the removal of Russia from the Council of Europe but, in no small way, without his enthusiasm and passion to do what was right, we would not have ended up with that situation. Although that dreadful war continues in Europe—the worst for nearly 100 years—he needs to take a large amount of credit for leading that initiative and increasing our international standing by making sure that happened.

2.40 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I have the privilege of representing the constituency of Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner. Although many of my constituents will share concerns about the small

boats, which were referred to briefly by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), generations of people from all over the world have found refuge in my constituency. In particular, they include a large population of Jewish people, who came to the United Kingdom before the second world war, as the state terror against them was cranked up by the Nazis in Germany. A significant number came following the partition of India. Those people recognised that Europe in general, and the UK in particular, was a beacon of human rights and the rule of law—a place where their lives, businesses and families would be respected. Although I was not a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, that was the reason I took an interest in the Council of Europe during my time in local government, and I served as the Conservative delegation leader at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe.

I want to share some reflections on that part of the Council of Europe, which is rarely referred to in this Chamber, except in the particular context of its work carrying out election supervision. It has significant impact on the way we manage migration and asylum. It is visible through my membership and that of other Members of the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, which looks at the way the legislation we pass in this Chamber interacts with the European convention on human rights, of which we are a member. I will touch on some of the impacts that the different bodies of the Council of Europe have and consider some developments, such as the implications of the Brighton declaration, that show how that convention and the bodies that form part of the Council of Europe continue to be a work in progress, reflecting the changing world we face today.

I have heard in this Chamber, as reflected in much of the academic coverage of the subject, that there is a good deal of debate about the role in its foundation played by Winston Churchill, after whom buildings in Strasbourg and key Council of Europe premises are named. However, there is little doubt reflected back to me by my constituents who came to the UK in those circumstances that its founding politicians saw a desperate need for this body in the reconstruction of Europe after the second world war.

The aim was to ensure that there was a sufficient body of international jurisprudence to restrain potential abuses of state power, such as those that had been seen in a number of its member states in the run-up to the second world war. That would ensure that in the future no nation fell below that minimum standard, through a process where international law could be invoked. That took place against the background of the global work undertaken by the United Nations.

Following its foundation, the Council of Europe has developed a political sense. A number of Members have spoken from the perspective of their experience of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, but in due course the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe was created and the Council of Ministers was always there as part of the supervisory activity, whereby the Council itself was directly accountable to the Governments of the member states and they had a direct role in supervising decision making.

That has been enormously important, because in many of the debates on, for example, the Illegal Migration Bill and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, both in

this Chamber and in the public discourse, we have heard reference to foreign judges and courts and a lack of accountability. The Council of Europe, almost from its inception, has recognised that politics, not just the rule of law, is important in shaping its work. To this day, it remains extremely accountable to and shaped by the view of parliamentarians and the other active parties from the member states.

The role of the judges was referred to during the course of the debates on the Illegal Migration Bill, but it was not mentioned that those judges are elected by the Parliamentary Assembly. Members of this House choose who the judges are going to be, from a shortlist put forward by the Government of the member state. In fact, there is a much higher degree of accountability around the appointment of judges to the court than there is for judges in our own domestic courts here in the United Kingdom. That political relationship is incredibly important.

Then we have to consider the role of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. The bit that we tend to make reference to, especially when we have debates about emerging situations in countries where there are concerns about whether free and fair elections are taking place, is the role of election monitoring. Our counterparts from local and regional government spend their time checking that those elections are being carried out in a free and fair manner, and also looking at issues such as how positive obligations on public bodies—for example, the duties on local authorities to house people or ensure they have access to education and healthcare—are playing out in practice.

On top of that, we have the Venice Commission, which is the body that looks at setting the international gold standard for the conducts of elections. There was much debate in this Chamber about whether it was appropriate to bring voter ID into the UK system, but it has been recommended by the Venice Commission for some time, as part of the gold standard for ensuring that elections are free and fair. It is standard practice across most member states of the Council of Europe.

I will turn briefly to some of the emerging challenges. A number of Members have made reference to the situation with Russia; I know my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) has done sterling work on that. I served on the Congress during a period when Russia was still an active member of the Council of Europe, which was a good explication of some of the challenges the Council faces. At that stage, Russia had already invaded and annexed Crimea, but was not the only member state of the Council of Europe that, arguably, had invaded and occupied territory of another member state. The challenges were very visible—politicians who were there to represent the interests of their people had to set aside some of those immediate direct international challenges.

It is clear that at the Congress, the Parliamentary Assembly and the organisation in its broadest sense, the changing world, for example the digital environment, introduces new challenges to the way in which the rule of law is enforced. It is only through the willingness of the member states that the principles that underpin the Council of Europe can be upheld. A key point for those who have concerns about the UK's continued membership, is that, as has already been clearly stated, the number of referrals to the Court from the United Kingdom are exceptionally low, and the number of findings against

[David Simmonds]

the United Kingdom is lower still. It is also interesting to note that during its period of membership the largest number of representations from any member country came from Russia. It is very clear that the rule of law has some distance to travel in that country.

I commend the work that about which we have heard from a number of colleagues who serve on the Parliamentary Assembly. I also pay tribute to the work of my former colleagues on the Congress, who have done a tremendous amount to shape both the work and the priorities of the Council of Europe, especially it comes to the rights of refugees, both in the United Kingdom and following their transition from wherever they may have originated to a place of safety elsewhere. It is important that those rights are respected but also managed, and that countries such as Greece, Italy and Turkey—which accommodate millions of refugees at a time when we in the United Kingdom are worrying about tens of thousands at the most—are able to share the challenges that that poses for their communities and the implications for their politics, and also to work with us to find a more functional and effective system of managing the way in which people who are in dire need of help move around the world. As issues such as climate change begin to become a larger factor, we have an opportunity to reflect on how those rights will all play out.

I want to express the pride that I think we all feel in the role that the United Kingdom has played in developing this framework, and in its consistent maintenance and enforcement of the standards of respect for human rights, which have done so much to reduce injustice among the member states and in wider Europe over the years since the second world war. I also want to place on record my personal thanks to some of the UK ambassadors and diplomats who I know are extremely active in Strasbourg, meeting regularly and ensuring that issues that politicians debate perhaps once a session are being managed and the process is being smoothed on a daily basis. In particular, like others, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley.

I also thank our counterparts—leaders such as Councillor Kevin Bentley, who leads the local government delegation—whose work behind the scenes, to which we do not often have a chance to pay tribute in the House, addresses our constituents' need for access to justice when they are abroad. While we in the House can spend a great deal of time arguing about what may in the grand scheme of things be relatively small issues, we have colleagues who are working to ensure that our fellow citizens, in this country and abroad, continue to enjoy their right to life, their right to liberty, their right to a family life, their right to pursue a business, and their right to do all the things that free human beings should be able to do within the context of a legal framework within which it can be ensured that no one infringes those rights unjustly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

2.51 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is an honour and a privilege to speak as the leader of the SNP delegation to the Council of Europe. Let me first thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for the

great work he does in leading the UK delegation. I also thank Nick Wright and the staff in the UK delegation office, who are always on hand when we need help and support. Certainly, when I joined the delegation in 2018, I had a lot to learn about the Council of Europe.

I think this is one of those unique debates in which there is much more agreement than disagreement, and I have to say that what we have heard today from, in particular, my Conservative friends in the delegation genuinely gives me a sense of hope and faith in our democracy. I think that the Council of Europe may be keeping them on the right track, and keeping them honest in some respects—I mean that in the kindest possible way. It is clear to me that all the delegates who are speaking here today, particularly the Conservatives, are absolutely committed to the principles of the human rights and democracy that the Council of Europe holds so dear and champions in everything it does.

Let me say for my own part that, while having been elected as a Member of Parliament for my home town of Livingston is a huge privilege, as a queer lassie from a working-class single-parent family growing up in Livingston, I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams that—having read modern studies and then gained a politics degree—I would walk through the doors of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg as a fully fledged member. Taking up that role was a source of significant pride and honour for me.

I hope that I have played my part in my contribution since 2018, as a member of various committees and, in particular, as a member of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. I have served as the committee's rapporteur, working on the report "Towards a human rights and public health approach to drug control policies". The report was produced largely under covid, and preparing it online was more challenging, so I want to put on record my huge thanks to the staff who supported me—particularly Kelly, who carried out so much work and research.

During that period, once we were allowed out and about, I had the privilege of visiting a drug consumption room in Strasbourg. That was an experience that I will never forget. As the debate on drugs policy ranges across the UK, in the UK media and beyond, I must say that seeing the progress that France and other countries have made in providing such facilities was truly incredible. As other Members have said, the opportunity presented by the Council of Europe to see the workings of our European friends and neighbours really does open our eyes and broaden our horizons. I am also now relishing being the rapporteur of a report into the state of human rights, human rights defenders and journalists in Azerbaijan.

I draw attention to the comments from the hon. Member for Henley about the perceptions both in society and, perhaps, even in this place about the Council of Europe and its work. People may not know that the EU nicked the Council of Europe's flag, and it has also adopted many of its principles. He spoke passionately about the importance of the Reykjavik summit, and I share his gratitude and delight that the UK Prime Minister attended. The work done at the summit on tackling the war in Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia is incredibly important. The SNP does not always feel that the UK Government are doing enough, and significantly more needs to be done—I say that as

someone who sat on the Public Bill Committee for the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, which did not go nearly far enough. We must ensure that concrete steps are put in place so that frozen Kremlin-linked assets can be seized and invested into the proposed Marshall plan, which I know the Dutch Government have taken up. I hope that that will be considered.

Other Members made fantastic contributions. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) took a moment to reflect on his 40 years since first being elected. He has been here for as long as I have been alive—I turned 40 last week. I do not mean to make him feel old in any way, but he has worked hard for his constituents, and I congratulate him on 40 years in this place. There has been much talk about immigration, and he spoke about the European Court of Human Rights ruling on the Rwanda case. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) spoke passionately about the Council of Europe and its work, and I was genuinely delighted to hear that. I hope that those on his party's Front Bench will reflect on that ruling, on the work of the Council of Europe and on the principle, as others have highlighted, of our continuing to be members of the Council of Europe.

It would be heartbreaking and unthinkable for the UK to turn its back on the Council of Europe and walk away. As a Member who was there during the dying days of the Brexit process, I remember the outrage and horror of our European colleagues and the pain they felt following the UK's decision in that vote. Equally, I remember a desire to work with us and to move forward. For my part, and the SNP's part, when Scotland is an independent nation we will, I have no doubt, be a proud member of the Council of Europe and, I hope, the European Union.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) spoke about how she had been embraced at the Council of Europe as a new mum. That was wonderful to hear and, I hope, gives hope to other Members with children that they will be able to balance their responsibilities. I know it is a daunting task for many, so I congratulate her on that. She spoke about the history of the Council of Europe and its origins in the tragedy of world war two. There was unanimity across the House on Russia's expulsion, and never has the importance of European nations working together against the war in Russia been more obvious.

The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) spoke passionately about her work at the Council of Europe on abuse in sport, which she continues to champion. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) talked about the debates she took part in on gender-based violence. The UK was a little slower than we would have liked to ratify the Istanbul convention, and it was of course my former hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, Eilidh Whiteford, who brought the ratification Bill to this place off the back of the great work of the Council of Europe. It took a few years to get it ratified, so I hope we will be a little speedier in future at getting important pieces of legislation ratified. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster on those important issues.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) talked about his work on track and trace applications—that must have been an interesting piece of work to do at

that particular time—and the beauty of the horizon broadening of the Council of Europe. We must all embrace that.

I am conscious that I have gone over time, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I will once again put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Henley for all that he does as the head of our delegation. There will be many things on which we disagree, but we do work well together as a delegation, and I look forward to continuing to work at the Council of Europe with all my colleagues.

2.59 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the whole House will want to let the people of France know that our thoughts and prayers are with them after the terrible events we have seen in Annecy today. I understand that the Foreign Secretary has indicated that a British child was involved in that terrible incident. *Donc, à nos amis en France, nos pensées et nos prières sont avec vous tous en ce moment.*

I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing this debate at a critical time for democracy, human rights and the rule of law across our continent, and I thank Members on both sides of the House for their thoughtful and considered contributions—we have heard many excellent comments.

I echo the hon. Gentleman's thanks, and the thanks of many Members, to all the UK delegation, particularly those from this side of the House, and to all the staff who facilitate the important work of the Council of Europe. I am glad he emphasised the importance of the ECHR, which has been referenced by many Members today, and of the work on election observation and monitoring. It was good to hear him mention ecocide, as my party has a firm commitment to taking that forward, were we to form the next Government. Like many Members, I share his views on the important work done by the Council of Europe, particularly in its expulsion of Russia and its firm stance in support of Ukraine, Kosovo's membership and many other issues.

Although there is a plethora of geopolitical hotspots across Europe at the moment, and Putin's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine is justifiably a key focus for all of us here today and in the work of the Council of Europe, there are many other areas on which the Council of Europe works that warrant the House's attention. Indeed, we have seen attempts not only by Putin but by other global and regional actors to sow disharmony, to undermine democracy and the rule of law, and to foment tensions elsewhere in Europe, whether in the western Balkans, Moldova, the eastern Mediterranean, the Baltic or the Caucasus, all of which come under the remit of the Council of Europe. It is arguable that the work of the Council of Europe is now more important than ever.

I recognise the work of not only my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who has spoken today, but of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who is not with us today—I thank him for all the work he has done over so many years. I also thank Lord Foulkes, Lord Griffiths and others who have been mentioned today.

It is right that, back in May, we saw the historic fourth Council of Europe summit in Reykjavik pledge unanimous support to protecting and advocating for

[Stephen Doughty]

democracy, human rights and the rule of law while reaffirming solidarity with the people of Ukraine. As the Reykjavik statement outlined

“European democracies are not established once and for all. We need to strive to uphold them each and every day... The Council of Europe remains the guiding light that assists us in fostering greater unity...for the purpose of safeguarding and realising these ideals and principles which are our common heritage.”

That is more important than ever, as we see backsliding on democracy, human rights and the rule of law in some contexts in our own neighbourhood.

Importantly, the Council of Europe focuses on practical responses and, as a number of Members have highlighted today, one key outcome is the establishment of a register of loss and damage in relation to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which will be critical as we approach the Ukraine recovery conference here in London this month. As we have seen with the terrible events over the past 48 hours in relation to the Kakhovka dam, which will have not only an immediate impact but a long-term impact due to the spreading of mines and the damage to agricultural land, which will have a long-term impact on Ukraine’s economy. I have written to the Government today—I hope the Minister will draw the attention of the Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), to that letter—asking practical questions about what support the UK will give in relation to that specific incident.

It is critical that we support the register, as it will be crucial in informing how we might be able to generate resources to support Ukraine in the long term. I hope the Minister will say a little about progress on seizing, not just freezing, Russian state assets and, indeed, expanding and deepening our sanctions legislation. The summit also gave a clear pan-European expression of solidarity with those affected by Russia’s war of aggression against not only Ukraine but Georgia—of course, we have also seen what has happened in Moldova. It is important that we work together with our allies on all those issues.

I mentioned the ECHR and I am glad it has come up multiple times in this debate, with strong support from across the House. I heard what the Prime Minister and others have had to say. Of course, the UK signed that final declaration that set out

“our unconditional obligation to abide by the final judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in any case to which we are Parties.”

It set out our support for the ECHR, so I wonder whether he could have a word with the Home Secretary and some other naysayers on the Government side of the House. However, it was good to hear the support here today from many colleagues. The ECHR is crucial in relation to the Good Friday agreement and so many other agreements to which we are party.

As I said in our last debate on the Council of Europe, the ECHR has delivered more than 16,000 judgments across a range of issues, not just the few that get highlighted in the media. Such issues include the right to life; the prohibition of torture; the prohibition of slavery and forced labour; the right to liberty and security; the right to a fair trial; the right to private and family life; freedom of religion; freedom of expression; the prohibition of discrimination; and the protection of property. The ECHR rightly stands up for those values

that are at the core of not only the British legal system, but the European system of human rights, which we played a crucial role in establishing over many decades. So I hope the Minister will assure us that the apparent change in tone from the Government on the ECHR will continue and it will be reaffirmed in his remarks today.

The Istanbul convention has rightly been mentioned by a number of Members. I wish to highlight my concerns about the Government’s reservation on ratifying article 59, which protects migrant and refugee women from domestic abuse and violence. Labour Members have made it clear that we would set out a clear, strict timetable on completing outstanding actions to ratify the convention in full. I hope that the Minister will say something about why the Government continue to have a reservation on that matter, because it undermines our position on a crucial measure brought forward by the Council of Europe to protect the world’s most vulnerable women and girls.

We have heard a lot of discussion today about the importance of upholding democratic practice and the cultures of political pluralism across the continent. That is central to the Council of Europe’s remit. Reference has rightly been made to the fact that its Parliamentary Assembly has led more than 250 election observer missions, and many Members from all parts of the House have paid tribute to the work done in those. The Council of Europe stands ready at every phase of an election cycle to ensure the integrity of ballot boxes, through devising legal frameworks for elections; training and educating local officials; encouraging voter registration; and verifying results. Those processes are elemental to our democratic life, but they can be open to exploitation and exposed to interference. It is crucial that we continue to support that work.

It has been noted, but let me say that in the past few months PACE has monitored elections in Montenegro and observed the second round of Turkey’s presidential election. It is also currently holding an inquiry on the impact of artificial intelligence. It is crucial that we understand that and I know that in due course we will be debating in this Chamber its impact on our democratic systems. We have had some worrying developments in that regard and it is important that we are working with European partners on that. They are also doing crucial work on the challenges facing Belarusians in exile from Lukashenko’s brutal regime.

Lastly, I come to the issue of human rights and the rule of law, because the Council of Europe has played a crucial role in protecting national minorities; the rights of LGBT+ people; migrant populations; Roma and Travellers; children; women; and people with disabilities. It has also worked on the elimination of trafficking. Labour stands squarely beside the Council of Europe in its defence of the rights of people across Europe. It is Pride Month, and I had the pleasure last week of being in another Council of Europe member state, Malta, which arguably now leads Europe in its support for LGBT+ people and is doing some excellent work. Unfortunately, when we see backsliding—some of it in this country, regrettably—we need to be looking to allies across Europe and in the Council of Europe to see how we can underpin crucial rights for LGBT+ people.

The Council of Europe is rightly working on a range of other human rights issues. We know of how the ongoing blockade of the Lachin corridor in the Caucasus

is having an impact on the social, political and economic rights of those living in Nagorno-Karabakh, an issue that I have raised regularly with Ministers. We know of journalists, trade unions and civil society leaders being pursued and prosecuted relentlessly for their advocacy in a range of contexts across Europe. I will not go into a long list of examples, but a number of them have been mentioned today.

Let us be clear, the human rights of Europeans have been hard fought for and hard won, but sadly they are not an inevitability; there will always be individuals and regimes that will seek to erode them. That is why the work of institutions such as the Council of Europe is so essential—whether that be rapporteurs working with Azeri officials to end police harassment of LGBT+ people, the work being done to end the violence against Roma women in Serbia, or the inquiry being conducted by the special representative for migration and refugees into the welfare of Ukrainian refugee children.

This has been a thorough and important debate. Labour remains resolute in its support for the work of the Council of Europe and will continue to work with colleagues across the House to further many of its workstreams and agendas. The Council of Europe is a manifestly diverse and dynamic organisation. We wish to make it clear that we will always seek opportunities to work alongside our allies and partners on issues of human rights, the rule of law and democracy. The Council of Europe is key to addressing all of those and upholding those very British and European values which all of us stand for in this House.

3.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is good to take part in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that you were able to come in only for the tail end of it, but it was one of those occasions when it was genuinely good to see both sides of the House speak up unanimously in favour of this important institution, with heartfelt gratitude for its existence. The Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), would have been delighted to take part in this debate, but he was not available to attend. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

I wish to congratulate—along with just about everybody in the Chamber—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on his incredible work. I had always thought that he had done well, but, having listened to all the tributes to him from right across the Chamber, I now know that he has done even better than I originally thought. That is quite extraordinary, so I say well done to him and thank him very much. He and other members of the UK delegation play a vital role in promoting the Council of Europe and its work. It is also right to highlight the important work of Sandy Moss and our superb team there as well.

I wish to say that our thoughts are with the people of Ukraine—especially those living in the area that has been affected by the flooding over recent days—whose lives, homes and livelihoods are threatened. This was just another terrible incident that has happened in this tragic war. I also echo the timely remarks of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of France—I cannot speak French, so I will go along with his words

—following that terrible attack in Annecy. They are also with the family of the British child who was sadly injured in that attack.

I am grateful for all the contributions that have been made, and I will seek to respond to as many as I can in my winding-up remarks. The UK has long been at the forefront of the Council of Europe, from its creation through the Treaty of London in 1949 to the Prime Minister attending the Reykjavik summit just a few weeks ago. The Council of Europe has been, and will continue to be, important to our human rights and foreign policy agenda. That is why the work of the Parliamentary Assembly is so vital.

We are grateful to the UK delegation for its efforts to promote and protect UK interests. As the Prime Minister said at the summit in Reykjavik last month, the Council of Europe has an extraordinary legacy. The reason that it has endured for so long is its important role in upholding the fundamental rights and freedoms underpinning our security and prosperity. We continue to co-operate and collaborate with our friends across Europe to uphold and promote the values of the Council of Europe.

As I said at the start of my speech, it is good to hear such strong support for the Council of Europe. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) made some really important points. I could see her pride in being able to be part of the delegation, which was true for many others as well. It is very clear that, although we have differences, there is definitely more that unites us than divides us, particularly on core values around democracy and freedom. Like her, I regard it an extreme honour to be able to help engage with interlocutors and often friends around the world as we seek to promote those values. I also recognise the significant 40th anniversary of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—[*Interruption.*] Ruby, indeed.

Putin's heinous and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine is the biggest threat to democracy, human rights and the rule of law on our continent since the Council was established, and it is rightly standing strong against those threats. Last year, the organisation took quick and decisive action to expel Russia, as has been highlighted. We should not forget that the UK parliamentary delegation and the Government were at the forefront in calling for that expulsion.

Today, the Council of Europe is playing a vital role in supporting Ukraine. Its work to establish the register of damage is an important step in securing financial accountability and supporting justice for the people of Ukraine, as was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Theo Clarke) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) in their excellent remarks. The Prime Minister signed the register at the summit as a founding participant, and we will continue to work with the Council and our friends worldwide to ensure support for it.

We also look forward to welcoming the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe and many other member states to the Ukraine recovery conference later this month, as the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth highlighted—we will follow up on the important points that he raised in his letter. That will enable us to galvanise international investment in reconstruction as we co-host the conference with Ukraine, building on the £220 million of humanitarian assistance we have already provided.

[David Rutley]

Responding to Russia's war, democratic backsliding and growing authoritarian trends, we renewed our commitment to the Council of Europe's democratic values and principles through the Reykjavik principles of democracy. The UK was proud to be at the forefront of that effort. We also demonstrated our commitment to the Council's convention system as the cornerstone of its protection of human rights.

We were instrumental in ensuring that the declaration referenced the principle of subsidiarity and the doctrine of margin of appreciation. Those key concepts define the boundaries of the Strasbourg Court's role and rightly allow it to concentrate on serious systemic issues when they arise. The UK has a strong tradition of both ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically and fulfilling our international human rights obligations. As the Prime Minister said in this House a few months ago:

"The UK is and will remain a member of the ECHR."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 594.]

As many of my hon. Friends have noted, the Council of Europe is an important institution for the United Kingdom. We are actively involved in much of its diverse work, from minority languages to the environment to violence against women and girls, which has been called out in this debate. Our membership allows us to shape international norms and standards and to reform conventions such as mutual legal assistance to better reflect today's challenges.

The breadth, scope and ambition of the Council's work is the reason its value has endured, and the UK is determined to ensure that that continues as we face the challenges of tomorrow. Digital technologies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) noted, have transformed the world, but we cannot ignore the complex risks to human rights that they can present, particularly when it comes to artificial intelligence. That is why the UK is committed to the Council of Europe's pioneering work to develop the world's first international treaty on AI in relation to human rights, democracy and rule of law.

The UK is also taking ambitious action to deliver a cleaner and greener world, and we are pleased to be engaging with the Council on how we might define the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, which has been raised in this debate. Illegal migration is another fast-growing problem and a pressing human rights issue. If we are to stop it, we need a concerted and collective effort from all countries in Europe to shut down people-smuggling gangs and to block them at every stage of their illegal and inhumane journey. We will continue to work with the Council of Europe to ensure that it plays its part in confronting illegal migration.

I recognise the work of members of the UK delegation on migration, refugees and displaced persons, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, who recently, as she said, visited Strasbourg with her baby—that is real dedication to the cause and I thank her for that work. On Kosovo, I just wanted to highlight to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who is not in her place—[*Interruption.*] Oh, there she is—excuse me. She made an important contribution on a number of issues, but I want to reassure her that the UK Government welcome the decision by the Committee of Ministers to

refer Kosovo's application to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. That is the next step in the process.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster, we recognise the importance of the Istanbul convention in helping to protect women and girls. There is also important work to be done on issues such as educational impacts during the pandemic, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) highlighted. We should recognise the wider work of the Council, including its ongoing work on election monitoring, which my hon. Friend the Member for Henley highlighted and on which he and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner have done considerable work.

Before I conclude, I wish my good and hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) very well for his first outing at the Dispatch Box in the Adjournment—good luck.

To end, let me reiterate what valuable work the Council of Europe does. Next year marks 75 years since the signing of the treaty of London—that is even longer than the right hon. Member for Islington North has been a Member of this House. It is an established, venerable institution. The UK has been a leading player since the Council's inception. In the face of the challenges on our doorstep in Europe, we will strive to ensure that the Council's value and legacy endure as they rightly should.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you. The last words go to John Howell.

3.20 pm

John Howell: I began this debate by thanking Madam Deputy Speaker because she is a former member of the Council of Europe, and so are you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to have two former members chair this debate.

I thank everyone for the enormous kindness of their words and for their contributions to the debate. There can be no clearer estimate of the appreciation across the House for the Council of Europe than this debate. I am incredibly grateful for all contributions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, John, for everything that you do on the Council of Europe. It was a great honour to be twice a member of the Council. The current Turkish Foreign Secretary—if he still is that—made me a life member of the Council of Europe, which is a great honour. Thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.

PETITION

East Putney station

3.22 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I present a petition from 3,176 residents of Putney asking for a lift at East Putney tube station on the District line. East Putney has a high footfall of more than 6 million passengers a year and a correspondingly high number of local residents with mobility issues who cannot use their own station.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Putney,

Declares that the latest available figures show a footfall of 6.18 million passengers a year through East Putney station, more than neighbouring Southfields and Putney Bridge stations yet there is currently no step-free access to the station platform, notes that this makes it impossible for many people with mobility issues to use the station and very difficult and dangerous for parents with wheelchairs, anyone with luggage and during peak usage times, and further declares that step-free access at East Putney Station is urgently needed to increase accessibility for all those wishing to use it.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to consider East Putney tube station for step free funding and deliver step free access at East Putney station.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002835]

Deep Geothermal Energy

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

3.23 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): It is opportune, on a day when the sun is blazing outside, to raise in this House what is sometimes referred to as the sun underneath our feet, or, to give it its formal term, deep geothermal.

“That must be too good to be true” was my reaction when I was introduced to deep geothermal technology. An environmentally friendly, dependable and cost-effective source of heat and power that can be found right underneath us? Surely not. I have been pleasantly surprised to learn that deep geothermal is, in fact, just as good as it sounds. Deep geothermal technology uses the heat from naturally occurring sources of hot water deep underground to generate a large amount of usable heat and energy. Heat radiates from the earth’s core, which is hotter than the surface of the sun, and although it dissipates as it reaches the surface, the heat remains significant. Where that hot rock overlaps with underground water sources, the combination allows for deep geothermal plants. Think about naturally occurring hot springs such as the famous Roman baths; it is the same principle. In places like that, the water that is being heated has found its way to the surface naturally, but modern technology can allow this hot water to be accessed artificially through drilling into aquifers to access the warm water below. Heat exchangers then transmit the heat to homes and buildings.

I have been introduced to this technology because of its great potential locally in Cheshire, as we sit above the hot underground aquifer known as the Cheshire Basin. The possibility of a deep geothermal plant has been considered a number of times locally but never progressed to firm plans, so I began looking at how we might get there. As I learnt more about it, I saw the potential for not just my area but the whole country. I was therefore delighted to be asked by the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), to produce a review on the potential for making better use of deep geothermal energy as we strive for net zero. I was similarly pleased when the current Prime Minister asked me to continue that work.

The obvious first step was to consider what is happening in other countries with similar geology and thriving deep geothermal industries. Geological experts pointed me towards France and Germany, among others. Deep geothermal energy is heating 250,000 homes in Paris, and across France more than 600 MWh of heat are produced annually, as the Government aim to increase the number of schemes by 40% by 2030. Munich is pouring in €1 billion through to 2035 to develop deep geothermal and make the city’s heating carbon-neutral. More widely, Germany is already producing more than 353 MWh annually, and the Government are targeting at least 100 new geothermal projects.

As part of my review, I was able to visit a deep geothermal plant in Pullach, a suburb of Munich. I got to see for myself how quietly and efficiently this hot water can be utilised. No one would know that the little building I visited next to a park and a school was

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

heating the local swimming pool, businesses, the town hall and hundreds of homes. The obvious question that follows, seeing this success elsewhere, is: why do we not see the same here? I understand that there has been some debate about whether the geology in countries such as France and Germany is more favourable to deep geothermal. The overwhelming feedback I received during my review was that that is not the case. While the greater temperatures needed to generate electricity, rather than just hot water for heating, may be less available, that is far from a reason not to see a flourishing industry here in the UK, for reasons I will go on to talk about.

My understanding is that the biggest difference between the UK and many of our neighbours is that Government support to help to get deep geothermal industries off the ground is widespread there. That consists of a mix of tariff guarantees, insurance support and grants. It is no surprise that investors will favour countries that are supporting an industry when it comes to deciding where to put their money. At one point, we did have a tariff guarantee for renewable heat. It was not taken up, but I think it was a matter of timing. It was ahead of the game—the game being the current huge appetite there is from investors and oil and gas to diversify on the way to net zero.

Of course, we can expect to see some differences between the renewable resources created in each country. We cannot expect to be world leaders in each field. We lead in solar and wind, for example, but we need to balance the disadvantages of the technologies we lead on. We know that solar and wind wax and wane with the weather and need large swathes of land. Deep geothermal does not. It is always on and always there, whatever the weather, and sites usually take no more than 1 or 2 acres. Even if we cannot lead in every technology, we cannot afford to not at least grab the lowest hanging fruit of all the technologies on offer.

That is because getting to net zero by 2050 will require us to pull every possible lever. Transitioning our heating systems is a particular challenge. The UK has more than 28.5 million homes and 1.9 million other buildings—offices, hospitals, shops and warehouses. The majority of those are heated by gas boilers. Nearly a fifth of all the UK's emissions come from buildings. Transitioning to an electric-based system of heating is expected to do the lion's share, but while we can of course support the growth of skills and jobs for technologies dependent on electricity, we can see even now that the workforce and manufacturing capacity in this field creates challenges.

Deep geothermal plants would allow us to recruit from an entirely different workforce and existing part of the economy in delivering results, and this is a workforce that we already lead on. Our oil and gas industry is one of the best in the western world, with world-beating companies and workforces with a long history of success not just in the North sea but globally. Deep geothermal provides us with the opportunity to recruit that workforce into drilling for clean heat instead of fossil fuels. That will not only help us get to net zero, but help that industry, with all the jobs it currently holds, to be a positive part of the transition. It is clearly in our interests to ensure that the UK is an internationally competitive environment for deep geothermal.

As with wind and solar at their outset, long-term financial incentives would help to unlock millions in capital investment and kick-start the industry. That transfers all the risk to the private sector instead of using taxpayer grants. This does not need to be a repeat of the open-ended subsidies that drove the wind and solar industries forward. Proposals from industry ask for a capped amount of support, which would still produce the results we need. Grant-based schemes inherently do not provide investor confidence; they involve too much uncertainty. Over time, a number of grants may well total up to a significant amount of investment from Government, but a company taking the decision to invest in drilling rigs and job roles on the chance that it may get some grants is a much trickier prospect than knowing that, if it makes that investment and is successful in delivering, it will be supported.

In a report by the Association for Renewable Energy and Clean Technology and Arup, the ask from industry was for tariff support at £55 per megawatt-hour for 30 initial plants for 20 years. I saw with interest that that was the amount agreed by Government to support the green gas industry. That suggests to me that the Government consider it value for money.

Of course, there are wider considerations beyond just the unit price. I have talked about the valuable role that geothermal could play in helping our oil and gas industry transition, but there are other factors when we reflect on where deep geothermal could be delivered. As part of my report, I commissioned Durham University's Energy Institute to review data about where we know the best combinations of hot water and rocks are, based on the data available for England. It is important to point out that other places for which we have less data could also be candidates, and I am sure there are opportunities across our family of nations, but the aim was to kick-start local stakeholders and drive forward projects from the ground up. I look forward to working with MPs and councils in those areas.

An unexpected but very stark finding of the review was that six of the 45 sites in England are in the top 10 of the index used by Government to identify areas in need of levelling up. Some 44% of the locations listed as having high potential for deep geothermal fall within the top 100 levelling-up locations. That is three times the amount we would expect to see as a result of chance, and it gives us yet another reason to look closely at that technology. It could help bring jobs and investment into some of the places most in need of it. We can also help secure public support for the energy transition if we are able to ensure that Government investment into it is spread to where it would generate the widest possible benefit. We have seen how some coastal communities have benefited from offshore wind, for example.

That is not to say that the industry is at a standstill; there are green shoots. The United Downs deep geothermal plant in Cornwall was a project initially supported by both the UK Government and EU grant funding, but with a recent private sector investment by Kerogen Capital and Thrive Renewables, it is set to go live next year, providing both heat and electricity. The local council has just received funding from the green heat network fund to enable the heat it generates to be used locally, and as I understand it, the Eden deep geothermal heat plant will go live very shortly, heating the world-famous Eden biomes as well as its offices and greenhouses, and potentially a distillery.

Near to my constituency, in Stoke, there is planning permission and a funding application in for a deep geothermal plant, and I have been supporting Leighton Hospital in discussions about securing a plant to provide the heat that that hospital needs. There is a wider group of NHS trusts exploring that approach, working with the carbon and energy fund and seeking support from the public sector decarbonisation pot. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) can pass on to the Energy Minister that I hope he will look encouragingly at those applications for funding to the Department, because we know that if we drill in some places, it helps us to understand the wider geology in a way that can benefit the whole industry.

As an advocate of this technology, it is important for me to be clear about its challenges. Making use of the heat from deep geothermal requires the building of heat networks. That is not a major issue for large single-use customers such as the hospitals I mentioned, and it is also not an issue for big businesses or civic buildings. It is also uncomplicated if it is included from the outset when building homes, but it is a challenge for existing individual homes. It is certainly not an insurmountable challenge—in Pullach, where I visited, homeowners are choosing to join the network bit by bit—but it does mean that deep geothermal is not an overnight solution for all of our existing housing stock. Thankfully, as I have explained, the challenge is so enormous that deep geothermal can play an important role, even if it is not the entire solution.

We also need to build public support and understanding. Having seen one for myself, I know that having a heat exchanger in a home is really no different from having a boiler, but we need to explain that. I think the best evidence of the environmental credentials of deep geothermal is the support it has received from Greenpeace and the UN, and as I mentioned, one of the first sites due to go live is at Cornwall's Eden Project, widely recognised as a leading UK environmental charity.

I hope that today I have been able to explain clearly the benefits and opportunities that deep geothermal presents, based on everything I learned in producing the review. I want to take a moment to thank some of those who helped me: I thank IGas Energy and GT Energy for facilitating and funding a visit to Pullach to view their deep geothermal network, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) for his advice on the conduct of a review. Thanks are also due to Professor Jon Gluyas and the Durham Energy Institute, the British Geological Survey, the Association for Renewable Energy and Clean Technology, the Coal Authority, the Eden Project, Pullach municipal council, the United Downs Deep Geothermal Power project, the Geothermal Energy Advancement Association, the Geological Society and the House of Commons Library.

I also thank the Secretary of State and the Energy Minister for the support they have given, and officials in the Department who have been open and co-operative and want to do what they can to understand how we can make the most of deep geothermal. Of course, I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) for asking me to start this review, and the Prime Minister for asking me to continue it.

I hope that my report, and recent efforts by others to highlight the opportunity that deep geothermal presents, will spark the beginning of a renewed effort to kick-start

a UK-based industry. If we dig deep on geothermal, we will help level up the UK and reap the rewards that will provide.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Now, for his maiden speech from the Dispatch Box, with his nearest and dearest looking on—so no pressure—I call Jacob Young. Good luck!

3.34 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I am grateful and proud to be making my first appearance at the Dispatch Box—hopefully it will not be my last.

I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) for securing this important and timely debate. I also thank him for his thorough report into deep geothermal energy and the associated economic opportunities, which was produced at the request of the Government. His report is right in its summation that getting to net zero by 2050 will require us to pull every possible lever, and it is also right that this transition can deliver major economic benefits to our country at the same time. I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and many others are interested in the potential of this energy source in their areas.

Before I move to the specifics, let me make it clear that this Government remain committed to meeting our net zero ambitions by 2050. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's weaponisation of hydrocarbons has only hastened our acceleration away from fossil fuels and made energy security even more of an urgent priority. Thankfully, we have made rapid progress on switching to home-grown renewable electricity in recent years, this country is now home to four of the largest operational wind farms in the world, and we are building a cutting-edge new lithium refinery in Teesside, but we need to do more.

We know that we need to keep investing in renewable sources if we are to reduce our dependence on volatile energy markets and support the global fight against climate change. That means continuing to make the most of the opportunities that our geology and geography afford us, including, as my hon. Friend set out so well, the huge potential for geothermal power.

Dr Mullan: I was delighted to hear mention of other Members in the Chamber whose areas could benefit from this technology. I just encourage my hon. Friend to note that Redcar itself is a great candidate for deep geothermal, too.

Jacob Young: Like me, my hon. Friend is a keen advocate for green energy, and Teesside can indeed be home to many green energy sources. I thank him for pointing that out.

While geothermal is a relatively new source of energy in the UK, we need only look to Cornwall, as my hon. Friend said, for an idea of its potential to provide clean and secure power for our households and businesses. The UK's first geothermal plant, operated by Geothermal Engineering Ltd at its United Downs site near Redruth, is set to begin generating next year, with a baseload capacity of 2 MW, rising to a combined power and heat capacity of 25 MW after four years. Geothermal

[*Jacob Young*]

Engineering Ltd has plans to develop other plants across the UK by 2028, producing enough energy to power 70,000 homes.

We recognise that the widespread construction of these plants could help to create thousands of skilled jobs in areas where those are lacking, from Cornwall to Cumbria, but what makes this technology even more exciting is that it enables decarbonisation in many other sectors, too. For example, we see the potential to decarbonise heat through clean heat network schemes or to scale up zero-emission vehicle production through battery-grade lithium extraction. Indeed, the potential for battery-grade lithium extraction from the waters pumped at the United Downs site shows promise, with Geothermal Engineering Ltd predicting that 15,000 tonnes of battery-grade lithium could be produced a year, which is approximately a quarter of domestic demand. The firm has also been successful in its £12 million application to the automotive transformation fund to provide battery-grade lithium.

As my hon. Friend's report notes, this technology is not without its challenges. Current departmental analysis suggests that its relative price is substantially higher than that of other renewables, largely due to the high cost involved in drilling safely. The potential capacity of geothermal power is significantly smaller in comparison with other renewable technologies, and is currently estimated to be between 170 MW and 2 GW. This means that large-scale deployment is likely to be limited, and there are also uncertainties concerning geological risks that must be taken into account.

The reality is that every renewable energy source has its strengths and its weaknesses. In the months and years ahead, we are going to leave no stone unturned in our quest for the cleanest, most cost-effective energy

available. That is why the Prime Minister set up the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero earlier this year. We are working closely with industry to ensure that the right support is in place to develop new technologies, including geothermal, whether that with is the green heat network fund, which has allocated Cornwall council £22 million to work with Geothermal Engineering Ltd to develop the Langarth deep geothermal heat network—the UK's first heating system to use geothermal energy to heat nearly 4,000 local homes and public facilities in the area, as my hon. Friend mentioned—or with the contracts for difference scheme, which is the Government's main mechanism for supporting low-carbon electricity generation. Geothermal technologies that generate electricity are eligible for the scheme, and the bidding process is currently under way. We will continue to review the support we provide to ensure that all these technologies can reach their full potential.

I want to finish by reiterating to the House our determination to make the most of every home-grown green technology available in our unprecedented transition to a net zero economy so that we can secure our long-term energy supply, keep bills down for consumers and raise the bar on tackling climate change. The report by my hon. Friend—he is known as Mr Geothermal—will undoubtedly help us consider whether there is a bigger role for deep geothermal energy and how we could support it. I am confident that the geothermal industry will continue to develop across every viable corner of the United Kingdom, and I look forward to seeing the Energy Minister continuing to engage with my hon. Friend on this vitally important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

3.41 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 June 2023

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Obesity and Fatty Liver Disease

1.30 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of preventing obesity and fatty liver disease.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I am truly grateful to the 19 right hon. and hon. Members from across the House and from all parties who supported the application for this debate. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on liver disease and liver cancer, and I thank all my colleagues in the group for their steadfast support. I am also grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate.

The debate's aim is simple and straightforward: to sound an alarm. This country faces a crisis—a fatty liver disease crisis. One in five people in the United Kingdom suffer from fatty liver disease. That is a quite incredible figure, and it is driven by obesity. Two thirds of the adult population of the United Kingdom are overweight or obese. It is worth noting that liver disease is often associated with alcohol misuse, but liver disease is increasingly being driven by obesity. I am also pleased that today is the global awareness-raising day for non-alcohol related steatohepatitis, or NASH. Some 150 million people across the world suffer from NASH, which is the most severe form of fatty liver disease.

As I said, two thirds of people in Britain are obese or overweight; that is the third highest obesity rate in the whole of Europe. The rise in obesity is having a hugely detrimental impact on the nation's health. Fatty liver disease is a problem in itself, but it is also closely related to cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and a multiplicity of cancers. It is also worth noting that liver disease has a huge impact on economic development, and that obesity is directly related to that. Obesity costs the UK economy £58 million a year and is a huge drain on the national health service, which is already under huge pressure.

If obesity is a huge problem, how do we tackle it? There are a number of ways. First, we can promote healthy living, and more active lifestyles in particular. To cite my own example, at one time, I prided myself on not having set foot in a gym, but now we have a treadmill at home and I use it regularly. That is becoming more regular all the time.

Secondly, there is the issue of junk food. Fat, sugar and salt are present in all junk foods. The UK is the largest consumer of ultra-processed food in Europe. I was startled to see a television report earlier this week focusing on the prevalence of emulsifiers in food. I was not aware of what an emulsifier was; for a moment, I thought it was a kind of paint. Emulsifiers are basically used to keep food together, and they are totally unnecessary

from a nutritional point of view. Nevertheless, there are serious studies and concerns about the potential harm that the use of excessive emulsifiers in so many of our foods can have on our health. The food industry needs to address that in a significant way. However, it is no good simply to leave everything to those in the food industry. They exist to make profit and that will inevitably have an impact on their profitability. There is therefore a need for a level playing field, and Government regulation is vital. That must be a significant agenda for the immediate future.

The Government really have to deliver on existing policy commitments. We are still patiently waiting for them to implement the 9 pm watershed plans to protect children from junk food advertising on television and online. There also needs to be a ban on advertising multi-buy junk food deals according to that cut-off point. I was encouraged this morning by a visit to Parliament of children from Nant Y Parc Primary School in Senghennydd, near Caerphilly, in my constituency. The children were aware that this is a serious issue. Everyone, especially children, loves junk food, but a discipline needs to be imposed. There is nothing wrong with an occasional burger or KFC, but it must be now and again and not a regular part of their diet. It is important that, time and again, that is stressed to young people at all levels of education.

When we look at liver disease outcomes in care, the huge variation across the country is striking. Inequalities are hugely geographically focused. If we look at non-alcoholic fatty liver disease deaths in England, we see that the north-west of England has a far higher mortality rate than the west midlands. In general, liver disease mortality rates are four times higher in the most deprived areas.

We hear a lot about levelling up these days, but not so much about the need to level up healthcare and life expectancy. That is why I am calling on the Government to lay out a clear set of policies to level up liver disease treatment and make real their declared ambition to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy. That is why I say that a prompt, thorough and comprehensive review of adult services in England is vital if we are to successfully tackle huge inequalities and geographical variations in liver disease treatment, outcomes and care.

Let us be honest: liver disease is a silent killer. It is often diagnosed very late, by which time the damage is irreversible and treatment is not really an option. Sadly, three quarters of people currently diagnosed in hospital following emergency admission cannot be given effective treatment or intervention because it is too late for them.

Since the launch of the British Liver Trust's campaign last year on early diagnosis, we have seen improvements in pathways for early diagnosis across the four nations. I pay tribute to Pam Healy, the chief executive of the British Liver Trust, and her extremely active team for their work in raising the issue across the country and, in particular, in Parliament. I was extremely pleased that more than 90 Members of Parliament from the Commons and the Lords attended a liver health test we organised in January. I have to say, some MPs were judged to need intervention.

I am also pleased that the Government have made some progress on this issue, and that only yesterday the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence announced its decision to recommend the use of fibroscans

[Wayne David]

as an option to assess liver damage in primary care. I welcome that positive step forward. I urge the Minister to put real emphasis on early diagnosis by adopting a new pathology pathway and ensuring that every community diagnostic centre has a facility to make an assessment of fibrosis—no ifs or buts, it should be available in every community diagnostic centre.

I urge the Minister to recognise that this is not an England-only issue; it affects the whole United Kingdom, and we need to look carefully at good practice in the devolved nations. I am a Welsh Member of Parliament who represents a constituency in the south, and I am very pleased that my own health board, the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, pioneered a pilot project that laid the foundations for the Welsh Government to introduce the all-Wales abnormal liver blood test pathway, and they have recently published a quality statement on tackling liver disease. This was the first part of the United Kingdom to do so, and I hope that the other nations in the UK will follow that good example quickly. That work and other good practice is worth examining carefully and emulating throughout the whole United Kingdom.

Fatty liver disease is a clear barometer of the nation's health. The obesity crisis in our country is clearly exacerbating health inequalities and causing real harm to people. It is resulting in a significant cost to the NHS and having a hugely detrimental economic impact. I therefore urge the Government to take immediate action to tackle this issue coherently and systematically. I very much look forward to the Minister's positive reply.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 3 o'clock, and I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 2.28 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for His Majesty's Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister and two minutes at the end for Mr David to sum up the debate. There are three highly distinguished Back-Bench Members seeking to speak in this debate. I hope you will allow each other enough time to get your contributions in. The first exemplar of that will be Maggie Throup.

1.42 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to participate in this extremely important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on securing the debate, which is timely because it coincides with International NASH Day. International NASH Day aims to raise awareness of fatty liver disease and non-alcoholic steatohepatitis, which affects more than 115 million people globally. Up to one in five people in the UK have non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, and almost 12% of the population have NASH. I am sure it comes as no great surprise to anyone, as the clue is in the name, that one of the key causes of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is obesity.

The need to tackle obesity as a priority was first identified by the Government in the early 1990s in the "Health of the Nation" White Paper. In the three decades since then, there have been policies such as the soft drinks industry levy, the pilot of the "Better Health:

Rewards" scheme in Wolverhampton, restrictions on product placement and calories on menus, which have been introduced effectively with the aim of reducing obesity. I am particularly proud that many of those measures were introduced or reinforced during my time as public health Minister. However, despite those policies being implemented successfully, the obesity rate continues to increase, so more needs to be done.

A recent report by the Obesity Health Alliance argued that obesity is the new smoking. That comparison was reinforced yesterday by the announcement of £40 million to pilot ways to make the newest and most effective obesity drugs accessible to eligible patients. That is an acceptance that obesity is a disease and should be treated with drugs, in the same way that lung disease is treated with drugs. Following that argument through, immense effort has gone into stopping smoking measures and reducing exposure to cigarettes, so immense effort should now be put into reducing everyone's exposure to foods that are more likely to cause obesity—that is, ultra-processed foods. The delayed 9 pm watershed and action on two-for-one offers will do just that.

Research by the Obesity Health Alliance shows that 72% of people believe a 9 pm watershed on junk food adverts should be brought in during popular family TV shows. The measure has public support, so why hold back? When will the Minister's Department introduce those important measures? Provisions are on the statute book, so let us just get on with it.

Statistics provided by the House of Commons Library highlight how obesity is steadily getting out of control in England. Since 1993, the proportion of adults in England who are overweight or obese has risen from 52.9% to 64.3%, and the proportion who are obese has risen from 14.9% to 28%. It is no surprise that the UK has the third highest obesity rate in Europe. Furthermore, the alarming rate of child obesity is of real concern. Data from the national child measurement programme outlines that in England, 10.1% of reception-aged children—aged four to five—were obese in 2021-22 and a further 12.1% were overweight. At ages 10 to 11—in year 6—23.4% were obese and 14.1% were overweight. Obesity prevalence is highest among the most deprived groups in society: children in deprived parts of the country are twice as likely to be obese than their peers in more affluent areas.

The health and economic impacts of obesity are devastating. Obesity is a force multiplier on fatty liver disease, cardiovascular disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer, and that, of course, puts ever-increasing pressure on the NHS. The combined cost of obesity to the Treasury—that is, to the NHS, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the economy as a whole—is projected to be £58 billion a year. I feel, however, that that could be a conservative projection, as there are many factors that have not been taken into consideration.

Those who are obese cost the NHS twice as much as those who are not. It has been estimated that those who are obese take four extra sick days a year, which equates to 37 million sick days across the UK working population. Those stats are clearly very concerning, and there needs to be a collective effort to tackle this widespread problem. If action is not taken now, we will embed ill health and low productivity into generations to come.

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is triggered by a build-up of fat in the liver, and as its name suggests, it is usually caused by obesity. Early-stage non-alcoholic

fatty liver disease does not usually cause any harm. However, if left untreated, it can lead to serious liver damage, including cirrhosis. Some 90% of liver diseases are preventable, and in the UK, the most common causes of cirrhosis are excessive alcohol consumption, hepatitis and NAFLD.

What can we do to avert this public health crisis? As individuals, we can all take measures to help us to avert the risk of NAFLD—simple measures including eating a balanced and healthy diet, and in particular, not eating ultra-processed foods. Additionally, we can all increase our activity levels, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly indicated. It has been estimated that if those who are overweight or obese lost just 2.5 kg—5½ lb for people of my generation—that could save the NHS £105 million over the next 15 years. I am sure that most people would want to lose more than just 5½ lb, and doing so would save the NHS even more money—5½ lb, or 2.5 kg for the younger ones in the room, is not a lot.

We need to do more to promote early diagnosis and raise awareness of the different causes of liver disease. It would be remiss of me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diagnostics, not to mention the possible impact of community diagnostic centres. Community diagnostic centres provide a quick and easy way to access checks, tests and scans, providing routes to early diagnosis. The recent announcement by the Department of Health and Social Care that fibroscan services will be made available in 100 community diagnostic centres is welcome. It could result in thousands of people being made aware of the poor condition of their liver, which could still be reversible.

Despite that positive news, I would like to see an expansion of liver testing in areas where obesity levels are higher and the risk of fatty liver disease is more extreme. Lives are saved when diseases are caught early. I am interested to hear the Minister's comments regarding the expansion of fibroscan services to all CDCs. My own local integrated care system in Derbyshire is currently categorised as green, indicating that an effective pathway is in place for the early detection and management of liver disease. Will the Minister therefore look at emerging good practice throughout the country and emerging good practice pathways at the ICS level, with a view to establishing a national pathology pathway to accelerate early diagnosis? Government policy towards obesity over the last 30 years has mainly been focused on individual responsibility, rather than mandatory policy, but we can all see that that is not working.

Monday night's BBC "Panorama" highlighted just how harmful ultra-processed foods are, and how they contribute massively to diet-related ill health. However, they are among the most profitable foods that companies can make. I know that this may sound unlikely, but there is a willingness among food manufacturers to reformulate; however, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly said, they want a level playing field. Sadly, no company is willing to step out of line and lead the way, yet if the consumption of ultra-processed foods continues at the current rate and the obesity rate continues to rise, our nation will be economically poorer and very unhealthy. To be bold, I believe this country is addicted to ultra-processed foods, similar to the way it was addicted to smoking in past decades. We tackled smoking addiction by intervention; it is now time to tackle ultra-processed food addiction by intervention too.

To conclude my remarks, this debate has undoubtedly helped to raise awareness of the problem of obesity and the detrimental impact it has on people's health, including liver disease, as well as the economy and the NHS. Clearly, more needs to be done to tackle the health inequalities of obesity and improve early diagnosis of fatty liver disease. The Government need to be bold and brave for the sake of the individual, the NHS and the economy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon.

1.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me, Mr Hollobone; it is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. It happens very often that you and I are here in Westminster Hall, but perhaps for different reasons and to participate in different ways.

I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for leading the debate. It is always a pleasure to hear his calm voice, and today he put the case forward admirably. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who brings a vast stock of knowledge from her former role and her deep interest in these subjects. Whenever she speaks in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber, it is always with facts, evidence and a determination to get the answers.

As the vice-chair of the APPG on liver disease and liver cancer, I am pleased to be here to draw attention to the liver disease crisis, but I am not pleased that there is a crisis of liver cancer in Northern Ireland. One of the great things about the Minister—I do not say this to give him a big head or anything—is that whenever we ask him questions, his first intention is clearly to respond in a positive fashion. That being the case, I have a couple of asks for him.

I am also pleased to work alongside the two shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). I was saying beforehand to the Labour shadow Minister that very often—most Thursdays—she, the Minister and I, and sometimes others, have this shift in Westminster Hall. We are always pleased to come and to participate. As we look forward, I hope that we can work together and emerge with a good practice for obesity prevention and the early diagnosis of fatty liver disease, which I hope can be replicated across the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I was delighted to sponsor the British Liver Trust's "Check your liver health" event in Portcullis House in January. The hon. Member for Caerphilly referred to that event. The turnout was great; he was absolutely right. I thank all MPs who took the time to attend. I personally got the all-clear. That does not mean that someone can sit back and say that everything is all right; they have to continue to do the right things, so that they do not fall back.

I would like to give some background on the situation in Northern Ireland. I always like to give a Northern Ireland perspective, because I believe that that enriches the debate, even though it probably replicates what everybody else is saying as well. When the SNP shadow Minister speaks, he will give Scotland's perspective, and I very much look forward to hearing that also. In Northern Ireland, nine out of 10 liver disease cases are preventable.

[*Jim Shannon*]

That is the point that we start from and it is what the hon. Member for Caerphilly said in his introduction: we can prevent liver disease if we eat right—if we have the correct diet—and we exercise, so it is really important that we do that. There is also the question of alcohol. I am not against anybody drinking alcohol, but if people do that, they should do it in moderation.

Liver disease deaths have doubled in the last two decades, which contrasts with the trends in other chronic diseases, which have decreased or stabilised. While liver disease and liver cancer have increased, other diseases have fallen. We cannot ignore that. There is an onus on Government. Government cannot do everything for everybody, but they can raise awareness and perhaps give some of the direction that is needed. It is important to recognise the trend.

Liver disease deaths in Northern Ireland increased by 39% during the period encompassing the pandemic—between 2018 and 2021. That was primarily driven by obesity and alcohol misuse. The pandemic was part of the reason for that, but there is also an onus on all of us individually, including me. We need to exercise and do the right things. Northern Ireland does have a non-alcohol-related fatty liver disease and haemochromatosis pathway in development, so there is a policy by the HPSS—health and personal social services—in Northern Ireland, but progress is slow.

I am, as always, keen to ensure that the Minister here uses his good offices to encourage the devolved Administrations to be active, and I am sure that that will be the case. The Minister himself is proactive. I know that he has had regular contact in all his ministerial roles—in Education and now in Health—and I hope that discussions with those in Northern Ireland continue. Has he had an opportunity to have discussions with the Department of Health back home in Northern Ireland? If not, may I request that he do that?

I have spoken before on the importance both of raising awareness of the risks of obesity and of early diagnosis. People with excess weight and fatty liver disease are at higher risk of cardiovascular disease and a wide range of cancers. People who are obese are two times more likely to develop liver cancer, three times more likely to develop colon cancer, two and a half times more likely to develop high blood pressure and five times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic. I will give an idea of what that involves. When I was diagnosed as a type 2 diabetic some 15 years ago, I weighed 17.5 stone. I was a big fat puddin’—I am talking about myself, so I can use this terminology. I lost some four stone and have kept that weight off. But people have to work at it; that is what the hon. Member for Caerphilly was saying. Diet control helped for a while, but my diabetes—this debate is not about diabetes—is now medication-controlled. It is important that people are aware of that issue. That included me, who came through that particular episode some years ago.

British Liver Trust research reveals huge geographic variation in access to patient care pathways for the early diagnosis and management of liver disease in primary care. Furthermore, removing stigma surrounding the impacts of liver disease is crucial. That is why it is important that we all recognise that we have to encourage people. It is so alarming that 49% of liver patients surveyed by the British Liver Trust in October 2022 reported

experiences of stigma from healthcare professionals. When someone comes to our office, our job as MPs is not ever to be judgmental; it is to help the person with whatever the issue may be. I think that there is a case for healthcare professionals to have the same attitude when people come to them. This should be not about judgmental attitudes, but about saying, “What can we do to help?” People should look at it that way.

I congratulate the Royal Victoria Hospital liver support group in Northern Ireland on its recent 25th anniversary. Its chairman, Jim Kilpatrick, is a constituent in a neighbouring constituency, and he is a passionate campaigner who has been instrumental in improving support for patients in my constituency of Strangford—indeed, in all areas. I commend him for that and for the support of carers across Northern Ireland. There was a debate in the Chamber earlier about carers. I think we all have experience of that—I know my family have. Jim Kilpatrick presents an understanding and supportive stance on behalf of the support group, persuading, assisting and making life better, as well as focusing attention on and driving the strategy. The Royal Victoria Hospital liver support group is a network of volunteer liver patients and their carers who provide confidential, compassionate, emotional and psychological support for all adults, teenagers and children coping with a liver condition. Their vital work is a lifeline to my constituents and patients across Northern Ireland.

Liver disease is a silent killer, largely asymptomatic in its early stages. Three quarters of patients are diagnosed with cirrhosis in hospital, when it is too late for effective treatment. The hon. Member for Caerphilly emphasised the need for early diagnosis, and he is right. Risks can be drastically reduced through early detection and through diet, exercise and drinking in moderation. Let us be honest—there should be moderation in everything. It is so important that we raise awareness.

I give sincere thanks to the British Liver Trust, which has been in constant contact with my office and has been so insightful in the information it has provided. I want to put on the record how grateful I am to the trust for providing me and my staff with the information to prepare for this debate. I look forward to working with it in future as we collaborate to address this important issue and improve the health of constituents. I am convinced that the trust would be keen to work alongside the Minister and his Department. Has he had an opportunity to discuss these matters, to work in partnership and to help each other?

I am also keen to receive an assurance that any co-ordinated plan or strategy here on the mainland can be delivered by the regional Administrations, including the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am confident and convinced that the assurances I seek will be given. I say this not as a political comment, but when it comes to many things, particularly health, one of the great things is that we can work collaboratively and better as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is always better to share our details, our practices and our experiences. By doing so, we can move forward together and make sure that across this great nation we can all improve our health.

2.3 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for giving me the opportunity to speak for the second time in two days.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on liver disease and liver cancer, on securing this debate. As vice-chair of the APPG, I am concerned that the UK Government lack a coherent strategy for tackling the worsening liver disease public health crisis, which disproportionately affects our most disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Ealing's mortality rate for men under 75 is among the worst in the country.

Despite being a leading cause of premature death in the UK, liver disease has not been appropriately prioritised by the Government and was overlooked in the major conditions strategy. Fatty liver disease is a public health emergency. Liver disease mortality rates are outpacing those for other major conditions, such as diabetes or respiratory conditions, which have stabilised or improved over the past 40 years. I am not complaining that those conditions have improved, but it is a fact that liver disease has not been taken seriously. Liver disease deaths are four times higher in the most deprived areas, where risk factors such as obesity, alcohol misuse and viral hepatitis are more prevalent. Poverty and deprivation are key drivers of both obesity and fatty liver disease in the UK.

Ethnic minorities have higher obesity rates than the national average, and south Asian populations are particularly vulnerable to developing fatty liver diseases due to a combination of genetic and societal risk factors, but limited action is being taken to accelerate earlier diagnoses of liver disease within primary care and community settings to reach the communities most at risk. Will the Minister commit to an urgently needed review of adult liver services to tackle the huge inequalities in liver disease outcomes and care across the country? Early detection and diagnosis is key, as all previous contributors have indicated clearly and eloquently. Four in five people with NASH, the most severe form of fatty liver disease, are undiagnosed. The prognosis of NASH is often poor with patients at high risk of liver failure and liver cancer, which has a five-year survival rate of just 13%.

My local integrated care system—North West London ICS—is currently categorised as green, which indicates there is now a fully effective pathway in place for the early detection and management of liver disease. Sadly, due to societal, ethnic and deprivation reasons, my constituency and Ealing lag behind other areas. I urge the Minister to look at the positive examples of ICSs, such as North West London ICS, and see how the great work they are doing can be replicated more widely across the country. I also ask the Minister to expand the work needed to ensure equitable access for all to those improved pathways.

3.7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing today's important debate, and for the comprehensive manner in which he introduced the issue and highlighted the scale of the problem. We have had a very informed debate. Obesity is a problem on an escalating global scale, with Scotland's obesity levels among the highest of OECD countries. Indeed, I was until recently classed as obese myself, and despite reducing a bit I am still in the overweight category. I am going the right way, but I have a long way to go to catch up with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has made much greater headway than I have.

Obesity vastly increases the chances of a person developing a range of lifetime diseases, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and several other forms of cancer, as well as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, which is what we are focusing on. Obesity reduces quality of life and ultimately contributes to premature death. As we have heard, the UK is very much the sick man of Europe in terms of obesity, and sadly rates of obesity are even higher in Scotland than in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Two thirds of adults aged 16 and over in Scotland are overweight, and nearly one in three people are obese, placing them at higher risk of premature death, chronic disease and a multitude of cancers. Obesity doubles the risk of developing liver cancer.

The causes of obesity are complicated and vary from person to person. They include the genetic make-up of a person and biological and social factors. It is also heavily influenced by health inequalities. A report by Public Health Scotland found that for children from the most deprived backgrounds, the risk of obesity was almost three times higher than for those from the least deprived—21% versus 8%. There can be no denying that poverty is a significant factor, as are housing, education, access to open spaces, exposure to advertising and the availability and sale of unhealthy foods, all of which affect whether we can be active or eat healthily and consequently have an impact on the risks of developing obesity. The predominant driver in all those factors is what we eat, which is in turn shaped by our environment. For example, for many living in poverty, eating healthy food is a secondary consideration to just eating at all—or even heating their homes. Access to healthy food should be a right, not a privilege.

I am therefore delighted that the Scottish Government have committed to restricting less healthy food promotions and to improving the availability of healthier options when people are eating out in their Out of Home action plan. Their support has also meant investment of more than £400,000 in the last five years to help smaller businesses reformulate common products to make them healthier. That plays an important role in improving dietary health by removing hundreds of millions of calories from Scottish food and drink products. We could, and need to, do a lot more on that if we are going to improve people's diet, and local companies that are rising to the reformulation challenge should be commended for their efforts.

More needs to be done, however. Minister Jenni Minto announced in Holyrood last month that the Scottish Government will undertake a consultation on regulations to restrict promotions of food high in fat, sugar and salt. That is a vital next step in fixing the broken food system, which is driving the obesity and fatty liver disease crisis in Scotland. So I echo other hon. Members' points and ask the Minister to commit to delivering prior policy commitments that are still to be implemented. Those include implementing the 9 pm watershed to protect children from junk food advertising on TV and online, and banning multi-buy junk food deals. Those measures enjoy huge public popularity, and I believe they would be effective tools.

The Scottish Government are at the forefront of efforts to strengthen obesity prevention and improve earlier detection of liver disease, including through pioneering use of intelligent liver function tests in primary care, which are now being piloted in sites across England as well. The British Liver Trust categorised my local

[*Martyn Day*]

health board, NHS Lothian, as green in autumn 2022, as it now has a fully effective patient care pathway for the early detection of liver disease. That is important because the mortality rate for chronic liver disease in my local health board is lower than the national average in Scotland, at 15.3 versus 17.9 per 100,000, reflecting the growing momentum for action to help improve liver disease outcomes and save lives.

Scotland is also at the forefront of harnessing new diagnostic tools to improve earlier detection of liver disease. The hon. Member for Strangford and others have spoken about how detection is important. We must prevent people from becoming ill in the first place if we really are to tackle the problem. However, by the time people are diagnosed, we often find they are too far down the pathway to make significant improvement.

The intelligent liver function testing pathway developed by the University of Dundee uses an automated algorithm-based system to further investigate abnormal liver function test results on initial blood samples from primary care. Intelligent liver function tests represent a nearly threefold increase in the diagnosis of liver disease and are estimated to be saving the NHS more than £3,000 per patient with an abnormal liver blood test. Indeed, iLFTs are now being piloted in Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Liverpool and north London, and the roll-out of such technology is welcome. I urge Ministers to look at other examples of good practice from the devolved nations to help improve patients' pathways for early detection and management of liver disease. Will he commit to delivering a new nationally endorsed pathology pathway for early diagnosis of liver disease that incorporates intelligent liver function testing in primary care?

In conclusion, we know that obesity doubles the risk of developing liver cancer, which is now the fastest rising cause of cancer death in the UK. Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is now the fastest rising cause of hepatocellular carcinoma globally. In Scotland, liver cancer has seen the largest increase in mortality rates—38%—of all cancer types over the past decade, and liver cancer is now the fastest rising cause of cancer death in the UK. Unfortunately, Scotland has the highest incidence of liver cancer among our four nations.

The liver disease public health crisis disproportionately impacts our most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. In 2021, chronic liver disease mortality rates in Scotland were 5.8 times higher in the most deprived areas than in the most affluent. Individuals in deprived areas are more likely to develop liver disease, be hospitalised with it and die from it than those in affluent areas. We must improve early diagnosis and prevention if we are to tackle this issue. That also means tackling poverty and health inequalities.

2.15 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to respond on behalf of the Opposition health and social care team. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (*Martyn Day*) said, it has been a very well-informed debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (*Wayne David*) for the exceptional work that he and the other members of the APPG on liver disease and liver cancer are doing to raise awareness of this vital issue.

As has been demonstrated, rising obesity poses a profound threat to public health. We have heard today—from Strangford to Erewash, and from Southall to Linlithgow—that this is an issue across the United Kingdom. Before we hear from the Minister, I want to say how impressed I am with how everyone has tackled their own health and wellbeing through exercise, and I will certainly try to do better the next time I come to one of these debates.

As we have heard, obesity can impact on cardiovascular disease, as well as a variety of other conditions, not least non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. The British Liver Trust estimates that deaths as a result of liver disease have doubled in the last 20 years—that is a sobering statistic—with mortality rates are four times higher in the most deprived areas, as we have heard. Childhood obesity is also rising at the fastest rate on record, with 39% of obese children estimated to be suffering from non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. Not only is obesity rising and costing lives, but it is also causing people to live less prosperous and enjoyable lives and harming our economic productivity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly said.

The case for action could not be clearer. If we want to lead happier, healthier lives, while also reducing pressure on our NHS and turbocharging our economy, we must get serious about addressing the obesity crisis. That can be done only by placing prevention at the heart of our work.

Despite our best efforts, individuals cannot tackle obesity alone. Too often, we have a narrative of personal responsibility, but it fails because it promotes harmful, outdated ideas about our bodies, and that is particularly true for women. We need a step change in how we tackle obesity as a society.

I am proud that Labour's recently launched health mission set out a blueprint for shifting the focus of Government Departments, the NHS, and wider public services to prevention. Most relevantly to today's debate, we want to give every child a healthy start in life, with a children's health plan.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Erewash (*Maggie Throup*) for her work as a public health Minister—she knows of what she speaks. We would want to implement that long-overdue 9 pm watershed for junk food advertising on television and to ban paid advertising of less healthy foods on online media. That would come alongside establishing fully funded breakfast clubs in every school and a balanced and broad national curriculum with a wide range of compulsory physical activities.

That is the start of our vision for Government. For far too long, public health problems such as obesity have been viewed as falling exclusively under the purview of the Department of Health and Social Care but, as we have heard, the causes of obesity are multifaceted. It is about what we eat, but also about our access to green spaces, our genetics, the money in our pocket, our access to community care, and so much more. If we want to tackle obesity and, by extension, this disease, every cog in the Government machine must recognise its responsibilities.

For that reason, Labour has committed to embedding health in all policies through the creation of a cross-departmental mission delivery board. That would bring together all Departments with an influence over the social determinants of health and act as an accountable

body akin to the Climate Change Committee. That is the kind of bold, ambitious thinking that will define the next Labour Government.

I am aware that those suffering, or at risk, from NAFLD want action from the Government now. With that in mind, I would like the Minister to address some questions. First, in relation to obesity and prevention more generally, the Government recently launched their consultation for the major conditions strategy, singling out six major groups of health conditions but, unfortunately, there is no mention of obesity in the consultation documents, although cases of several of the diseases mentioned are rising in part because of obesity. It would therefore be helpful if the Minister set out what role preventive obesity policy will play in those major disease conditions. Similarly, concerns have been raised that there was no mention of liver disease in the strategy. Will he therefore set out how he plans to address increases in liver disease, and specifically NAFLD?

I also want to press the Minister on health inequalities. The British Liver Trust describes liver disease as, effectively, a barometer for underlying health inequalities. It points out that the main risk factors—obesity, alcohol misuse and viral hepatitis—are most prevalent in marginalised communities, and we heard some shocking statistics from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). That goes back to the point made earlier about the wider determinants of health. Unless the Government implement a coherent strategy for health inequalities, we will never be in a position to drive down liver disease.

The Minister will remember that in 2019 the Government pledged to extend healthy life expectancy by five years by 2035 and reduce the gap in healthy life expectancy by 2030. The clock is ticking. Not only is the target on track to be missed, but things are actually getting worse—inequalities in life expectancy are widening. Given that the Government binned their health disparities White Paper, will the Minister provide an update on how he plans to reverse the health inequalities that have widened on this Government's watch?

We know that liver disease is largely asymptomatic in its early stages and that diagnosis is essential in providing effective treatment. As we have heard, one in four people diagnosed with alcohol-related liver disease in hospital die within 60 days, and there is evidence of huge geographical variation in the pathways for early diagnosis. Given that grim picture, what assessment has the Minister made of current diagnostic provision for liver disease, and how will he improve that picture so that, no matter where someone lives, they can receive a timely diagnosis?

In conclusion, our current trajectory must not be allowed to continue. Unless we address obesity and rising fatty liver disease, more lives will sadly be lost, and our health service will come under existential pressure. Labour stands ready and waiting to address this crisis, but we cannot afford to wait. The Government must get to work now. We look forward to hearing from the Minister.

2.22 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing a debate on this

hugely important issue, and of course to the all-party parliamentary group that he chairs for its important work on tackling liver disease and liver cancer. I am responding on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who is the responsible Minister in this area. Nevertheless, I will try to give as full a response as I can.

The Government welcome the opportunity to discuss the prevention of obesity and fatty liver disease, and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed today—particularly the hon. Member for Caerphilly, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), who did not have to be here but who came to raise their points.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash for all her work as a Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care. She is a passionate advocate for tackling obesity and the conditions that result from it. She and I know that we do not agree on everything—we have had many a debate on this issue—but we both believe passionately in tackling it, because we know how important it is.

As has been said, liver disease is one of the most significant killers of working-age people in England, and I suspect that that is the same across our United Kingdom. In the last two decades, around 90% of liver deaths in England have been related to lifestyle and unhealthy environment, and the vast majority are alcohol related. These diseases are responsible for a four-times increase in liver mortality over the past few decades. The populations most at risk from non-alcoholic fatty liver disease are those living with obesity or type 2 diabetes.

Alongside its role in non-alcoholic fatty liver disease—I appreciate that the focus of today's debate is obesity—obesity is also the leading cause of other serious non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers, and it is associated with poor mental health. As the hon. Member for Caerphilly pointed out, this represents a huge cost to the health and wellbeing of individuals, and also to the NHS, wider society and our economy. It is estimated—this must be correct, because the hon. Gentleman and I have exactly the same figure—that obesity costs the NHS £58 billion. That is a loss to the economy and, importantly, a reduction in the quality of life of people up and down the country.

Although obesity rates have been relatively stable over the past few years—in fact, over the past decade—they are still stubbornly high. About one in four adults, and one in four children aged 10 to 11, live with obesity, so the prevalence remains far too high. I am particularly concerned about childhood obesity, not just because I am a Minister at the Department for Health and Social Care, but because I am a former Children's Minister and Minister with responsibility for school sport.

Two weeks ago, I represented the United Kingdom at the World Health Assembly. I spoke to representatives of about 25 other countries, and it was interesting how many times obesity came up as a challenge that they are facing too, so we need to work together. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it is not just about our United Kingdom; we need to work together and share best practice globally to make sure

[*Will Quince*]

we are tackling this issue together. I raise the point about children because, from my work as Children's Minister, especially on early years, and as a father of two children, I know too well that habits are formed really young, so we have to tackle this issue at the earliest possible point.

Data shows that people in lower income groups are more likely to be living with obesity than the rest of the population. Nevertheless, the issue is prevalent across all groups, as the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall said. The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) raised health inequalities and the major conditions strategy, which sits with the Minister for Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). I know she would be happy to meet hon. Members to discuss the major conditions strategy ahead of the interim report, which I understand is due to come out this summer. I am happy to commit my ministerial colleagues to meet hon. Members, as I do regularly.

Obesity is a complex problem that is caused by many factors, and there is no single solution. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash and I have had many debates on this issue, and there are many ways that we can tackle it. It is multifaceted and complex, and therefore the solution will inevitably be somewhat complicated.

I am not particularly fond of talking about my own health. I often hear people say that they prefer the expression "living with obesity" to "obese people". When we come back to Parliament and are sworn in again, they take our photo. I was 19.5 stone at the time of the 2019 general election, and they still, to this day, use that photo. I turn up at events and people say, "You don't look anything like your photo." The point I am trying to make is that I know how difficult these things are; it is a daily battle to lose weight and keep it off. It is a mixture of diet and exercise. I passionately believe that we need to empower people to make better, healthier life choices. There are interventions that we are making and further interventions that we should make to tackle this issue. I assure the House that, although this is not my direct ministerial responsibility, I am a passionate but realistic advocate of the measures that we can and should take to tackle obesity.

I genuinely believe that a mix of actions at a local and national level are required to help with the prevention of excess weight gain and to promote healthy behaviours. We know that obesity does not develop overnight; it builds up over time. It is frequently about excessive calorie consumption. It does not have to mean overeating hundreds of calories a day, although we all do that sometimes, and we then have to overcompensate in another way. It often means small amounts of excess calories, consumed regularly, which add up for adults and children, so there is a big education piece that we need to do. We are doing that, but we need to do more.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash said, yesterday, as part of action to treat those already living with obesity, the Government announced plans for a two-year pilot, backed by £40 million, to look at ways of expanding access to new weight loss drugs outside of a hospital setting through primary care that more eligible patients will be able to benefit from, therefore reducing their risk of obesity-associated illness.

One area that is certainly within my ministerial responsibility is our work on research with the National Institute for Health and Care Research. Obesity is one of our national healthcare missions; we are determined to look at some of the innovative solutions out there to help people to take control, and empower them to make healthier life choices and control their weight.

Wayne David: I note that the Minister said there is Government support—in a limited way, at the moment—for weight loss drugs. I welcome that, but I am cautious; there is a real danger of placing too much emphasis on drugs as a way to lose weight. They can be in addition to other measures, but those other measures are critical. I welcome the Minister's views on that, but there is a danger of putting too much emphasis on those drugs.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point; I totally agree. As further details are published, he will see the current criteria for accessing those drugs. The reality is that more and more are coming on stream, and they will be part of our arsenal and one of our tools to help people tackle obesity and make healthier life choices.

What do we also know about the drugs? Well, we know that they are effective. However, they are effective only for as long as someone takes them, unless they change their lifestyle and behaviour. Anything we do in relation to drugs must be alongside an education piece, and supporting and empowering people to make healthier life choices. Ultimately, and ideally, we do not want people to be on drugs for the rest of their lives where it is not necessary. We want the drugs to be a tool and enabler to help and support them to get to a place where they can manage their own weight. That might be difficult for some people and they may struggle to do so, and for others it may not. It is just a helping hand; the hon. Gentleman is right.

As hon. Members made their contributions, I scribbled down the actions—just in my own mind—that the Government have taken over the past few years, such as calorie labels on food in supermarkets. I know that that made such a difference, because when I am looking, I make active choices. I look at the traffic light system, I look at the calories, and I look at the amount of salt and sugar in these products; and doing so enables me to make healthier choices. That is important. There is the calorie labelling on food sold in large businesses, including restaurants, cafés and takeaways, which came into force back in April—not uncontroversially.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend is right that there is a lot more information there for people to make informed decisions on, but there are also hidden contents that people are not being informed about, such as the ultra-processed foods. Products may be labelled as low in fat, but they have other products in them to ensure that they will taste okay and still be low in fat. We need to not just look more at the overall messaging on packaging, but ensure that we reduce some other items in the products that are causing the obesity crisis.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we are constantly learning more. At the moment, I do not think there is a definition of an "ultra-processed food". There has been a lot of work. We are learning more and

more about the issue and it has recently exploded into the public domain. We need to ensure that more people are aware of and being educated about what is actually in their food, and that they are looking at labels. If we go back 20 years, we were all very much alive to E numbers—does everyone remember E numbers?—which no one looked at before. Now, we often look over the back of the packaging to see the number of E numbers in our products. The more that the public are educated and informed so that they can look out for these things, the better. My hon. Friend the Member for *Harborough* will be happy to discuss this further with my hon. Friend the Member for *Erewash*. I know that ultra-processed foods are an issue about which the public are concerned, and we certainly have more to do on food labelling.

Jim Shannon: The Minister always brings good responses. The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for *Linlithgow and East Falkirk* (Martyn Day), made a comment that I endorse totally, because it is something that I hear from my constituents every week. With respect, many people can look at the labels and see what they mean, but what do they look at first? They look at the price, because they are trying to make a meal for their family. What drives them will be, “What can I afford to do?” I am conscious that the Minister has been very constructive in his responses, but there must be a wee bit of reality as well.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. He is absolutely right; not everyone has the luxury to make choices, and they will often have to go for the cheapest products or products that are available in their area when others might not be. That is why it is so important that we continue the work with industry on reformulation.

Personally, I have been more of a convert to Government action in this area. The soft drinks industry levy has been hugely successful. The industry was already doing a lot of that work. Nevertheless, the levy has nudged and pushed it further in the right direction—but there is more work to do.

I would push back ever so slightly on a couple of the comments that have been made today about industry not wanting to do this. It is not moving at the pace that we want, expect and need it to, but it is doing it. The sugar content of cereal is down by about 15%, and it is down by about 14% in yoghurts and fromage frais. We need industry members to go further, but they are doing it because they are responding directly to what their customers and consumers are telling them they want, and to people actively choosing healthier products. However, we have more to do on reformulation and working with industry.

We will also introduce restrictions on the advertising of less healthy products before 9 pm. I will answer the question on that from my hon. Friend the Member for *Erewash* in just a moment. The major conditions strategy call for evidence is open, and, as I said, my hon. Friend the Member for *Faversham and Mid Kent* will gladly meet colleagues to discuss that.

There is also the piece of work around supporting people with weight management, such as the NHS digital weight management programme, the weight loss drug programme and pilot that we announced yesterday, which I just spoke about, and the better health

campaigns—including the NHS weight loss app *Couch to 5k*, which, if anyone has not tried it, is a great way of getting into running, and *Active 10*. There is also the NHS health check, which includes checking on BMI, encouraging people and giving them the tools to take control of their health.

Then there is the research piece. As I say, this is one of our healthcare missions. Obesity is right there at the top; we want to see the newest and most innovative products and medicines coming forward and being used first in this country.

The hon. Member for *Bristol South* is absolutely right that this cannot just be an issue for the Department of Health and Social Care; it must be a cross-Government issue. I remember when I was the Children’s Minister and had responsibility for school sport: looking at school sport investment and premiums, at the upskilling of primary school PE teachers in particular, and at the holiday activities and food programme, which was specifically targeted at children in receipt of free school meals.

I remember visiting some eye-opening educational programmes. In one example—I would love to get a number of parliamentary colleagues to try this experiment—there was range of soft drinks, from a *Monster* energy drink through to flavoured water, and a big box of sugar cubes. The children were asked to put against each product the number of sugar cubes they thought it contained. You would be amazed, Mr *Hollobone*, how many children put six cubes against the water and very few against the *Monster* or the full-fat *Coke*, despite the can of *Coke* containing something like six cubes of sugar. In schools, we are also promoting the daily mile, the healthy schools programme and healthy school meals. That is all important work, but do we need to do more? Of course we do.

My hon. Friend the Member for *Erewash* asked about the delay to policies, specifically to the restrictions on advertising and promotions. I understand her frustration but the delay to advertising restrictions allows the Government and regulators to carry out certain processes necessary for the robust implementation of the restrictions. Those processes include carrying out consultations, appointing a frontline regulator, the laying of regulations and the drafting of guidance. She asked specifically when that is coming in; it will be in October 2025. She also asked about the volume price promotions ban, which was delayed due to the unprecedented global economic situation. I do not know the answer and I do not want to mislead her. The legislation states October this year, but I do not know latest position, so I will ask my hon. Friend the Member for *Harborough* to write to her.

Wayne David: I think there was an intake of breath in the Chamber when the Minister mentioned October 2025 for the introduction of the limit on advertising. Is there any way that he would support measures to circumvent the excessively long delay? I think the will is there; it is a question of just dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s to ensure that everybody is on board. That can be done relatively quickly, if there is the political will.

Will Quince: As much as the hon. Gentleman tempts me to make Government policy on the hoof, as it is not my policy area I will refrain from doing so. I will ask my hon. Friend the Member for *Harborough* to speak directly with the hon. Gentleman to see if there is any way that process could be accelerated.

[*Will Quince*]

I will turn to early diagnosis and community diagnostic centres—a subject raised by the hon. Members for Caerphilly and for Bristol South, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash. I am a massive fan of community diagnostic centres. In fact, I was in one in Roehampton this morning.

NHS England is playing a key role in helping to reduce preventable deaths from liver disease, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash alluded to, it has begun the process of fibroscans through community diagnostic centres. There is a £2.3 billion programme to increase the number of CDCs across the country to 160. The commitment so far is that 100 of them will be diagnosing liver disease by March 2025. If we can accelerate that, we will. We are accelerating the CDC programme. That is within my gift, and I will look at that closely to see what is within the art of the possible. Of course, I am keen to see what we can do to boost diagnostic capacity to diagnose liver disease and improve earlier diagnosis, which leads to improved health outcomes.

The hon. Member for Strangford asked about work in Northern Ireland. We do so much work across the United Kingdom on public health, research and medicines, as well as in the health space. I do not know the specific answer, because it does not sit within my portfolio, but I have no doubt that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough will be working on that on an all-nation basis. The spirit of collaboration is important when it comes to these issues.

A lot of poor health is preventable; that point has been made a number of times during the debate. People instinctively want to be and to stay healthy. Sadly, however, most people who are diagnosed with liver disease at a late stage, when it is less treatable, are often diagnosed during an emergency hospital admission. That has to change, and the Government are determined

to take action to make the needed changes. As the hon. Member for Caerphilly said, today is International NASH Day—a day to raise awareness of non-alcohol-related fatty liver disease and its more advanced form. I hope that by debating the topic, we have raised awareness of that hugely important issue, and of the disease.

2.44 pm

Wayne David: We have had an excellent debate. The Chamber has heard contributions from six Members, and although they have been from different political parties there has been a unanimity among them about the importance of the issue and some of the measures that need to be put in place urgently to tackle the fatty liver disease crisis.

The Minister has made some positive remarks, it has to be said, but I hope that he will report back to his colleagues to ensure that the issue is given greater priority within the Department of Health and Social Care. He has made certain commitments to provide information and make representations on the basis of what has been said. I hope he will do that—I think he will.

It is essential that we move forward, as far as possible on a consensual basis. We all recognise that this is a huge issue that has to be addressed as a matter of urgency. To do that we need the will of the Government to work with others, to come forward with a policy, as they now have, and to develop that policy to address the situation in the not-too-distant future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of preventing obesity and fatty liver disease.

2.45 pm

Sitting suspended.

World Ocean Day

[MRS PAULINE LATHAM *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Ocean Day.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mrs Latham. Our ocean, our largest ecosystem, is a precious natural resource and for too long we have taken it for granted and somewhat abused it. Over and illegal fishing in some parts of the world, pollution, including by chemicals, plastics and nutrients, and overdevelopment along coastlines have all contributed to our ocean not being as healthy as it should be. There is an urgency to tackle global climate change, and given the right focus, support and investment, the ocean is one of our best and most cost-efficient nature-based solutions. As an island nation, our national seas also have huge social and economic value for the UK and especially for our coastal communities. The ocean is our bright blue hope.

Today is the 31st anniversary of World Ocean Day, which gives us the opportunity to highlight and support the implementation of worldwide sustainable development goals and to foster public interest in the protection of the ocean and the sustainable management of its resources. This year it specifically raises awareness and supports the goal and the commitment from global leaders to conserve at least a third of our land, water and ocean by 2030, known as 30x30. It also builds on the high seas treaty agreed in March this year by a number of nations to protect the world's biodiversity in international waters.

The historic high seas treaty took 10 years of negotiations to reach agreement. It aims to safeguard and recuperate marine nature and provides the ability to more easily realise the target of establishing 30% of the global ocean as marine protected areas by 2030. The treaty also strengthens governance of the world's ocean by providing the framework to manage the ocean and sustainably use its biological resources. Prior to the treaty, there was no means for nation states to declare marine protected areas beyond their national jurisdiction. The new treaty supports a holistic ocean governance framework as a means to implement the obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment, as included in the United Nations convention on the law of the sea.

That is an important step as the ocean covers 70% of the planet's surface area and produces around 50% of the oxygen we breathe. It has a hugely significant role to play in slowing down the rate of climate change. Since 1978, more than 90% of the Earth's increased heat and 40% of carbon emitted from burning fossil fuels have been absorbed by the ocean. Furthermore, it is estimated that the ocean has absorbed between 25% and 30% of all carbon dioxide emissions caused by human activity, making it the largest carbon sink in the world.

The sea is home to most of our biodiversity. According to the United Nations, 3 billion people globally rely on the ocean for their livelihoods, and around 200 million people are employed either directly or indirectly in related industries. However, the UN also states that carbon emissions from human activity are causing ocean warming, acidification and oxygen loss.

A debate about the ocean could cover many topics, including plastic, sewage, chemical or nutrient pollution, marine protected areas, fishing, and renewable energy opportunities and risks. I am sure that some hon. Members will discuss those today. I want to focus on blue carbon and ocean-based solutions to climate change, which, worryingly, are disappearing and require urgent global restoration and protection. We also need to conserve and use ocean resources sustainably, as healthy oceans and seas are essential to human existence and life on Earth. For too long our ocean has been the missing part of our path to net zero. It is essential that Governments across the world take rapid action to increase the ocean's critical role in tackling climate change.

Our oceans offer significant solutions that can mitigate and combat climate change. It is predicted that blue carbon ecosystems could sequester and store around 2% of UK emissions per year. There is huge potential lying beneath our waters, which have yet to be fully realised.

According to estimates from the Office for National Statistics, the UK's salt marshes and subtidal muds and sands alone captured at least 10.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2018—the real amount could be as much as six times higher. That carbon sequestration, according to the ONS, is of significant economic as well as environmental value—valued at more than what is earned from exploiting our oceans for oil and natural gas.

Let us not forget that our coastal salt marsh areas can help protect against flooding from sea level rise if properly restored, maintained and managed. Seagrass meadows provide among the most productive ecosystems in the world. An area the size of a football pitch can support more than 50,000 fish and more than 700,000 invertebrates, which is good news for our marine habitats and fishing communities around the UK. One acre of seagrass can sequester 740 lb of carbon per year, or 83 grams of carbon per square metre, which is the same amount emitted by a car travelling 3,860 miles.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is not enough understanding of how important blue carbon is or of the crucial role that the ocean could play in absorbing and capturing carbon? It is, therefore, great that we have the opportunity to debate it today.

Sally-Ann Hart: Yes, I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. One issue is that we do not yet have enough data and research to truly evaluate the amazing role that blue carbon can play.

UK coastal habitats such as seagrass and salt marsh provide an estimated £48 billion of economic benefits to society, despite occupying only 0.6% of the total land area. Based on available data, the Office for National Statistics values the UK's marine natural capital assets at £211 billion, so protecting and restoring the UK's marine natural capital assets preserves more than the environment. It has value for people and the economy.

Maintaining and, more importantly, restoring and improving marine ecosystems to sequester carbon is vital in mitigating climate change. Fully restored, our coastal ecosystems could capture emissions equivalent to one third of the UK's 2028 emissions and save an

[Sally-Ann Hart]

estimated £6.2 billion in spending on artificial flood defences by 2050. It is essential that the UK Government take further measures that protect and restore our marine areas, ensure greater research and provide more sustainable funding for all types of blue carbon and carbon dioxide removal. But no Government can fund entirely the actions needed to unleash the full power of nature. They need to look carefully at how they can encourage and facilitate private sector funding.

There are new fledgling organisations such as the social enterprise Bright Tide, which was founded by Harry Wright. Bright Tide is doing a sterling job in working with businesses to address urgent climate and biodiversity challenges around the world. I ask the Minister to outline what the Government are doing to recognise and facilitate funding to protect ocean nature-based solutions.

Also, will the Minister update the House on the measures that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has taken to ensure that blue carbon habitats are restored, increased and properly protected? Our ocean is incredibly important to coastal communities such as mine—beautiful Hastings and Rye—because many livelihoods, from fishermen and tourism to aquaculture and renewable energy, depend on a healthy, clean and functional coastal environment to ensure long-living and sustainable industries. Without careful planning and review of impacts from human activities, both the environment and livelihoods are at risk.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on coastal communities and the all-party parliamentary group for the ocean. Coastal communities and our national seas are interlinked—co-dependent. The APPG for the ocean's first inquiry, into blue carbon and ocean-based solutions to climate change, produced an excellent and comprehensive report, "The Ocean: Turning the Tide on Climate Change", and three of our eight recommendations were echoed in the Government's recent environment improvement plan. They include our recommendations to remove trawl or dredge zones, which can destroy marine ecosystems and disturb seabed carbon stores, from UK MPAs; create highly protected marine areas; and include more aspects of marine carbon storage and sequestration, specifically seagrass and salt marsh habitats, in the UK greenhouse gas inventory.

Our report also highlighted that investing in coastal and ocean-based solutions can considerably boost industry and the economy in coastal areas. As an MP for a coastal community and as chair of the APPG on coastal communities, I recognise at first hand the solutions that the ocean can offer in mitigating and combating climate change. I also recognise the added value, huge benefits and potential that ocean-based solutions can have for coastal communities in creating new skills and jobs in tourism, ecotourism, seabed mapping activity, the renewable energy industry, environment and ecology, aquaculture, fishing and so on. Nature is the most cost-effective solution in combating climate change, as well as providing added value. We must unleash her power.

The report also highlighted that blue carbon and ocean-based solutions are often neglected in conversations about climate change, despite the fact that the destruction of marine habitats such as seagrass—the wonder grass—may be of greater consequence than land-based destruction

such as deforestation. Why are they overlooked? Part of the reason is the lack of understanding, research and data. Certain types of ocean-based solutions, such as those that could occur in the open ocean or seabed, are even less understood and require greater mapping to understand the clear benefits. It is time to review our ocean, not only as something that needs protecting, but as a useful tool—a living, breathing organism that can help us tackle climate change.

Finally, with the increasingly diverse uses and potential uses of the ocean and the growth in areas designated for marine conservation, there are clearly growing spatial pressures on our ocean—spatial squeeze. That may have an effect on our more traditional industries, such as our fishing fleets. I know that the fishermen of Hastings and Rye are concerned about that. We must ensure that offshore renewables—windfarms and tidal stream energy for example—blue carbon habitats, marine protected areas, fishing grounds, aquaculture, cables, oil and gas all coexist, where possible, so that there is space for all without detriment to traditional industries such as fishing or to the marine environment. There is an argument to be explored for a new approach to marine spatial planning that involves the co-management of our national seas and greater accountability for regulators. I would be keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

By protecting, researching and investing in ocean-based solutions and blue carbon habitats, the UK can ensure that our net zero targets are met, that coastal communities can benefit from significant opportunities and that the ocean becomes an active player in climate change mitigation. We all need to work together to ensure that that happens.

3.14 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I warmly thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate on World Ocean Day. She is a great champion of coastal communities in general and Hastings and Rye in particular.

As we have heard, the ocean covers 70% of the Earth's surface and is the largest carbon sink on the planet. To take just one example, salt marsh and seagrass habitats can store and hold massive amounts of carbon for thousands of years, so there is huge potential for ocean-based solutions—so-called blue carbon—to play a key role in delivering net zero and protecting the climate from disaster. At the same time, well-managed blue carbon projects can help deliver levelling up through the creation of new high-paying, high-quality jobs in coastal communities.

The massive potential of blue carbon was highlighted in the report, "The Ocean: Turning the Tide on Climate Change", published last year by the APPG for the ocean, of which I am a member. In it, we pointed out that we cannot hope to succeed in our ambitions on combating climate change without using ocean and land-based carbon removal solutions, so we need better mapping of the blue carbon habitat within the UK's exclusive economic zone. We also need more research, more data and a better understanding of the capacity of the marine environment to absorb and store carbon. That goes beyond salt marshes and seagrass to include ideas such as seaweed cultivation and ocean alkalinity enhancement.

To harness the potential of blue carbon, it is vital that we do more to protect the marine environment and the biodiversity it contains. That brings me to plastic. Plastic pollution is one of the great tragedies of our time. Plastic is a versatile material that has many benefits, but we must find a way to reduce its use, recycle more of it and, above all, ensure it is disposed of responsibly. It is shocking that, less than a century after its invention, such a vast volume of plastic has made its way into every corner of the ocean. I feel genuinely disturbed when I see pictures of the impact that it has on wildlife, including of young birds that perish because they are fed plastic by their parents, which mistake it for food. We have to do something about the situation. I know the Government are taking a strong, leading role in tackling the scourge of plastics pollution and have passed some of the world's first laws against microbeads in personal care products, which was a big step forward.

I also welcome the fact that the Government pioneered the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance to seek the international action that is so crucial. They are also leading the Global Ocean Alliance to meaningfully protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, but there is a vast amount of work that still has to be done. For example, we need to consider how to reduce the flow into the sea of microfibres from clothing. In that regard, I commend the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the Marine Conservation Society for filters that catch such fibres to become mandatory in new washing machines sold from 2025.

Let us also see the delivery of the Government's long-promised extended producer responsibility and deposit return schemes to promote plastic recycling, reuse and responsible disposal. I have mentioned that to the Minister many times; she knows my views. I hope that the frankly chaotic situation with the Scottish National party version of DRS will not jeopardise getting a workable scheme in place across the whole of the UK.

Above all, we must have more concerted action globally if we are to tackle the problem of plastics pollution in the ocean effectively. Progress on that is being made, too: the draft high seas treaty agreed in March signals a real intent to ensure that human activities in the high seas are consistent with conservation objectives. I urge the Government to engage energetically in securing the international treaty on plastics that is vital in driving forward the rescuing of our oceans.

In conclusion, we have a responsibility to act against plastic pollution and the destruction of precious ocean habitats. Together with our overseas territories, we are stewards of one of the world's largest marine estates. This nation built a vast empire largely because we had the most powerful Navy on the planet, which has protected our shores and our freedom ever since it was founded by Alfred the Great over 1,000 years ago. Our continuing links with the overseas territories are one of the last legacies of that once-mighty empire, so let us use those ties of friendship and history to work with overseas territories to push forward with further protection for the seas and oceans that have played such a seminal part in our island's story. It is essential that we safeguard them for the future.

3.20 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I echo the words of congratulation of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) to my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this debate. This issue is enormously important, and does not get enough time in this House. Even as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global deforestation, I find that we are too apt to look at what happens on land, and not apt enough to look at what happens at sea. This is a very appropriate and topical debate, particularly on World Ocean Day, as my hon. Friend said.

I am pleased to see the progress that has been made in recent months, including the treaty that was agreed back in March and the output of the various conferences of the parties of the past 18 months. I hope that the next COP, due to take place in the United Arab Emirates this autumn, will drive improvements to our approach to tackling biodiversity loss. I equally hope that it will reflect the need to protect ocean biodiversity.

I will focus on three aspects of the challenge we face: the need to protect more, the need to restore more, and the need to enforce more. Let me start with protection. The Minister knows of my concern to ensure that we accelerate our work on marine protected areas and highly protected marine areas; we debated that in this Chamber only recently. That is fundamentally important both for our nation and for the globe, because protected areas are about not just the UK but important areas of marine ecology around the world.

But let us start at home. We are making progress. The work that the Government have done on Dogger Bank and in other areas is very welcome, as is their ambition. As the Minister knows, my only concern is the pace. We need to do more, because although we have marine protected areas, most people would judge them not to be particularly well protected at all. In those areas, we still allow large industrial trawlers to scan the seabed with huge mechanical equipment, causing all kinds of damage and destruction. That may be appropriate in some parts of the sea, but it is inappropriate in our marine protected areas. It is particularly important that we accelerate the process that has started. As we have left the common fisheries policy, we have the freedom to apply proper protections. We will renegotiate our fishing arrangements with the European Union in the next couple of years. I suspect that those in Brussels are probably expecting things to carry on much as they are. We must ensure that is not the case, and that we really do take a significant step forward in applying UK-focused and ecology-focused rules to our fisheries, particularly those that are in need of much greater protection.

There is also the issue of the highly protected marine areas, which are much smaller. A substantial part of the seas around the United Kingdom are covered by our protected marine areas. The highly protected marine areas are much smaller, which is as it should be, because very little fishing should take place there at all. They need to expand too, and the Benyon review was very constructive in that respect. Of course, Lord Benyon is now very much at the heart of delivering this.

[Chris Grayling]

We must not make the same mistake as Scotland, which pressed ahead without engaging and involving the fishing communities. I take the view that the fishing communities of this country benefit from measures that look after our marine life and particularly our fisheries, because without those, the fishing communities have no livelihood. I do not think that our fishing fleets in the UK have anything to fear from a more robust approach to marine protection, because they see their fisheries disappear when we have huge industrial boats scouring the ocean in areas where we should be restoring fish stocks, not allowing them deteriorate still further. The benefit of highly protected marine areas, where there is virtually no take at all, is that they really do give the fish and the other life a chance to recover. In fact, fish stocks in areas around the most protected areas, where there is genuine enforcement, are now better as a result, and fishing fleets benefit from that.

I will continue to push the Minister, who I know is very sympathetic on this issue, and, through her, her officials to get on with this. They have made a good start, but I still see no reason why we cannot deliver a complete ban on bottom trawling in marine protected areas and deliver a significant increase in the area covered by highly protected areas in the time left in this Parliament. Our fishing communities and our ecology would benefit greatly if we did.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye mentioned the 2030 goals—the 30x30 protections. We have to play our part in ensuring that other countries do the same as us, and help them where they need political, financial or other support to do so. It is all well and good the UK protecting our waters, but if others do not do the same, we clearly do not achieve anything like what we need to achieve globally. Our ocean is a global asset. We have to protect it. We need to support other countries in enforcing proper protections in their marine protected areas, and in banning the most damaging fishing practices in those areas, so that see the ecology recovers.

This does work. When we put in place greater protections, numbers rise. We need only look at the whale population. Whales were in serious danger of extinction, but since positive steps were taken globally to ban whaling, numbers have started to surge. People can go and see these magnificent creatures all around the world now. If we take similar steps to provide appropriate protections in key areas of marine ecology—I am talking about excluding fishing, not from whole seas, but in key areas—we will benefit enormously. I am thinking of areas such as Galapagos, where until recently there was a genuine threat from some of the big, global fishing fleets that were sailing around the Pacific. We need to ensure that absolute, proper protection is in place, backed by enforcement; I will come back to enforcement in a moment. This is not just about protection of what is there; it is also about restoration of habitats that have been lost. My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet are absolutely right: there are opportunities to recreate habitats in the ocean, which can make a real difference to supporting and restoring marine life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye mentioned seagrass. There is clearly an opportunity for us in the United Kingdom on that. There are interesting projects taking place around the UK to begin to restore some of the seagrass that has been lost. We have lost something like 90% of our seagrass beds. We need to restore those, and we need to create the space for that to happen, because that helps marine species to recover. I would also mention kelp. If she has seen the extraordinary photography in the recent BBC “Wild Isles” series, she will have seen just how extraordinary kelp forests around the UK are. They, too, have disappeared to much too great an extent. We need to reverse that.

This does not really apply to our shores, but we must also focus on mangroves, because mangroves in coastal waters around the world have disappeared at an alarming rate, and they play a hugely important part both in the ecology of coastal areas and in protecting local communities against rising sea levels, floods, storm tides and the rest. I would therefore like—this does not fall within the Minister’s Department; it falls more to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—those elements of our aid budget that go on supporting ecological projects to support the restoration of mangroves around the world. Of course, there are big, global efforts taking place to do that, and to restore other marine habitats.

One of the most extraordinary projects I have come across in the last couple of years is the work being done by Mars Sustainable Solutions, and community groups working with it around the world, to restore coral reefs. The before and after for such projects is quite extraordinary. If a simple piece of netting, which looks like the inside of a chip pan, is placed on the seabed near a reef that has deteriorated, the reef regrows quickly, so there is a real opportunity to restore some of what has been lost.

Too many of our reefs are in danger, and too many have suffered damage from changes to water temperature, boats and the impact of mankind, but it is possible to restore reefs more quickly than one might imagine. Across the piece, we have an opportunity. Replanting seagrass, supporting the regrowth of kelp, and restoring coral reefs and mangroves can all play a part in capturing carbon, helping to restore local habitats and making the ocean healthier, so we as a nation should be putting as much effort as we can into helping the restoration of those habitats around the world. As I say, I speak as somebody who campaigns on deforestation and, indeed, on reforestation, but we must not forget marine environments.

Then we come to the issue of enforcement, because all our efforts are pointless if illegal operations destroy marine habitats again. Along with the treaties that have been agreed over the last 18 months, the good work being done on restoration, and what I hope our Government and others will do to put in place proper protections in marine protected areas, we also need really robust enforcement, because we have too many illegal and unregulated fishing operations doing real damage to fish stocks and marine environments around the world. Often they are carried out by vessels that simply go dark. Law-abiding, decent fishing vessels go around and do their stuff with proper tracking systems onboard, so we know where they are. If I opened up an app on my phone, I could probably see where most of the vessels are. Those that do not play within the rules disappear—they go black. That cannot be tolerated, because then however many rules we put in place, damage is still being done.

We as a country need to play our part as we move to the next stage in the negotiation of global agreements. We have done some really good work in putting together frameworks for the future, but they now need to be translated into action if we are to deliver the protections and the constructive approach that have been agreed by countries around the world. However, in order to do that, there has to be proper enforcement of what is put in place. My message to the Minister is this: when it comes to illegal and unregulated fishing, we need to make sure as a nation that we take a lead in saying that the next step is not just practical ecological measures, but the enforcement to go alongside them.

There are tools that we can use. The amount of Earth observation data is now substantial—we have satellite data for even relatively small areas. Supermarkets use Earth observation data to make sure that the products they source do not come from areas of land that have been deforested, which is great. In this country, that is being driven by our pathfinding legislation, the Environment Act 2021. We have a bit more to do, as the Minister and I discuss regularly, and I will happily help push other Departments to work with her to deliver that. But that is on land, and we need to do the same in the oceans. The technology can also be used by supermarkets to look at the origin of the fish stocks they are purchasing. It can also be used by enforcement authorities to look at what is happening—who is fishing where, and who is doing what where—and to take the appropriate action. We can also support countries that do not share our economic strength or ability to take enforcement action; that piece is enormously important. It must be a central part of what we as a nation do, going into the next stage of the various COPs and international discussions about how we turn the 2030 agreements into action. We must provide proper protection, both for restoration work and for what we have at the moment.

Those are the challenges. None of them will be easy, but they are challenges that we have to meet. As a global community, we cannot see the ocean continue to deteriorate and decline. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet is absolutely right about plastic. I happen to believe that before too long, we will end up harvesting it from the oceans. The plastic needs to be removed, but we may well find that it has positive uses, now that technology is moving on, in helping us to combat climate change through a move away from conventional fuels, for example. We may well end up having a positive reason to take that plastic out of the ocean, but we should certainly stop putting it in. We should be taking all the steps that we can to avoid the further pollution of the ocean and further degradation of marine habitats.

We have the foundations and frameworks in place for the next 10 years. They are already agreed in principle, and they now need to turn into action. That action is about protecting what we have, restoring what we lost and enforcing good behaviour to ensure that rogue elements do not get away with doing further damage to our marine habitats. That is not a small task, but I am delighted that we have this Minister in place, because she is very committed to this issue. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye on calling for this debate. World Ocean Day is a moment for all of us to think about what else we can do, individually and collectively, to protect our oceans.

3.36 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I echo the congratulations to the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on bringing forward this important debate. It has become something of an annual event to have a debate that coincides with World Ocean Day on 8 June, and it follows, as we have heard, from a recent debate on the impact of plastic in our oceans.

This year's theme is "Planet Ocean: Tides are Changing". The tides may well be changing, because experts warn us that we are reaching a tipping point that will bring devastating and dramatic consequences for mankind with regards to our oceans. The purpose of World Ocean Day is

"to inform the public of the impact of human actions on the ocean, develop a worldwide movement of citizens for the ocean, and mobilize and unite the world's population on a project for the sustainable management of the world's oceans."

This day reminds us all of the major role that oceans play in our everyday lives. They are the lungs of our planet, a major source of food and medicine, and a critical part of our biosphere. The ocean covers the majority of the Earth, but only a small portion of its waters have actually been explored. Despite humanity's utter reliance on it, and compared to the breadth and depth of what it gives us, the ocean receives only a fragment of our attention and resources in return. That surely has to change.

The latest estimates from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation warn that more than half of the world's marine species may stand on the brink of extinction by 2100. Temperatures have increased by 1.1°C, and an estimated 60% of the world's marine ecosystems have already been degraded or are being used unsustainably. Warming of 1.5°C threatens to destroy 70% to 90% of coral reefs, and a 2°C increase means a near 100% loss—a point of no return.

The ocean occupies over 70% of the planet's surface area and produces at least 50% of the world's oxygen. It is a hugely significant force in mitigating climate change. Despite that, its role is most often considered as passive rather than active, but it has a significant role to play in slowing down the rate of climate change. Since 1978, over 90% of Earth's increased heat and 40% of carbon from fossil fuels have been absorbed by the ocean. In addition, it is predicted that the ocean has absorbed between 30% and 50% of all carbon dioxide emissions caused by human activity, which makes it the biggest carbon sink in the world, as we have heard today.

I want to talk about ocean acidification. When CO₂ dissolves in sea water, the water becomes more acidic. The acidity of our oceans has increased by 26% since about 1850, and staggeringly, the pace of change is around 10 times faster than at any time in the last 155 million years.

Ocean acidification reduces the amount of carbonate, which is a key building block in sea water. That makes it more difficult for marine organisms such as coral and some plankton to form their shells and skeletons and existing shells may begin to dissolve. The present-day pH of sea water is highly variable and a single organism can cope with fluctuations of different pH levels during its lifetime. The problem with ocean acidification is the sustained nature of the change, as the risk comes with the lifetime exposure to lower pH levels. Further, the rapid pace of acidification will influence the extent to which calcifying organisms will be able to adapt.

[Patricia Gibson]

The impact of ocean acidification is not uniform across all species, but a more acidic environment will harm marine species such as molluscs, corals and some other varieties. Marine organisms could also experience changes in growth, development, abundance and survival in response to ocean acidification. Most species seem to be more vulnerable in the early stages of life. Juvenile fish, for example, may have trouble locating a suitable habitat. Research suggests that ocean acidification will also be a driver for substantial changes in ocean ecosystems this century. Those changes may be made worse by the combined effects of other emerging climate-related hazards, such as the decrease in ocean oxygen levels—a condition known as ocean deoxygenation—which is already affecting marine life in some regions. Ocean acidification also has the potential to affect food security, coastal protection, tourism, carbon storage and climate regulation because more acidic oceans are less effective in moderating climate change. To reduce the impact of ocean acidification, we need to improve our air quality, develop sustainable fisheries management practices and sustainably manage habitats, as well as establishing and maintaining marine protected areas, about which we have heard a lot today. Currently, only around 8% of our oceans are protected. We need to do more, but on a global and international basis.

A recent YouGov survey of 1,696 adults found that almost three quarters of people in the UK say ocean life needs more protection. At this juncture, I wish to pay tribute to Sir David Attenborough, whose “Blue Planet” programmes brought the ocean world into our living rooms and showed us the wonders and the beauty of our oceans in such an educational and breathtaking way. He also warned us that the living world cannot operate without a healthy ocean—nor can we. The ocean may connect, sustain and support us all, but, according to the UN,

“its health is at a tipping point and so is the well-being of all that depends on it.”

The UN hopes World Ocean Day will help inform the public of human actions on the ocean and develop a worldwide movement to protect it and unite the world in seeking to sustainably manage our oceans, making this is an important day on the global calendar.

I will end with the wise words of Sir David Attenborough:

“Nowhere is more powerful and unforgiving, yet more beautiful and endlessly fascinating than the ocean.”

It is time we act globally in a way that shows we understand how important our oceans are and stop taking them for granted.

3.44 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Latham. I thank the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for securing this important debate. She and all speakers covered the issues comprehensively and laid out a number of solutions and actions that we would like to see taken forward. There is probably an element of unanimity in the debate around what needs to be done.

On World Ocean Day, we acknowledge this year’s theme of “Planet Ocean: tides are changing” as a call to intensify our efforts to understand, preserve and harness

the power of our oceans. Our vast oceans hold the key to so much: biodiversity, marine ecosystems, climate change mitigation, food security, renewable energy and the future preservation of our planet. The role of our oceans in combating climate change is grossly underappreciated. More 70% of our planet’s surface is made up of ocean, which produces at least half of our world’s oxygen. Since 1978, the ocean has absorbed more 90% of the Earth’s increased heat and 40% of fossil fuel emissions, making it the world’s largest carbon sink. However, these watery giants are seldom acknowledged as active players in the fight against climate change. We need to draw focus to the power of blue carbon habitats, such as saltmarshes, seagrass meadows and mangroves. We heard extensively from other speakers on those issues.

Our seas and oceans are a rich source of biodiversity. Healthy sea beds are home to many species and drive richer marine ecosystems. Our marine environment and the creatures that call it home face numerous threats from human activity, such as damage from waste and toxins, dredging and dragging of the sea bed, and the destruction of corals, maerls and sandbanks—I could go on.

The Government’s commitment to the UN’s pledge to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030 is all well and good, but their actions do not suggest that they will get us there. The latest analysis from the Wildlife and Countryside Link—the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England—found that although 40% of English waters are designated as marine protected areas, only a maximum of 8% of English seas are effectively protected for nature. While the three new protected marine areas announced by DEFRA this year are welcome, we should note that those sites represent not even 0.5% of English seas.

The impact of humankind on our oceans cannot be understated. It has now been five years since David Attenborough’s groundbreaking “Blue Planet II” forced marine plastic pollution into the public consciousness and inspired millions across the globe to take action. His work encouraged a seismic shift in the public consciousness and helped to put plastic pollution on the political agenda. Despite that, the plastic pollution problem in our oceans continues to get worse. The UN estimates that plastic pollution in oceans and other bodies of water could more than double by 2030. Plastics pose a significant threat to the stability of our global ecosystems and human health, as evidenced by the discovery of microplastics in both seabird eggs and human blood.

It is a global crisis, and we are not exempt from responsibility. In the UK, around 14 billion plastic bottles, 9 billion aluminium and steel cans and 1.5 billion glass bottles are consumed each year. In fact, 75% of the litter found on our streets comprises drinks containers, and much of it finds its way into our waterways. Despite that, the Government’s proposed deposit return scheme is limited to certain materials, rather than creating a framework that could include more types of plastic or bioplastics in the future. Their plan to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042 is years behind schedule. Only a Labour Government will tackle waste, improve recycling rates and introduce an all-in deposit return scheme to tackle the problem head on.

Our seas are also of huge economic significance, supporting many British people through fishing, offshore energy, building, and tourism—I could go on. The

Government's lack of action is a huge threat to many of those jobs. Consider the worrying 44% drop in the levels of shellfish caught and landed in the UK in just the last year. In Teesside, the local fishing industry has reported a 95% drop in their catches of shellfish, such as lobsters and crabs. Such die-offs are devastating to nature and the fishing sector. However, when the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), addressed the House on 30 March and asked the Environment Secretary to join him in meeting the North East Fishing Collective, she responded with uncharacteristic clarity:

"I do not need to meet with them." —[*Official Report*, 30 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 1132.]

So uncaring and callous is the Secretary of State's attitude to our own waters and biodiversity, we can only assume she has less care for our global oceans. Talking of global oceans, let us not forget that UK overseas territories account for the fifth largest marine estate in the world. I praise Government Ministers, especially Lord Goldsmith, for the blue belt programme and Darwin initiative funding. When I spoke to many of the overseas territories in May at the UKOT conference in Westminster, they still felt that the UK did not give them a voice at global negotiations. That approach would change under Labour, as we would adopt a modern, respectful and engaged partnership with our overseas territories.

It is that sort of attitude that encapsulates how little the Government care about the impact of their actions on the livelihoods of the people they are elected to serve. The tourism industry, for example, has pleaded with the Government to help it stop sewage being dumped into waters near our beautiful beaches. Last month, nine UK beaches lost their blue flag status, including the iconic Brighton beach, which was subject to 45 sewage discharges last year. Just last month, the Government blocked Labour's Bill that would have ended the sewage scandal and finally have made water bosses accountable.

Our coastal communities should not have to worry about water companies using their water as open sewers while the Government turn a blind eye. While it is positive to see World Ocean Day being celebrated in this way, it is now incumbent on the Government to convert warm words into concrete action and protect our blue planet.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mrs Latham—two days in a row—especially for such an important debate. I have enjoyed hearing the knowledge and passion of colleagues this afternoon. It is clear that all colleagues present today recognise the importance of our ocean and the urgency with which we need to take action, and with which we are taking action. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for securing the debate, which was perfectly timed, given that today is the UN's World Ocean Day, the theme of which, as has already been said, is "Protect 30x30", aimed at protecting at least 30% of our blue planet by 2030.

Despite the official title of UN World Oceans Day—of course, there are many different oceans—I will refer to it as World Ocean Day, because it is one ocean, all

connected. The nature and species that survive, thrive and depend on our ocean see no boundaries. There is one global connected ocean, and it makes sense to design policy responses accordingly. There have been many calls this afternoon for us to work collaboratively with devolved Administrations and internationally with other countries. I will come on to the progress that has been made.

Marine life is important. A safe, healthy ocean underpins our lives and our economies and my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye was correct to say that more must be done. More is being done, but it will not be easy. We have to tackle the triple planetary crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution. Without action, plastic pollution entering the ocean is set to triple by 2040. Over 1 million species, including 33% of reef-forming corals and one third of marine mammals, are predicted to disappear entirely over our lifetimes. Meanwhile, 33% of our global fish stocks are over-exploited.

I want to pay tribute and give thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for the sterling work that she did in my Department, setting the scene and paving the way for the Environment Act 2021, off the back of which we have the recently launched environmental improvement plan 2023, which goes into far more detail than I can possibly give here today. It is not just about oceans, but about all aspects of how we will protect our planet and halt the decline of nature by 2030.

We know that many small island—or, more appropriately, big ocean—developing states are bearing the brunt of the challenges from climate change and plastic pollution. They have been raising the alarm for decades while contributing little to the problem. Here in the UK we are seeing the effects, including estimated losses of 85% of our saltmarsh and 92% of our seagrass habitats in the last 100 years.

I also want to thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for a most insightful and interesting contribution and making us all more aware of ocean acidification. I found her contribution staggering in terms of the acceleration that our oceans are enduring.

But we can be proud of the Government's record. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) commend the work of Lord Goldsmith, who attended the APPG for the ocean's annual general meeting earlier this week, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye also attended. The work is cross-Government. I am also proud of the UK's international leadership, where we have been at the forefront of securing critically important international agreements. Just last week the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), was involved in the second intergovernmental negotiating committee on plastic pollution, demonstrating that we continue to work with other countries. At the UN biodiversity summit in December, as leader of the Global Ocean Alliance and ocean co-chair of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, the UK helped to deliver a landmark global deal for nature.

The Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework commits to halting and reversing biodiversity loss by 2030, including through the 30x30 target for land and the ocean. The Secretary of State attended that conference,

[Trudy Harrison]

which made such fantastic progress, along with my noble Friend Lord Benyon, who is the Minister with responsibility for oceans. There can be no better parliamentary champion for mangroves than the Secretary of State, although his passion is matched by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who is a fantastic champion for all things environment and nature. Once again, I heard his plea loud and clear to chivvy along officials in DEFRA, but I think we are making tremendous progress. These things are not easy, but I will support our teams and all the NGOs and devolved Administrations we work with in going as fast as we can, because we understand the urgency. I welcome the constant nudging and encouragement from him on this and other matters.

The UK was also instrumental in agreeing the draft text of the “biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction” agreement earlier this year, which will provide the framework to implement greater protection and governance for over 60% of the global ocean. This is vital to achieving the global 30x30 target.

We also know that biodiversity loss and climate change are inextricably linked. With a 2° rise in global temperature, a predicted 90% of coral reefs will be lost, so we continue to work to raise ambition on ocean-climate action across the United Nations framework convention on climate change, to fill key evidence gaps and to build capacity around the world to protect and restore blue carbon habitats. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye will recognise the work that is being done. She called for more research and development, and for better understanding, which is what we are working towards.

As a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution, which now numbers well over 50 countries, we are pushing for an effective and ambitious plastic pollution treaty that will end plastic pollution by 2040. As I mentioned, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, was in Paris last week, and I am pleased that the critical decision was made to start drafting the new treaty text, with our world-leading scientists, businesses and NGOs working towards an agreement by the end of 2024.

Alongside protection, we know we have to manage our global ocean sustainably. That is why, last year, the UK joined other ambitious ocean leaders as part of the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, again working and collaborating internationally, and it is why we pushed for the June 2022 WTO fisheries subsidies agreement to curtail harmful subsidies and tackle one of the key drivers of overfishing.

In parallel, we are determined to end illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. I was pleased to speak at a recent debate secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell on this subject. With expanding membership, the IUU Fishing Action Alliance will bring further international pressure and action to stamp out this harmful practice.

Effective ocean action is possible only with the right resources and tools to deliver it. SDG 14, “life below water,” is the least funded of all the sustainable development goals, so the UK is helping to mobilise finance for ocean action. I was particularly pleased to hear my hon.

Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye reference the importance of private finance because, of course, taxpayers’ money can go only so far. My noble Friend Lord Benyon, as the Minister with responsibility for green finance, is working diligently and determinedly to secure that private finance, particularly for the oceans. The UK’s blue belt programme is supporting the British overseas territories. It is so important that we work with our overseas territories to take action to protect the ocean. With £30 million of support since 2016, the blue belt now protects 4.3 million sq km of ocean and supports sustainable growth.

Our £500 million blue planet fund is supporting developing countries to address biodiversity loss and climate change by tackling marine pollution and supporting sustainable seafood in some of the world’s most important but fragile ocean environments. Just this morning, Lord Benyon hosted a roundtable to understand how public and private sector investment can come together to deliver a blended finance solution through the excellent global fund for coral reefs programme, which supports the ocean, reefs and climate-vulnerable communities.

But, of course, our action starts at home. We remain committed to achieving a good environmental status in our seas, and we will shortly publish an update to our programme of measures to do so. We have already built a comprehensive network of marine protected areas—374 sites covering 38% of the UK’s waters and 40% of England’s—and we are focused on making sure that they are properly protected. Nearly 60% of England’s inshore MPAs now have fisheries byelaws in place. Having left the EU, we can put in place management to protect against damaging fishing practices in our offshore sites. The first four byelaws for offshore sites were made last year, and we plan to finish putting in the management needed in all MPAs by the end of next year.

Using the new powers in the Environment Act 2021, we now have a statutory target to make sure our MPAs are recovering our biodiversity. We have announced the first three highly protected marine areas, which provide the highest levels of protection. Those sites will be designated in the next month, and we are starting to look at further sites.

Protecting and restoring critical blue carbon habitats is a key part of our approach to protecting coastal communities, such as the one I live in, from rising seas and more frequent storms. That will deliver biodiversity and absorb carbon dioxide.

I am delighted that the cross-Administration UK Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership is publishing its evidence needs statement today, setting out key research questions and demonstrating the UK’s ambition to fill critical blue carbon evidence gaps. In response to the UN decade of ocean science for sustainable development, the UK has established a National Decade Committee to inspire and enable a whole-of-society approach to meeting the interconnected challenges to the ocean that we have heard about today.

Chris Grayling: The Minister referred to discussions that we had this week about these issues, when we spoke about the complexity of getting consent to reforest an area of the UK. Have she and her officials looked at what barriers there are, if any, to restoring areas of seagrass or kelp? If there are planning barriers, will she and her Department look at ways that we can alleviate the situation and make it easier to do that?

Trudy Harrison: It would not be appropriate for me to speak more about the work we are doing to speed up the way we plant trees in this country, as this is a debate about oceans. I am not the Minister directly responsible for oceans, so I will ask Lord Benyon to write to my right hon. Friend with more detailed information about any hold-ups that he has identified in the planning system, particularly around sea kelp.

Hon. Members referred to technologies, and the UK is a global leader in offshore wind. Through our offshore wind environmental improvement package, which is currently before the House as part of the Energy Bill, we are supporting the drive for net zero and energy security. The package will support the rapid deployment of offshore wind while protecting our precious marine environment through an innovative set of measures, including new environmental standards for offshore wind infrastructure, measures to enable strategic compensation and the establishment of a new marine recovery fund.

We know that the sea will only get busier. My Department is leading the cross-governmental marine spatial prioritisation programme to optimise use of our sea space and work together to increasingly co-locate uses where possible. That includes our domestic fishing industries. We are working to ensure that the industries are sustainable environmentally, economically and socially, with a diverse fishing fleet run by a fishing industry with whom we are committed to working much more closely. Of course, supporting our fishing communities through this transition is vital. We recognise the fantastic work they do, and the provision of fish and seafood continues to be an absolute priority. We have developed regional fisheries management groups and are making good progress on DEFRA's first six frontrunner fisheries management plans. Those plans are being prepared for public consultation, building on a huge amount of engagement that has already taken place, and five FMPs will be published by the end of 2023.

As I have set out, we have good reason to be proud of the UK's commitment and also its leadership, working with other countries. We have secured progress on many international agreements and continue to champion ocean protection here and internationally. Collaboration and awareness raising are vital, and the debate has certainly raised awareness. I hope I have been able to demonstrate the successful collaboration and outcomes that have come from those international negotiations and agreements.

That brings me back to the importance of World Ocean Day, which helps with both those aims. There is still much more to do and we can deliver together. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate about the work we are doing in DEFRA. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye not just for the way in which she has enlightened us today, but for her continued passion for the environment. I very much look forward to visiting her constituency next week and meeting some of her farmers, who seem equally passionate about the transition towards much more environmental stewardship in food production. I look forward to seeing her there.

4.7 pm

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive speech and her agreement that more needs to be done despite the UK's global leadership on this matter. She might be interested to know that the APPG's next inquiry is on the future of ocean technology, where there is some exciting stuff going on.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who highlighted the need for more research and data, the issue of plastic pollution and the leading role that the UK plays globally in combating that. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who highlighted the importance of ocean-based solutions to climate change, the acute need to protect, restore and enforce our marine protected areas, which also protect our UK fishing livelihoods, and the role that the UK can play globally in this.

I thank the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for their valuable contributions, illustrating—almost—that our ocean is not something that separates us, but which joins us together in political action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Ocean Day.

4.9 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 June 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Trade Negotiations with Israel, Mexico and Switzerland

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The Department for Business and Trade has made progress on three key trade negotiations in the month of May. This statement provides Parliament with an update on the UK's trade negotiations with Israel, Mexico, and Switzerland. The Government will continue to keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

UK-Israel trade negotiations

The second round of United Kingdom-Israel free trade agreement negotiations commenced on 9 May, concluding on 17 May. This round of negotiations was hosted by the UK and conducted in a hybrid manner; a group of Israeli officials travelled to London for in-person discussions, with further officials attending virtually.

Prior to the round, the Secretary of State visited Israel to meet her counterpart, Minister Nir Barkat, to discuss the negotiations and the wider UK-Israel trade and business relationship.

During this round policy officials held text-based discussions, having exchanged draft chapter texts in advance of the round. Technical discussions were held across 30 policy areas and 60 sessions in London. Negotiations covered the breadth of the upgraded agreement.

The ongoing negotiations for a new modern free trade agreement putting services and innovation at its heart will upgrade our trade relationship, worth £7.2 billion in the four quarters to the end of 2022, supporting new opportunities for our businesses.

UK-Mexico trade negotiations

The third round of United Kingdom-Mexico free trade agreement negotiations commenced on 15 May, concluding on 19 May. This round of negotiations took place in Mexico City in a hybrid format, with a UK delegation of officials travelling for in-person discussions.

Officials held discussions across 66 sessions with 39 being held in person in Mexico City. A key objective for the round, at this relatively early stage, was to develop a more in-depth understanding of Mexico's trade policy positions and priorities and use the opportunity to move our positions closer together through detailed discussions on treaty text.

These negotiations continue to reflect our shared ambition to secure a comprehensive and updated deal and to strengthen our existing trading relationship, worth over £4.8 billion in the four quarters to the end of 2022. Both countries agree that this is an opportunity to complement and add value to the UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for transpacific partnership (CPTPP).

UK-Switzerland trade negotiations

The first round of UK-Switzerland free trade agreement negotiations commenced on 22 May, concluding 2 June. This round of negotiations was hosted by the UK and took place in a hybrid manner; a group of Swiss officials travelled to London for in-person discussions, with some additional officials attending virtually.

Prior to the round the Secretary of State visited Switzerland to formally launch negotiations with her counterpart, Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin, where they discussed the significant opportunities an enhanced trade deal presented for both the UK and Switzerland.

During the round, officials held discussions across 30 policy areas and 53 sessions both in person in London and virtually. Chapter negotiators focused their discussions on establishing a more detailed understanding of the outcomes the UK and Switzerland are seeking and began to share early text proposals to work from.

These negotiations demonstrate our shared ambitions to upgrade and future-proof our current trade agreement to reflect the focus of both of our economies by delivering modern provisions for services, which represent over 70% of GDP for both our economies, while also identifying opportunities to further remove tariff barriers and create commercially meaningful opportunities.

Summary

The Government remain clear that any deal we sign, including with Israel, Switzerland and Mexico, will be in the best interests of the British people and the United Kingdom economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental and labour protections, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the NHS, and the services it provides is not on the table.

His Majesty's Government will continue to work closely with Israel, Mexico, and Switzerland to ensure negotiations proceed at pace and takes place on terms that are right for the UK.

[HCWS833]

UK-Maldives Free Trade Agreement

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): Today the Department for Business and Trade has announced the launch of a public call for input into a prospective free trade agreement with the Government of Republic of Maldives (Maldives). The call for input can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/trade-with-maldives-call-for-input>.

Maldives is one of the only remaining Commonwealth countries without preferential access to UK markets or with which the UK is not already pursuing a free trade agreement (FTA). The UK is therefore looking to negotiate a bespoke, goods-only trade deal with Maldives that seeks to build on the existing goods trade between the countries. The UK Government are clear that any deal that we sign will not compromise on our high environmental and labour protections, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest.

The call for input will run for eight weeks and invite businesses, public sector bodies, individuals, and other interested stakeholders to set out their priorities for a closer trading relationship with Maldives.

The information that the Government receive through this exercise will be beneficial in shaping our approach to negotiations and our priorities and objectives, ensuring that our final approach is informed by stakeholder needs.

Next Steps

The UK and Maldivian Governments share a desire to develop closer ties. Prior to launching official talks with Maldives, the UK Government will publish their approach to negotiations; this will include a response to the call for input and our strategic objectives. We will continue to keep Parliament, the devolved Administrations, UK citizens and businesses updated, as we make progress.

[HCWS832]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Prices Act 2022: Expenditure on Energy Schemes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): I am tabling this statement to update hon. Members under the Energy Prices Act 2022, in line with the requirement under the Act for quarterly reporting to Parliament on expenditure incurred under it.

This is the second quarterly report on energy scheme expenditure under section 14 of the Act and covers the period from 1 January to 31 March 2023.

Energy prices are volatile, and changes will affect the outturn cost of the schemes.

The Government have prioritised support for those most in need, while ensuring we act in a fiscally responsible way. The Government have covered nearly half a typical household's energy bill through the energy price guarantee and energy bills support scheme since October—with a typical household saving around £1,500. The energy price guarantee scheme will continue at £2,500 to the end of June.

Expenditure incurred

<i>£m</i>	<i>Expenditure incurred between 1 January and 31 March 23</i>	<i>b) Cumulative expenditure incurred to 31 March 23</i>
Energy bills support scheme GB and NI	4,200	11,873
Energy price guarantee GB and NI	253	253
Domestic alternative fuel payment	619	619
Energy bills relief scheme GB & NI	4,006	5,558
Non-domestic alternative fuel payment	61	61

Future costs

Forecasts of FY23-24—1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024—expenditure for the energy schemes were published by the Office for Budget Responsibility on 15 March 2023 as part of the spring Budget 2023. The forecasts provided were: £4.0 billion for the energy price guarantee, £0.5 billion for the energy bills relief scheme, £0.5 billion for the energy bills discount scheme and £0.4 billion for the energy bills discount scheme heat network support.

The costs in FY23-24 for other energy support schemes are forecast to total £0.5 billion. This includes the energy bills support scheme alternative funding, the domestic alternative fuel payment, the non-domestic alternative fuel payment, and prepayment meter levelisation (energy price guarantee).

Separately, the forecast for heat networks alternative dispute resolution bodies funding is £0.3 million.

All forecasts are provided on an accruals basis. Ongoing work on the reconciliation of scheme costs may impact the FY23-24 forecasts.

To note:

Figures for expenditure incurred are on a cash basis. This includes payments made by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to energy suppliers, local authorities and other scheme operators. Some of the expenditure incurred in the last quarter will be recognised in FY23-24, where it relates to energy scheme support from 1 April 2023 onwards. The figures for expenditure incurred do not include accrued costs, i.e. expected FY22-23—1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023—costs which are yet to be paid out. Therefore the figures for expenditure incurred may not represent the full cost of schemes in FY22-23.

The energy bills support scheme in Great Britain was not made under the powers conferred by the Energy Prices Act 2022, but it is included for completeness.

The energy bills discount scheme launched for UK businesses, charities and the public sector on 1 April 2023.

Heat networks alternative dispute resolution bodies funding utilises the power conferred by section 13 of the Energy Prices Act 2022. This scheme has not incurred expenditure to 31 March 2023. This funding is separate to the energy bills discount scheme heat network support.

Administrative costs are not included in figures.

[HCWS835]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly Membership

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The Lord Ricketts has been appointed as a Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in place of the Earl of Kinnoull.

The Baroness Bull CBE has been appointed as a full representative of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in place of the Earl of Kinnoull.

The Lord Krebs has been appointed as a substitute representative of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in place of the Baroness Bull CBE.

[HCWS834]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

HIV Action Plan: Annual Update 2022-23

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I am pleased to update the House on the publication of the first annual update to Parliament on the HIV action plan. In January 2019, the Government committed to an ambition to end new

HIV transmissions, AIDS diagnoses, and HIV-related deaths within England by 2030. Achievement of these ambitious commitments—including our interim commitment to an 80% reduction in transmissions by 2025—is within our grasp, and we should be encouraged by the progress already made. This progress is testament to the collective and ongoing efforts of many organisations across the UK Health Security Agency, local government, the NHS and wider health system, statutory agencies, and the voluntary and community sector.

As part of the plan, we committed to update Parliament each year on the progress made towards our ambition to end new HIV transmissions, AIDS, and HIV-related deaths within England by 2030. I am proud to present to Parliament a summary of the work undertaken towards these objectives in 2022-23.

Despite the challenging backdrop of the covid pandemic, England has seen a 33% fall in new HIV diagnoses since 2019. NHS England has committed £20 million in funding for 2022 to 2025 to expand HIV opt-out testing in emergency departments in areas with the highest HIV prevalence. This has helped diagnose 2,000 new cases of blood-borne viruses (hepatitis B and C as well as HIV) in the first year of the programme. During National HIV Testing Week 2023 almost 22,000 free HIV testing kits were ordered by the public—with self-testing kits that provide instant at-home results available for the first time. We have also established the HIV Action Plan Implementation Steering Group to oversee progress, as well as a Community Advisory Group and four task and finish groups to support PrEP access and equity; workforce; HIV control strategies in low prevalence areas; and retention and engagement in care, and I look forward to seeing the impact they will make.

[HCWS838]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Illegal Migration Update

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Provisions within the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA), which came into force on 28 June 2022, set out the framework to differentiate between two groups of refugees who ultimately remain in the UK: “group 1” and “group 2”.

The primary way in which the groups are differentiated is the grant of permission to stay: group 1 refugees are normally granted refugee permission to stay for five years, after which they can apply for settlement, whereas group 2 refugees are normally granted temporary refugee permission to stay for 30 months on a 10-year route to settlement.

The differentiation policy was intended to disincentivise migrants from using criminal smugglers to facilitate illegal journeys to the UK. This was the right approach. Since then, the scale of the challenge facing the UK, like other countries, has grown— and that is why the Government introduced the Illegal Migration Bill. The Bill goes further than ever before in seeking to deter illegal entry to the UK, so that the only humanitarian route into the UK is through a safe and legal one. The Bill will radically overhaul how we deal with people who arrive in the UK illegally via safe countries, rendering their asylum and human rights claims (in respect of their home country) inadmissible and imposing a duty on the Home Secretary to remove them. This approach

represents a considerably stronger means of tackling the same issue that the differentiation policy sought to address: people making dangerous and unnecessary journeys through safe countries to claim asylum in the UK.

We will therefore pause the differentiation policy in the next package of immigration rules changes in July 2023. This means we will stop taking grouping decisions under the differentiated asylum system after these rules changes and those individuals who are successful in their asylum application, including those who are granted humanitarian protection, will receive the same conditions. Our ability to remove failed asylum applicants remains unchanged.

Individuals who have already received a “group 2” or humanitarian protection decision under post-28 June 2022 policies will be contacted and will have their conditions aligned to those afforded to “group 1” refugees. This includes length of permission to stay, route to settlement, and eligibility for family reunion.

On 23 February 2023 the Home Office announced the streamlined asylum processing model for a small number of cases of nationalities with high asylum grant rates: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria, Yemen. Because this model focuses on manifestly well-founded cases, positive decisions can be taken without the need for an additional interview. No one will have their asylum application refused without the opportunity of an additional interview. Those claims made between 28 June 2022 and the date of introduction of the Illegal Migration Bill (7 March 2023) will be processed according to this model. This will also include claimants from Sudan. Sudanese legacy claimants are already being processed in-line with established policies and processes and will be decided in-line with the Prime Minister’s commitment to clear the backlog of legacy asylum claims by the end of 2023.

[HCWS837]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions Dashboards

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): Pensions dashboards will transform the way in which people plan for retirement. On 2 March 2023, I announced that the pensions dashboards programme would require additional time to deliver the connection of pension providers and schemes, in accordance with the connection deadlines set out in the Pensions Dashboards Regulations 2022 and the Financial Conduct Authority’s corresponding pensions dashboard rules.

More time is needed to deliver this complex build, and for the pensions industry to help facilitate the successful connection of a wide range of different IT systems to the dashboards digital architecture. As part of our reset of the pensions dashboard programme, I am today laying amending regulations with a new approach to delivery that allows us to work more collaboratively with the pensions industry. Rather than setting out the entire staging timeline in legislation, we will instead set this out in guidance which we will collaborate on with industry this year. This will give the pensions dashboards programme the flexibility it needs to ensure this complex project is completed effectively.

In recognition that the requirement to connect to the digital architecture should remain mandatory, we will include a connection deadline in legislation of 31 October 2026. This is not the dashboards available point—the point at which dashboards will be accessible to the public—which could be earlier than this.

The Government remain as committed as ever to making pensions dashboards a reality and we are ambitious about their delivery. I am confident that this reappraised approach will enable us to make significant progress on delivering dashboards safely and securely, enabling consumers to take advantage of their benefits to plan for retirement.

[HCWS836]

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