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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 May 2024

House of Commons

Oral Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 May 2024

TRANSPORT

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

The Secretary of State was asked—

Reliability of Rail Services

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's proceedings, I would like to make a short statement. On Monday night, the House agreed a new policy based on a report of the House of Commons Commission setting out the steps that can be taken if a Member is arrested on suspicion of committing a violent or sexual offence. This involves a risk assessment carried out by a panel, which may recommend that a Member be excluded from the parliamentary estate. More details of the policy are available on the House of Commons Commission's webpage.

As the House knows, the main motion, as amended, was agreed to without a Division. No Member voted against the exclusion policy. However, I understand that some hon. Members have received threats on social media since the vote on Monday. Let me be quite clear: any attempt to intimidate or threaten any Member of this House is totally and wholly unacceptable. It is an affront to our democracy and to the constituents who elected us, and it is a contempt of this House.

Any Member who receives threatening communications should report them to the Parliamentary Security Department and, if appropriate, to the police through the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigations Team, which will be able to investigate further. I wrote to all hon. Members last night to remind them of the support services available to Members. We take this very seriously.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it relevant to what I have just said?

Sir Charles Walker: It is, Mr Speaker. Given that our legal system has in-built safeguards to protect the rights of the accused and that we in this place promote and defend these rights on behalf of our constituents, was it not absolutely in order for this House to debate the extent of these rights in relation to the exclusion of Members of Parliament from this Chamber and the estate before they had either been convicted or discharged by the courts?

Mr Speaker: It is absolutely right that this House should have an opportunity to debate and vote on these matters, as it did on Monday night. I will leave it at that.

1. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the reliability of rail services for passengers. [902835]

3. **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the reliability of rail services for passengers. [902839]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Performance varies across the network and is dependent on both reliable infrastructure and strong operator performance. Where we have both, as on Greater Anglia, passengers enjoy great performance, and I am clear that this is a standard for all operators to achieve, working with their Network Rail route counterparts. I regularly meet Network Rail and train operators to encourage greater collaboration on day-to-day performance, including convening a rail industry summit in March.

Andrew Gwynne: With fares up and cancellations at a record high, rail passengers are crying out for change. In my patch, Reddish South and Denton stations are served by just one train a week. I would like a train service that meets our needs, but the Minister seems to have put rail reform on the back burner. Is that because he cannot deliver, or he thinks Labour will?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Member is completely wrong. The pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Rail Reform Bill is being done right now by the Transport Committee. I think I am the final witness to appear before the Committee next week, so that it can, I hope, report in July. Contrast that with the passenger-in-chief approach of meddling with the railways and indeed of a resource-led timetable to fit the existing staff, and I think it is quite clear that it is the Conservatives who want to improve the rail system.

Samantha Dixon: Summer has arrived and tens of thousands of visitors will be heading to Chester and north Wales, and cross-border connectivity is essential. I remind the Minister of his Government's cast-iron commitment, made in October, to electrify the north Wales main line. When will the north Wales main line actually receive an allocation of real money so it can start work on the electrification of the line?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Member is absolutely correct that the Prime Minister's Network North commitment means over £36 billion of former HS2 money is being put into other projects, chiefly in the north and the midlands. The electrification of the north Wales main line is one of those, and it is something I am determined we will deliver. We are taking steps in allocating project

time and resource so that we can advance such projects, but bear in mind that the HS2 spend was for up to 2043, so it will not all come at once.

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

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Is it the case that train operating companies stand ready to invest significantly to improve passenger journeys, but a disincentive is the break clause in current contracts? Ahead of wider reforms that the Transport Committee is scrutinising at the moment, may I urge the Minister to review those break clause arrangements and incentivise that investment now?

Huw Merriman: This is the folly of Labour's nationalisation plan, because the best performing operator in terms of punctuality is Greater Anglia, and that one has the option that is coming up. The Labour party, if it makes it into government, would take away the contract from the operator that has the best performance, showing that it is all about dogma and not about best common sense. I firmly believe that where operators can deliver more for passengers, and indeed for their workforce, by having more certainty, there is certainly a case to be made for looking at those contract terms and giving them longer.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): My hon. Friend knows that after decades of closure, Kenilworth station has been reopened by a Conservative Government and a Conservative county council. However, the reliability, indeed the variety of services through that station, would be significantly improved by double tracking the line between Leamington and Coventry. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the time he has already given me on this issue, but will my hon. Friend do all he can to bring about that improvement, which will benefit not just my constituents, but also provide connectivity options that the northern leg of High Speed 2 no longer will?

Huw Merriman: My right hon. and learned Friend has been a champion of that project, and as he mentioned he met the Secretary of State to discuss it. HS2 is making provision for the project to occur should funding be available, and the new local transport fund makes funds available for those parts where HS2 would previously have been delivered. There is now a great opportunity for my right hon. and learned Friend's transport authority to fund the project that he has championed for so long.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): In the five years since the Government first admitted that reform of our railways was needed, passenger services have gone from bad to worse, with a train now cancelled every 90 seconds—the worst statistics on record. With the Transport Secretary openly admitting that any reforms this side of an election are unlikely, does the Minister understand why passengers have given up on this Government doing anything to improve their rail experience?

Huw Merriman: I do not agree with that assertion. Post privatisation—nationalisation would reverse this—passenger numbers have doubled, and £100 billion has been invested in the railways by this Government since 2010.

We look at performance, which of course we want to get better, but in March for example, 70% of trains were running to time, with 2.9% of cancellations. The two biggest cancellation failures during March were one trespass and one suicide, and the trespass alone caused 286 cancellations. Yes, there is more we need to do, but the Opposition Front-Bench team would have a lot more credibility if they recognised performance indicators and what parts we need to deliver, rather than just chucking dogma about nationalisation, which is a tired, failed old policy.

D1 Licence Training

2. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Whether his Department provides grants for the provision of training for D1 licences. [902838]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): Although we do not provide direct funding for drivers to obtain D1 licences, the Department makes available more than £3 million a year through the bus service operators grant to community transport operators in England, which are predominantly charities operating vehicles that require D1 licences. They receive £1.60 for every £1 claimed, reflecting the increased costs faced by the sector, and supporting them to continue delivering inclusive and accessible transport across the country.

Owen Thompson: I thank the Minister for that answer. In Scotland, as across the rest of the UK, there has been a shortage of minibus drivers, with Brexit and the legacy of covid fuelling a crippling shortage of bus drivers. Passenger-carrying vehicle drivers can pursue careers in various fields, including public transport, tour and travel companies, school transportation and private charter services. What more can the Government do to incentivise such training?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman might not be aware of the recent consultation to reduce the age requirement for bus and HGV drivers from 21 to 18, and I encourage him to speak to the Department for Work and Pensions. We are working closely with the relevant Ministers at DWP to have sector-based work academies and skills boot camps, to encourage greater participation by drivers.

Rail Passenger Numbers

4. **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): If he will fund exploratory rail studies on passenger numbers through the local transport fund. [902840]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): The local transport fund is a £4.7 billion fund that has been allocated to local authorities in the north and midlands to fund a wide range of transport measures. The funding empowers local leaders to invest in the transport policies that matter most to people in their area, and that could include rail studies. Guidance will be published shortly to support local leaders in developing their plans, but it will rightly be a local decision.

Graham Stuart: May I first congratulate my hon. Friend on the award of £168 million to the East Riding to improve transport, whether that is potholes, bus

shelters or whatever else in Beverley and Holderness? The Minister is aware of my championing, alongside Labour colleagues, Liberal Democrat colleagues and the councils across the whole area, of the reopening of the Hull to York line through Beverley. I am delighted to hear him confirm today that that funding can be used to explore and produce a refined demand model for that railway. Will he confirm that?

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend is indeed a great champion for this scheme, which we have discussed many times. I am pleased to confirm that the local transport fund could be used to develop the new rail link between York and Hull via Beverley. It is important to say that it will be for the local transport authority to decide, and I encourage him to continue to engage with it. Our upcoming guidance will set out more detail about the scope of the LTF, and I am sure he will continue with his mission to deliver.

Transport Connectivity: North-west

5. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve transport connectivity for towns and cities in the north-west. [902841]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Before I answer my hon. Friend's question, may I just welcome very strongly your statement at the beginning of business, Mr Speaker, standing up for the rights of Members to debate things in this House and the importance of protecting their security? That is welcome, and I am sure it will have been welcomed by all parts of the House.

In answer to my hon. Friend's question, Network North will see a further £19.8 billion of investment in the north of England following the redirection of funding from the second phase of HS2. Liverpool city region is one of six areas to benefit from nearly £4 billion of uplift in the second round of the city region sustainable transport settlements. A further £1.48 billion is going to the non-mayoral local authorities to fund a wide range of projects. Guidance on how that should be spent will be forthcoming shortly.

Damien Moore: My right hon. Friend knows how important rail connectivity is to my constituents. It will be further enhanced by the reconnection of the Burscough curves, a project that is also supported by our hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher), who has her own campaign for a station at Midge Hall. Given the importance of schemes that link areas, will he issue stronger guidance for transport authorities to have better links between each other, rather than just within their own transport areas?

Mr Harper: As my hon. Friend knows, I recently hosted a roundtable, bringing together him, his local authority, Lancashire County Council, local rail operators and other interested parties to discuss how to further develop the business case for the Burscough curves. He will be aware that we have allocated that money to the local transport fund. Lancashire County Council will get £494 million over seven years, starting next year. I suggest he continues the conversation we have had to urge the council to look at developing that scheme.

We will be publishing guidance encouraging it to do that, working with Members of Parliament in the very near future.

Mr Speaker: You can think of Coppull station.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): When will the Secretary of State improve on the timetable at the time of Gladstone?

Mr Harper: I am not entirely certain—the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) set out clearly the improved performance that we have seen this year. We are clear that we are integrating track and train with our rail reform that is being scrutinised in the House, and that will improve things. We have recently reorganised the Department, bringing in Alex Hynes to link that together. That is how we deliver improved performance. We have set out those plans clearly. Legislation before this House is being scrutinised by the Select Committee of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). We look forward to its report, which I understand we will get before the summer recess, to take those plans forward.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): We welcome the £494 million in Lancashire, as you will in Chorley, Mr Speaker. We have also been having discussions about what we want to see with that funding, whether that is at the Hare and Hounds junction in Clayton or just fixing potholes across the constituencies. One of the important things in Hyndburn and Haslingden is making sure that our train stations are accessible for everybody. We currently have a few bids in, including Church & Oswaldtwistle and Rishton. Will the Secretary of State look favourably upon those bids?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for welcoming the money that will go to her local authority. We will make it clear in the guidance, which I hope will be welcome to you as well, Mr Speaker, that local authorities should very much involve their Members of Parliament in discussing those priorities. I hope that every Member in the north and the midlands where local authorities are getting those funds will take advantage of that.

On my hon. Friend's specific point about accessibility and our Access for All programme, as she knows, a number of bids were made and they are currently being scrutinised. I hope that, in the near future, we will be able to set out which ones will be funded. I urge her to wait for that announcement. I wish her good luck. Obviously, I cannot prejudge that process, but I hope that she is successful.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain why train fares have risen almost twice as fast as wages since 2010?

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady will know that over the last two years the Government have made significant interventions to keep rail fares rising no faster than the rise in people's wages. She also knows that we have to balance the farebox against the taxpayer. She will know that, because of the pandemic, the taxpayer has put in £31 billion over a couple of years to protect the rail industry. Passenger figures have not yet recovered to

their numbers beforehand. That is why it is important that, as soon as we can, we get rail companies on contracts that incentivise them to drive up the number of passengers using the service, which is how we will reduce the call on the taxpayer and enable fares to be kept competitive.

East West Rail

6. **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent progress he has made on the East West Rail project. [902842]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): For connection stage one of East West Rail. I was pleased to attend an event in March to mark the completion of work on the final section of track connecting Bicester and Bletchley, with services expected to commence next year. At the spring Budget, £240 million was announced to accelerate work introducing services between Oxford and Bedford by the end of the decade. Following the announcement of the preferred route alignment between Bedford and Cambridge last May, a statutory consultation is due to launch this summer.

Richard Fuller: The connection of East West Rail from Bedford to Cambridge will cost the taxpayer an enormous amount of money—the Minister knows that, because he was at the Transport Committee sitting right next to the permanent secretary when she said so—although apparently that is okay because a few landowners and developers will make shedloads of money out of planning gain. Meanwhile, the latest chief executive officer of East West Rail has scarpered because he could not stand the heat in the kitchen.

As the Minister said, East West Rail is progressing with a statutory consultation—having completely fluffed the first consultation by not contacting the right people—but holding it over the summer months while people are away. All the time, the project is being driven by the economic growth board in the Treasury, which meets secretly and tells people nothing. What can the Minister tell my constituents about this project?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—[*Laughter.*] He was indeed in the same room as I was when I was with colleagues—this is an important aspect—from the Treasury and the Department for Levelling Up as well as our permanent secretary to discuss the cross-governmental co-ordination that will be required to unlock all the economic benefits. As he knows—we will not necessarily agree on this point—I believe that East West Rail is critical in delivering a workforce to Cambridge, which will allow Cambridge to compete with the likes of Boston and cities in south-east Asia so that those pioneers have a workforce and we can keep Cambridge, and indeed Oxford, motoring on that basis.

Mr Speaker: On that basis, let us go to Cambridge.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Indeed, some are more positive about the improved connectivity potential in and around Cambridge, but the Minister will be aware that his colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities recently established the Cambridge delivery group, which is looking to create 150,000 additional homes, which

will in turn create a whole series of transport challenges. Will he tell the House what structures are in place to ensure proper dialogue between his Department, DLUHC and East West Rail?

Huw Merriman: The East West Rail growth board, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) pointed out, is being led by the Treasury, will be critical to ensuring that joined-up approach. It is essential that we look at this project as an economic opportunity for the area. I have met my hon. Friend's constituents as we have both travelled around, and I appreciate that there is an impact where there is housing, but if we do not have a workforce, Cambridge and that region will not be able to compete on the global stage and we will not see the pioneering scientific and bio-health developments that we see from Cambridge. That is why I believe that this railway is critical.

Bus Manufacturing

7. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support bus manufacturing. [902843]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): The UK boasts a strong and highly competitive bus manufacturing industry. Manufacturers have benefited significantly from Government funding as we work with industry to decarbonise the bus fleet. More than 5,200 buses have been funded across the UK since February 2020, with UK bus manufacturers supporting many of them. UK manufacturers have grown substantially in recent years as a result of their success in securing orders, supported by £460 million of dedicated ZEBRA—zero-emission bus regional areas—funding.

Alan Brown: The reality is that the UK Government could do much more. At Tuesday's sitting of the Transport Committee, Mick Whelan of ASLEF said that in Germany, they have German trains and in Italy, they have Italian trains. He said:

“Before they award a Government contract, they look at their supply chains, future apprenticeships and all the things associated with those contracts”.

Why does the UK continue to destroy its own industrial base by refusing to implement similar procurement policies for all transport manufacturers, including buses? There is too big a reliance on Chinese imports.

Mr Harper: As I said, UK bus manufacturers have done very well out of decarbonisation policies. They are every competitive, and I have had the opportunity in this job to visit a number of them. If the hon. Gentleman believes that there is unfair competition from imports, he knows that there is an independent statutory body, the Trade Remedies Authority, whose responsibility it is to look at importers where there might be dumping. If he thinks there is any evidence of that by any manufacturers, he should provide that evidence to the Trade Remedies Authority so that it can conduct an investigation, as appropriate.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): The UK has a proud bus manufacturing history, from London's iconic original Routemasters to Alexander Dennis' next

generation of hydrogen double-deckers used today in the Liverpool city region. As operators and local authorities decarbonise their fleets, UK manufacturers are ready to power that green revolution, but our bus makers are at risk from cheap models imported from overseas. This week, a major UK operator is preparing to procure Chinese-built buses for tens of millions of pounds due to cost pressures and because this Government have not set out a full industrial strategy since 2017. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what he will do to back British bus manufacturers and secure their role in this green revolution?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman will know that it is not possible, given our international commitments under the World Trade Organisation, to specify that people have to buy British buses. He will also know that British bus manufacturers are very competitive. The Government have made support available to businesses through our Advanced Propulsion Centre and UK Export Finance. As I said to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), if the shadow Minister thinks that there is any unfair competition with subsidised imports, the Trade Remedies Authority has all the tools at its disposal to deal with that.

We back British buses. We have fantastic manufacturers, and I have confidence in them. In a fair competition, our bus manufacturers can take on the world. Wrightbus has had £76 million of support from UK Export Finance to support its ambitious exports. It is a shame that he does not have the same faith in British industry that we do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Deary me, Mr Speaker. We have confidence in the bus manufacturers, and it is a pity that the Government do not—that is the problem. Unlike SULEBS and ScotZEB—the Scottish ultra-low emission bus scheme and the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund—the ZEBRA scheme has been a failure. No spin from the Dispatch Box can deny that, and our bus manufacturers are paying the price. We must learn from this, and we can start by encouraging those purchasing zero-emission buses to place greater emphasis on social value and wider environmental and economic impacts when evaluating tenders. The Government must take responsibility. Will the Secretary of State consider conducting a cross-Government review into prioritising domestic manufacturing within existing legal frameworks?

Mr Harper: People are able to put social value into their tenders. My understanding is that local authorities do that, but they are not allowed to have a specific commitment to buy from a certain provision. The hon. Gentleman has to decide whether he has confidence in our fantastic companies, as he set out. In a fair competition, some of the companies that have been mentioned—some of which I have visited—can win against competitors around the world. If he thinks that there is unfair competition and that companies are being subsidised, he should give the evidence to the Trade Remedies Authority, which has the legal structures and the tools to do the job.

Mr Speaker: We've had one question about buses, and then a second one comes along.

Local Bus Services

8. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): What steps he is taking to support local bus services. [902844]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): The Government have provided over £4.5 billion to support and improve bus services since March 2020. Leicestershire County Council received over £3.5 million in emergency recovery funding to help maintain services during and after covid, and has recently been awarded up to £7.6 million to deliver its bus service improvement plan.

Andrew Bridgen: As the House will know, the word democracy comes from the Greek “demos”, meaning the people, and “kratos”, meaning power—power to the people. Well, the 1,200 people in North West Leicestershire who signed a petition for the reinstatement of the numbers 16, 29 and 29A bus services on their original routes are not feeling very empowered. Despite a very well run campaign, there is no movement from Arriva or Leicestershire County Council. What can the Minister do to help my constituents?

Guy Opperman: Where commercial operators want to change a service, as I understand happened in this community, they have to work with the local authority to replace services where possible and limit disruption. I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that Leicestershire County Council has also received over £1 million from the rural mobility fund to trial demand-responsive services, and I encourage him to meet it.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): My constituents and I are extremely concerned about Arriva's sudden proposals to close its depot in Aylesbury, with no warning that it was even being considered. The company admitted that it would mean ending the vast majority of its services in our area, causing huge problems for those who rely on its buses to get to school, work and hospital. I have demanded an urgent meeting with its senior management, but what can the Department do to help hold Arriva to account and ensure Aylesbury residents have the bus services they need and deserve?

Guy Opperman: I am aware of this problem, which has recently come to light. I would certainly encourage a meeting between the local authority, the bus company and my hon. Friend, and I will assist him in any way in that respect. I am aware that some local operators, in the form of Carousel Buses and the Oxford Bus Company, are running some of the services, but I accept that there is an issue in Aylesbury and I will help him on an ongoing basis.

Air Safety

9. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If he will have discussions with (a) Airbus and (b) Boeing on air safety. [902845]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): Both I and departmental officials engage proactively with industry, including Boeing, Airbus and other manufacturers, on aviation safety. The Civil

Aviation Authority, the independent safety regulator for the aviation sector, also engages regularly across the industry. I should point out that we have some of the safest skies in the world. The fatal accident rate of UK airlines is among the lowest in Europe and the world. We have not had a single fatal accident involving commercial passenger airplanes for more than 29 years. I am determined that that safety record will continue.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister might know that I am the chair of a manufacturing group for Members of Parliament. Airbus, Rolls-Royce and Boeing are amazing manufacturers at the heart of our manufacturing economy, but does he agree that we must sort out the problems that seem to have occurred in the manufacture of Boeing's 737 MAX? Does he agree that the faster our regulators work with American regulators to sort this out, the better for British jobs and British innovation?

Anthony Browne: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member that they are amazing companies with huge operations in the UK and enviable safety records. Not one of the 171 Boeing 737 MAX 9s operating globally operates in the UK or from the UK, so there was no need to ground them. The Department for Transport liaises closely with American authorities. The CAA follows very closely the work of the US Federal Aviation Administration to ensure that safety standards remain as high as possible.

Helicopter Search and Rescue

10. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with helicopter search and rescue operators on the adequacy of response times. [902846]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): The right hon. Member will be aware that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is conducting an analysis of recent incident data to examine whether the demand for the search and rescue helicopter service has changed since the launch of the UK's second generation search and rescue aviation procurement. It is expected to be published by the end of 2024. I have had no recent discussions on this point, as the review is ongoing.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister for his answer—he seems to be aware of the situation—but a new threat to search and rescue response times is emerging, namely the poor and deteriorating industrial relations between Bristow's management and its staff. As we speak, members of the British Airline Pilots' Association who work in SAR cohort 2 are on strike, having been driven to it by a management who are playing negotiating hardball on salary and on terms and conditions. Will the Minister call in the management and make it clear to them that, as the customer, the Government expect them to treat their search and rescue staff with the respect and consideration that their skill and bravery deserve?

Anthony Browne: I know how important search and rescue services are in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, and he has been a great champion for them. Good industrial relations are clearly vital to ensuring that they operate effectively, and I am sure that the MCA will keep that in mind during its review. I should add that just this morning, I agreed to meet the management of Bristow.

Road Resurfacing

11. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What funding his Department is providing for road resurfacing. [902847]

16. **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What funding his Department is providing for road resurfacing. [902852]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): The Government are firmly on the side of drivers, which is why we are using funding reallocated from the HS2 programme to improve the condition of the country's local highways network. Our record funding increase of £8.3 billion for local highways maintenance in England over the next decade will enable highways authorities to resurface roads and fix thousands of potholes across the country.

Martin Vickers: The Secretary of State and his Ministers are well aware of my campaign for the removal of the concrete surface of the A180. It is now six years since I received a letter from the then roads Minister telling me that the work would be completed by the end of 2021. Can the Secretary of State tell me when work will begin to remove that concrete surface and make the road much safer than it is at present? Can he give me a firm date?

Mr Harper: My understanding is that the A180 is part of the National Highways concrete roads programme and that there is a plan to undertake additional treatment to reduce noise substantially early in the next road investment period, which starts next year. My hon. Friend may wish to meet the roads Minister to discuss the matter in more detail and secure some specific information about the timing.

Philip Dunne: As my right hon. Friend knows, Shropshire's road network is the fifth longest in all the English local authority areas. Last autumn, he made a welcome announcement about a significant increase in funding—£150 million—to repair and improve roads, and he made another in February about the HS2 reallocation of £136 million. Will he explain to me, and to other Shropshire Members, what that will mean in practical terms for the amount to be spent on roads during the next Parliament?

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend is correct: Shropshire County Council will receive two pots of money, a minimum uplift of £153 million from 2023 to 2034 for highway maintenance and a further £136 million under the new local transport fund, starting next year and continuing for seven years. Those figures represent a significant increase on what the council would otherwise have received. We will provide more detail shortly about the guidance on how the money should be used and, as I have said in response to earlier questions, Members of Parliament will be involved in setting those priorities.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Somerset is unfortunately home to tens of thousands of potholes. Persistent flooding makes the problem worse, but so does the lack of attention given to improving the resilience of our roads. Does the Secretary of State recognise the importance of future-proofing them, with specific funds

for local authorities to spend on measures of that kind, as opposed to pothole funding that serves only as a temporary sticking plaster?

Mr Harper: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has asked that question, because I absolutely do. Part of our purpose is not only giving local authorities that significant funding increase but spreading it over 10 years, so that they have certainty over a longer period, is to enable them to move away from dealing with pothole filling and to embark on a proper road resurfacing programme. That funding will pay for the resurfacing of more than 5,000 miles of roads, thus delivering to the hon. Lady's constituents the improvement that we all want to see.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Residents in West Fenham recently said to me that car mechanics must be the main beneficiaries of Conservative transport policy, given the steady flow of work for them caused by the terrible state of the roads. A local authority survey says that the roads are in their worst condition for 28 years, and AA call-outs are at a five-year high. How can the Secretary of State possibly say that he is on the side of drivers when the roads are in such a terrible condition?

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady has just demonstrated why our decision to allocate a very significant and unprecedented increase in spending to improving local highway maintenance is exactly the right thing to do. I have noticed that my local authority is busy resurfacing roads across my constituency and the rest of Gloucestershire. The money we are providing will enable every local authority to do that over the coming decade.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): At the last Transport questions, the Secretary of State suggested that drivers know what they are getting with a Conservative Government. Well, drivers know one thing they are getting from this Government: more potholes—a hundred times as many as there are craters on the moon. In 2023, RAC patrols attended 33% more breakdowns related to poor road maintenance than in 2022, and AA call-outs were at a five-year high. The road repairs backlog has gone up to an eye-watering £16.3 billion, which is far greater than his allocation of money from scrapping the northern leg of HS2. Is it not abundantly clear to drivers, and to everyone else, that it will take the election of a Labour Government to fix Britain's roads, just as it will take the election of a Labour Government to fix Britain?

Mr Harper: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has asked that question, because we have set out our plan very carefully. There is £8.3 billion of extra money to improve the quality of local roads. The Labour party has not backed that plan and has not committed a single penny of money to local roads, so the choice is clear: if people vote Conservative, they get £8.3 billion spent on roads; if they vote Labour, they get none.

Bi-mode Trains

12. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Network Rail on the timeline for introducing bi-mode trains on the midland main line. [902848]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): A monthly meeting is held with Network Rail and East Midlands Railway to discuss the introduction of the new bi-mode trains. Those meetings include notification of the latest delivery timescales that Hitachi has provided to the operator, and an update on mobilisation plans and related infrastructure upgrades. The aim is for the new trains to be phased into passenger service throughout 2025.

Mr Hollobone: I welcome the phased introduction of the bi-mode Class 810 Aurora trains on the midland main line through Kettering next year. Can my hon. Friend the Rail Minister confirm that the new trains will be faster, quieter and more environmentally friendly than the current inter-city fleet, and that they will have more seats and luggage space, and better mobile phone signal reception?

Huw Merriman: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that these fantastic new trains will be not only faster but quieter and more environmentally friendly, as they will be able to take advantage of the increasing extent of electrification that we are delivering on the midland main line. They will have 19% more seats per five-car train, and they are designed for greater comfort and more luggage space. Bearing in mind that my hon. Friend is one of the hardest-working MPs for his constituents, he and they will be delighted that there will be enhanced wi-fi and mobile phone reception, making his productivity even greater.

Gallows Corner Flyover

13. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Transport for London on the refurbishment of Gallows Corner flyover. [902849]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I am pleased to say that the Gallows Corner scheme was recently approved at outline business case stage, with over £50 million-worth of backing from the Department for Transport. My officials are liaising with Transport for London to progress the scheme to the next stage of the process, and I look forward to TfL submitting the final business case for approval.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his announcement of the funding for a makeover of Gallows Corner flyover, but I fear that we must do better. This is a major junction connecting the eastern side of Greater London with Essex, and it is where the A12 and the A127 join together. My constituents in Romford, and those of the wider Essex region, will be disappointed that we are not getting a fundamental restructuring of the junction to address the safety and congestion issues that I have highlighted for decades. Will he speak to Transport for London, go back to the drawing board, and come back with something better and more permanent that will put the safety of road users first?

Guy Opperman: I will certainly go away and write to my hon. Friend on his specific point, but I reassure him that we are spending over £50 million to improve that particular junction. If my hon. Friend has concerns about the scope of the works, I urge him to take them up with TfL, because it is for TfL to develop the full business case. It is then submitted to the Department for approval, which we hope will happen later this year.

Fire and Rehire

14. **Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to prevent the use of fire and rehire practices in the transport industry. [902850]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): The Government recently published a statutory code of practice on dismissal and re-engagement. The code will address the practice of fire and rehire, aiming to ensure that it is only ever used as a last resort, and that employees are properly consulted and treated fairly.

Sam Tarry: The TUC has found that since 2020 about 10% of all workers have had to reapply for their job. And let us remember that in 2020 British Airways tried to sack 36,000 staff through fire and rehire, which was stopped only through strike action—the Government took no action. In 2021, Go North West in Manchester threatened the same and, again, industrial action stopped it happening—the Government took no action. In 2022, infamously, P&O Ferries unlawfully sacked 786 staff before replacing them with agency staff—the Government took no action. I implore the Government to outlaw this practice. Rather than just bringing in a code of best practice, they should be taking action to protect British workers.

Anthony Browne: After the P&O incident, in which workers were indeed treated totally unacceptably, we introduced a whole range of measures set out in our nine-point charter, including the Seafarers Wages Act 2023, which will come into force this summer. We launched the seafarers charter, to which P&O has now committed, which I very much welcome. The code of practice on dismissal and re-engagement, which will come in before the summer recess, will give workers up to 25% extra compensation if their employers do not abide by it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The UK minimum wage is £11.44 an hour, but last week, here in Parliament, Peter Hebblethwaite, the chief executive officer of P&O, admitted that it paid seafarers £4.87 an hour. This has been an awful breach of trust. What more will the Minister do to stop companies acting like modern-day pirates of the high seas when it comes to fire and rehire?

Anthony Browne: As I mentioned in my previous answer, many of P&O's practices have indeed been totally unacceptable, including on minimum wage issues. That is why we introduced the Seafarers Wages Act, which will ensure that seafarers operating on regular services in UK waters get the minimum wage. We have also co-ordinated with legislation in France to ensure a minimum wage corridor for all services operating between the UK and France, which will give workers the wages they deserve.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is two years since the reprehensible actions of P&O, and Peter Hebblethwaite's calamitous appearance in Parliament comes four years after Willie Walsh and

Álex Cruz, the then CEOs of the International Airlines Group and BA, shamefully threatened thousands of British Airways workers with fire and rehire, having refused Government covid assistance. On Tuesday I asked the Minister of State at the Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), in this Chamber to confirm whether the new fire and rehire code of practice would have prevented this threat from being made. He could not do so, so I ask this Minister the same question. And if not, why not and what is the point?

Anthony Browne: In addition to my earlier answer, I should point out that the P&O case is being investigated by the Insolvency Service, and I await the outcome of that investigation. The point of the code of practice is to ensure that fire and rehire is very much a last resort. If employers breach the code, their employees can get up to 25% greater compensation. The Government have made sure that is the case.

Topical Questions

T1. [902875] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Since the last Transport questions, my Department has been getting on with our plans: £143 million for new zero-emission buses; a world-leading sustainable aviation fuel mandate; cutting red tape for small-scale fishing businesses; taking steps to future-proof the £18 billion classic car industry, which supports tens of thousands of skilled jobs; and ensuring that taxpayers can hold local councils to account for how they spend their record funding boost for road resurfacing, made possible by reallocating High Speed 2 funding. All Labour has been able to offer is an unfunded, incoherent rail nationalisation plan, putting the unions in charge, cutting services for passengers and containing anti-car targets, taking us back to square one.

Mr Robertson: Given that Tewkesbury is one of the fastest growing areas of the country, does the Secretary of State agree that we need to expand the A46 and junction 9 of the M5, and not reduce its capacity or downgrade it in any way? If any agency puts plans to him to downgrade the A46 or junction 9, will he reject those plans?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—and Gloucestershire neighbour—for raising that issue. He rightly sets out that his constituency is one of the fastest growing. He is a doughty champion for his constituents and I am sure that any agency thinking of downgrading any of his road network would not dare to do so, for fear of the consequences of having to deal with him on the warpath.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Car insurance costs have increased by 80% since the Secretary of State came into office. If he is intent on ending the war on motorists, what has he done about it?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for advance notice of the question—she wrote to me this morning. I will say a few things. First, she will know that the insurance industry is the responsibility of the Treasury, but it is an important issue for drivers, so I am happy to deal with it. I read her letter with great care, and I notice that it contains no plan and not a single proposal to deal with the cost of insurance. Whereas this week the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), chaired a roundtable with Treasury Ministers and the industry to look at these important issues, which are also in evidence across Europe.

Secondly, having read the letter carefully, I notice that the hon. Lady takes a pop at postcode pricing, which is about pricing according to risk. It seems to me that she is proposing—I am sure she cannot really mean this—to put up insurance costs across the country to reflect the Mayor of London's failure to grip crime in inner London.

Mr Speaker: Remember that we are now in topical questions, folks.

Louise Haigh: Given that the Secretary of State had advance notice of my question, I am afraid that his answer shows how out of touch with reality he has become. Car insurance is not a luxury but a legal requirement, and it is completely unaffordable for millions of drivers. There has been a £219 increase in the average premium in two years. Instead of parroting conspiracy theories about 15-minute cities, why does he not do his job, take action, demand action from regulators, call in the Competition and Markets Authority, and act on soaring insurance premiums?

Mr Harper: I will say a couple of things. First, the hon. Lady called for action. My hon. Friend the roads Minister has already been meeting the industry and Treasury Ministers, who are responsible for the industry regulator, so we are already doing that. As I said, this is an issue not just in the UK but elsewhere.

Secondly, as I said, the hon. Lady said in her letter that she was looking at outlawing the ability for insurers to price according to risk in local areas. I am sure that hon. Members noticed that she has not denied that, so they will know that she is proposing for people across the country to face higher costs to reflect the higher crime that we see in inner London, where her Labour Mayor has failed to get a grip.

T5. [902879] **Matt Hancock** (West Suffolk) (Ind): Will the Rail Minister join me in campaigning to save Brandon station, which is a beautiful listed building that has been out of use for years? Greater Anglia, to its credit, is trying to find a solution to ensure that that beautiful building can be put back into use. Will he join me in that campaign and, if his diary allows, join me on 14 June, when we have a public meeting to drive that forward?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I will do everything I can. It is a beautiful example of railway architecture and it must be saved, so I applaud my right hon. Friend's work. I recently had a conference for leaders in rail, at which I talked to all the train operators and Network Rail about bringing these

beautiful buildings back to life for the community. I have met that team as well and will do everything I can to help him.

T2. [902876] **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): It is now exactly four months since the Avanti management were caught laughing at the Government—they are not on their own. They were laughing because they see the performance payments that the Government hand out to them as free money and a joke. When will the Secretary of State take the smile off the faces of the appalling Avanti management by finishing their contract?

Huw Merriman: When that incident occurred, the Secretary of State and I made it clear to the teams at Avanti and FirstGroup that that was not acceptable, and their senior management agreed. It was crass and it was wrong. We often talk about Avanti's performance. The overtime agreement had been withdrawn by ASLEF, which caused the start of the difficulties, but it has since been put back in place. When I looked at the data for the first week of May, there were pretty much 0% cancellations from Avanti induced incidents. Matters are getting better and, where they are better, we should applaud the staff.

T6. [902881] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): The condition of local roads is the No. 1 concern raised with me by Aylesbury residents, whether that is potholes, congestion caused by countless utility works, or simply not enough roads to cope with all the new houses that have been built. Will my hon. Friend reassure local residents that it is under this Conservative Government and our excellent local Conservative council that Aylesbury's roads will improve for my long-suffering constituents?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I recently met the council leader, Martin Tett, who is doing a fantastic job, aided by record investment by this Government of £8.3 billion for road resurfacing and our street works consultation, which will crack down on utility organisations and ensure that they work much faster and much better. We are also giving extra funding on an ongoing basis.

T3. [902877] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Every day that Hammersmith bridge remains closed is a reminder that this Government cannot be trusted to fix even the most basic problems. Do the Conservative Government have any intention of keeping the promise they made in 2019 and fixing Hammersmith bridge?

Huw Merriman: The bridge is owned by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, which is not a Conservative borough, so I will correct the record there. There are two phases of work: stabilisation to ensure permanent access for pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic—despite not being the owner, the Government have put money into that—and strengthening. We will do everything we can to work with the owners of the bridge to make that happen.

T8. [902884] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Junction 10A on the A14 is a crucial piece of future roads infrastructure to support Kettering's housing expansion. Should North Northamptonshire Council

approve the relevant planning application this coming Monday, will my hon. Friend the roads Minister reconfirm his commitment to give the proper direction this project needs to proceed at pace, to visit the site with me and to arrange for me to meet with National Highways to ensure progress?

Guy Opperman: Yes, yes and yes.

T4. [902878] **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): Blackpool is experiencing the scourge of unlicensed taxis in our treasured seaside resort. Uber and similar companies, which have no operating licence in Blackpool, are allowing passengers to use their unlicensed taxis uninsured, creating a real public safety risk. These unlicensed taxis are parking in local ranks illegally, taking fares from our hard-working, rule-abiding Blackpool taxi drivers. What is the Minister doing to tackle these unlicensed drivers, and will he meet me to discuss this issue in my constituency?

Guy Opperman: May I first welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place? He is a worthy winner and I am delighted to see him in the House. I wish him good fortune. The Government have published updated taxi and private hire vehicle best practice guidance for licensing authorities in England. I will write to the hon. Gentleman in detail and set out the particular points, and then we will see whether a meeting is required thereafter.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): In Horsham we have a significant problem with car racing on specific stretches of road. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a role for speed cameras in deterring those activities and the real risks they represent?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising the important matter of road safety. He is right that there is a role for speed cameras. Decisions for enforcing speed limits are for the police and local agencies. I know he has raised the issue with them. I hope our exchange today will continue to put pressure on them, that the campaign he is running to ensure safer roads for his constituents is successful, and that the police take note.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Bridgen—not here.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I was pleased to have been told late last year that Haughley and Ely north junctions would be funded, but I have since become frustrated by the slow progress. I hear all the right noises from the Department, but when I talk to Greater Anglia and Network Rail, all I hear is frustration at the slow progress. Will the Secretary of State promise me that we will get on with these projects, which are crucial to Ipswich, Suffolk and East Anglia in general?

Huw Merriman: I can give that assurance to my hon. Friend. I think his Labour opponent stated that the Conservatives had not promised to deliver this project. In October, the Prime Minister set out that we would deliver the rail junction at Ely and Haughley. It is a project that the Department is keen on, as it is good for freight, and for our freight growth target. I will meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues who support the project to show them the steps that we are taking to get this vital project under way.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State will be aware that the courts yesterday awarded £25 million of compensation to 1.4 million passengers who were overcharged for rail fares between 2015 and 2017 by Stagecoach South Western Trains, the predecessor franchise to South Western Railway. Will he ensure that affected passengers are not left out of pocket, and get automatic redress, rather than having to make an historical claim?

Huw Merriman: I have been meeting the operators to discuss the matter. I am happy to write to her, setting out the exact conclusion of those conversations. I am always keen to ensure that passenger and consumer interests are protected and preserved, so I will write to her.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the Rail Minister for their support for upgrades to Pokesdown station in my constituency, not least the improvements to the lifts, but the project has run into a few technical and financial problems; will the Secretary of State or the Minister update the House on it?

Huw Merriman: I promised my right hon. Friend from this Dispatch Box that the project would be delivered, and I continue to give him that assurance. I am sorry that there have been those delays. This week, I spoke to the team at some length about the station. My right hon. Friend knows that I will visit him at the station, and I will have some more concrete news for him then.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): How reliable are the key performance indicators that the train operators are quoting, which the Rail Minister mentioned earlier? The Disability News Service reports that train companies are sending unreliable statistics from freelance mystery shoppers who pretend to be disabled and give overly positive feedback about the experience of disabled passengers. Does he share my concern about that, and what can he do about it?

Huw Merriman: Data from mystery shoppers, as the hon. Gentleman calls them, cannot be used unless those individuals have the disabilities that they claim to, but there are wider mystery shopping experiences that are undertaken. I will happily write to him—in fact, I will meet him, seeing as he is such a great man—and take him through the steps that are taken into account. I also thank him very much for doing what he always does, which is raising that matter with me last night, so that we could discuss it in advance.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The reopening of Aldridge train station will finally give my constituents the railway service that they badly need and deserve. I wish to place on record my thanks to the Minister's Department, the Government, former Mayor Andy Street and the West Midlands Combined Authority for their support in securing funding for the project through the city region sustainable transport settlement. Will my hon. Friend help me to continue to nudge Network Rail and others to progress this to completion in 2027?

Huw Merriman: Yes. It is a brilliant £30 million project, with 40 car parking spaces, which my right hon. Friend has been instrumental in making happen. I will,

I hope, meet the new Mayor, whom I congratulate, to ensure that he delivers the project for 2027, as the fantastic Andy Street promised.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): More people are killed by cows and lightning than by dangerous cyclists, whereas around five people a day are killed on our roads by motor vehicles—a level that has flatlined under this Government. When will the Transport Secretary publish the long-overdue strategic framework for road safety?

Guy Opperman: The Secretary of State took a decision on road safety yesterday, so clearly we are addressing all these matters on an ongoing basis. I addressed the issue in a Westminster Hall debate recently, but I will write to the hon. Member with more detail.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): The Labour Mayor of South Yorkshire has been given colossal sums of money by this Government. Sadly, it appears that he chooses to spend it on Sheffield supertrams and Sheffield's transport infrastructure, not Doncaster's. Will the Minister send a clear message to him that he should spend this money not only wisely, but across the combined authority, not just in Sheffield?

Mr Harper: It is obviously up to mayors to decide how to spend the money, but I would expect them to spend it fairly across the entire region that they represent. Given that fantastic Members of Parliament such as my hon. Friend will hold them to account, voters in his constituency and across the combined authority area will hopefully make the right decision, when they get the chance.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): New evidence shows that Ofgem's targeted charging review has led to significant increases in public electric vehicle charger standing charge rates, which are passed on to the consumer. In one site in northern Scotland, costs have increased from £315 to £809 per day. What will the Minister do to regulate the cost of electric vehicle charging nationally?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): I am the Minister responsible for electrical vehicles. The cost of charging is a concern to many EV drivers. On standing charges for charge point operators, I met with the chief executive of Ofgem, the regulator, earlier this week to discuss that exact issue. It is one of the things that Ofgem is looking at.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): How is the Minister working to improve the supply of rolling stock orders, to give customers a better experience, and importantly, to give companies such as Hitachi orders to bid for?

Huw Merriman: As an example, just yesterday an invitation to negotiate was sent out by Southeastern to five train manufacturers, one of which is Hitachi, which is so well supported and championed by my hon. Friend. We have plans over the coming years for 2,000 rolling

stock orders, worth a total of £3.6 billion. I hope that, with our support, the benefits for train manufacturing supply chains will continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Road safety organisations and driving instructors are concerned to ensure that young drivers have some experience of night driving. Does the Minister intend to ensure that night driving becomes part of the test?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman knows that the test has got more difficult and onerous for individuals; we have made it much harder to pass in the first place. We look at all aspects of post-test passing on an ongoing basis, but I will take the matter up with him personally.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I was grateful to the roads Minister for his commitment in an earlier answer to working with us in Buckinghamshire to find a solution to the crisis created by Arriva withdrawing bus services, but does he agree that companies that have been all too happy to take a taxpayer subsidy have a moral duty to maintain those services or give the money back?

Guy Opperman: We certainly expect those companies to engage with the local authority to ensure the provision of alternative service. That is what we intend to ensure happens.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Government recently announced yet another consultation support mechanism for the production of sustainable aviation fuel. Meanwhile, other countries across the world are getting on with producing SAF at scale. When will the Government get the mechanism in place, and will they meet their unambitious target of five SAF plants by 2025?

Anthony Browne: On 25 April, we published the SAF mandate, requiring 10% SAF across the aviation industry by 2030, and announced the revenue certainty mechanism consultation. It is an eight-week consultation. We have been inviting the whole industry to respond to it. We have to ensure that we get it right, and we will produce the final result very shortly after that.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): Moor Farm roundabout in Cramlington is not for the faint-hearted. In fact, many of my residents have told me that they actively avoid it. That is exactly why I had the roundabout cleaned and re-marked recently; however, more work needs to be done. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss a more permanent solution, and the progress that I have made with Northumberland County Council and National Highways?

Guy Opperman: As someone who knows that roundabout very well, I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, and to ensure that the good work that Northumberland County Council is doing to upgrade and improve the area continue.

Speaker's Statement

10.38 am

Mr Speaker: Before we move on, I wish to make a short statement about the Speaker's chaplain, the venerable Patricia Hillas. This morning, Downing Street announced that His Majesty the King has appointed the Rev. Canon Hillas as the next Bishop of Sodor and Man. I am sure that Members will agree that the Rev. Canon Hillas—Tricia, our friend—has been an amazing colleague, and has faced during her tenure some of the most turbulent, challenging and celebratory times in our history: the impact on the parliamentary community of covid; the murder of our much-loved colleague Sir David Amess; the deaths of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh; and of course the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III.

At every gathering, in all circumstances, Tricia has had a calming presence, exuding her trademark warmth and giving wise counsel to MPs and staff alike. Tricia will be consecrated as the bishop in October, and I am sure that we will all wish her joy on that occasion. She takes up her post on the Isle of Man, one of the oldest and smallest of the Church of England's 42 dioceses, in the autumn. Work on the recruitment of Tricia's successor will follow in due course.

I personally will miss Tricia, and all the support and help that she has given me in my position. She has been not only a great Speaker's chaplain, but a great friend; we will all be united in thinking that. I am sure that the whole House would like to take this opportunity to wish Tricia well.

Conflict in Sudan: El Fasher

10.40 am

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Deputy Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on the Government's response to atrocity risks in El Fasher, Sudan.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Yesterday we published a written ministerial statement outlining our grave concern about reports of devastating violence in and around El Fasher, with civilians caught in the crossfire. In April, the UK led negotiations, alongside Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Algeria, at the United Nations Security Council to deliver a press statement that urged the warring parties to de-escalate in El Fasher, and to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. We also called for a closed UN Security Council consultation on the situation.

On 2 May, the Deputy Foreign Secretary publicly called on the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces to protect civilians and "spare Sudan from their wilful destruction and carnage."

We continue to pursue all diplomatic avenues to achieve a permanent ceasefire, and we welcome plans to restart talks in Jeddah. We urge the region to refrain from actions that prolong the conflict and to engage positively in peace talks. We have used exchanges with the warring parties to condemn strongly atrocities that they have perpetrated, and to demand that their leadership makes every effort to prevent further atrocities in territories that they have captured or threatened to capture, as well as to press the need for improved humanitarian access.

On 15 April, the Deputy Foreign Secretary announced a package of sanctions designations, freezing the assets of three commercial entities linked to the warring parties, and we will continue to explore other levers that we have to disrupt and constrain the sources of funding that both warring parties are using to sustain themselves. We continue to support the Centre for Information Resilience, which documents, preserves and shares evidence of reported atrocities, so that their perpetrators can in due course be brought to justice. There will be no impunity for human rights abusers.

Finally, we will keep working to ensure that the voices of Sudanese civilians are heard, whether they be survivors and witnesses of human rights abuses, Sudanese non-governmental organisations, women's rights organisations, activists helping in their communities, or those trying to develop a political vision for Sudan's future. UK technical and diplomatic support has been instrumental in the establishment of the anti-war, pro-democracy Taqaddum coalition, led by former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and we will continue to support Taqaddum's development.

Ms Brown: More than 1 million civilians are under immediate threat of massacre in El Fasher. The Opposition have been calling attention to the risks for several weeks. RSF plans have been slowed, due to pressure from the UN, our diplomats and the United States, but that offensive is happening now at full pelt. We need the international partners with the most influence over the RSF to use their power now and stop the ongoing mass atrocities in El Fasher. Every state must surely recognise

that the ongoing collapse of Sudan into anarchy and famine is against its best interests, because the generals' war against the people of Sudan is a blight on humanity.

The US has set out a red line, promising

“direct and immediate consequences for those responsible for an offensive on El Fasher.”

How will the Government back that position? We need more pressure put on both the warring parties to move towards an immediate ceasefire and granting humanitarian access. We need the Government to consider all serious and rapid options for civilian protection. I genuinely believe that we need to support the resistance committees and emergency rooms.

The Deputy Foreign Secretary is a good man who genuinely understands what is at stake, but the Opposition expect the UK's collective voice to be heard loud and clear at this time, in the very hours when this atrocity is under way, so how will the Government act to protect civilians and ensure that our horror and anger are properly heard?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and for her commitment to keeping this appalling situation firmly on the global radar. In April, the UK led negotiations at the UN Security Council, delivering a press statement that urged the warring parties to de-escalate and to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. As I said, we have called for a consultation in private in order to be able to move this forward. On 2 May, the Deputy Foreign Secretary called on the RSF and SAF to protect civilians, and to spare Sudan from their wilful destruction. We will continue to do all we can to bring about a sustainable end.

We continue, of course, to work with a wide range of countries and bodies—including Gulf and African partners, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the African Union and the UN—to achieve a ceasefire, and at the same time and most importantly, we are increasing much-needed humanitarian assistance and access to protect civilians. We will continue to lead on the UN Security Council, where we hold the pen on Sudan. On 8 March, the UNSC adopted a UK-drafted Ramadan ceasefire resolution, which called for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Thank you and good morning, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are in a crucial moment of atrocity prevention in Sudan right now. The UK Government must accept that what is happening is genocide. The UK Government have been proactive in the delivery of aid and food to the civilians of Sudan, but how are they reacting to the growing number of Sudanese civilians facing famine and starvation, and what protections are in place to ensure that no more people are driven to catastrophic levels of hunger?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The challenge of food security is at the heart of the most urgent humanitarian work. The recent integrated food security phase classification projection for Sudan indicates that the intense conflict and organised violence has driven nearly 18 million people

into high levels of acute food insecurity, so we provided £42.6 million in humanitarian funding in the past financial year. Of that, £12.2 million was destined for UNICEF for life-saving nutrition activities, and approximately £23.5 million was for the Sudan Humanitarian Fund for a multi-sector response, including a high proportion of food security interventions.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The ongoing and developing crisis in Sudan is being fuelled by weapons from foreign supporters who continue to flout the UN arms embargo on Darfur. How are the Government utilising their UN Security Council position as penholder on Sudan to prevent the flow of arms to the Rapid Support Forces?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady asks an incredibly important question. Of course, a long-standing UK arms embargo is in place for the whole of Sudan, as well as a UN arms embargo on Darfur, and we will continue, as I say, to use all our diplomatic tools at the UN Security Council and with international partners to highlight that. As the Deputy Foreign Secretary has said, there are now clear signs of ethnic cleansing in Darfur, and the continued flow of weapons allows that threat to continue for longer than we want, so we will continue to press in that area.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Our heart goes all out to all those who are, tragically, being ethnically cleansed from parts of Sudan. Bearing in mind our historical connections with that part of the world, what direct action will His Majesty's Government take, working with the United States, the United Nations, the African Union and others, to ensure the safety of Christians, who are being murdered and forced out of their homes? Surely it is time for Britain to show leadership.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The challenge that my hon. Friend has raised is such an important and difficult one. We continue to work closely with a wide range of non-governmental organisations and UN partners on conflict and atrocity prevention, and on these really important questions around losses of religious freedom. We are systematically prioritising atrocity monitoring and reporting, and are continuing to increase our capacity when it comes to human rights and atrocity prevention investment. We want to complete that assessment in-country in order to inform how we can continue to expand the strategy and be very clear that all those who are committing these terrible crimes will be held to account.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The scale of the humanitarian situation in El Fasher is horrific and demands urgent action. At the same time, Sudan is at the centre of a series of interlocking and interdependent humanitarian crises that blight the whole horn of Africa. Last week, the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, which I chair, convened a high-level summit to look at the issues of resilience and conflict in the horn of Africa, and highlighted particular issues around engagement with grassroots groups and increasing ethnic polarisation. The Minister is here on behalf of the Deputy Foreign Secretary, and she is a friend of the APPG; on his behalf, can she commit that he will meet with the APPG to discuss the incredibly important actions that the British Government can take?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am sure that in the absence of the Deputy Foreign Secretary, I can afford his diary secretaries the opportunity to find a slot. I hope that the APPG, which will be doing incredibly important work scanning across a range of channels, will have the opportunity to meet with Alison Blackburne, who is our UK special envoy for the horn of Africa, Sudan and the Red sea. We ask her to do that incredibly important work from there; it has been impossible to have a special envoy within Sudan, but she is a great and experienced advocate, and I will try to make sure that that meeting takes place as soon as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her answer. Will she outline what further steps the Government can take when the elderly, the ill, those who are ill-equipped, the disabled and civilians are taking to the streets in an attempt to stand against the paramilitaries and to protect their hospitals and vulnerable people who are without aid? It is not a question of if the city falls, but when, so how can we get medical aid and support to those hospitals and vulnerable people at this very important time?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Member highlights one of the most difficult aspects of this issue: the challenge of getting relevant humanitarian access where it is needed. Currently, access into Sudan remains highly constrained; Port Sudan is the primary entry point for relief supplies, and onward distribution from there continues to prove challenging. Movement is limited, but the investment has been made, and of course, through our relationships and all the diplomatic tools that we use, we continue to work on finding ways to support those who are most vulnerable.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) on securing this urgent question.

Nearly 100 humanitarian groups in Sudan have warned Elon Musk that he risks collectively punishing millions of Sudanese by shutting down his vital Starlink satellite internet service in that war-ravaged country. Have the Government have raised our concerns about the devastation that that would cause to civilians and humanitarian aid agencies?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We will absolutely be raising the challenge of having those communication lines open. There are real concerns, and I will happily take this up with the Deputy Foreign Secretary when he gets back.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Those of us who have constituents of Sudanese origin can relate to the Minister the distress and concern in that community. There is particular concern about the fact that—I think this is now the estimate—anything between 500,000 and 1 million refugees are going from Darfur into Chad. Could the Minister explain what support we are providing for those who are in Chad, because at the moment it looks as though the agencies that are there are unable to cope?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I can update him that the Deputy Foreign Secretary has recently been to the Chad-Sudan border to see for himself exactly the flow that the right hon. Gentleman identifies. He saw the

“sheer horror” and “misery”—his words, not mine—that these appalling acts have created, and he is very focused on ensuring that we use our humanitarian aid to think about how we can provide support across every part of this terrible situation.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I intend no disrespect to the Minister, but the Government’s response just does not seem to be as robust as it could be given the severity of the situation in Sudan, which is horrific. She will have read reports in *The Guardian* about children—alive children—being “piled up and shot” by RSF paramilitaries in El Geneina. What mechanisms are the Government considering to prevent this genocide from spreading to El Fasher?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As the hon. Gentleman highlights, this is an appalling situation. I have just highlighted, in relation to the Deputy Foreign Secretary’s visit, the sheer horror and misery being wrought on these innocent people across the area, which is absolutely beyond words. As I say, there are now very clear signs of ethnic cleansing and appalling humanitarian abuses. We are providing support for the gathering of evidence, and we will continue to try to support those gathering information on the ground—be they NGOs or civilians—to make sure that those who are committing the atrocities will be held to account.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): As I understand it, previous regional efforts to agree on the deployment of a peace-keeping force in Sudan were rebuffed last year, but I find it incredibly hard to see how ever-escalating atrocity and indeed catastrophe can be avoided without one. Is that even on the agenda now, because otherwise it seems to me we are talking here not so much about atrocity prevention as about atrocity monitoring?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we have continued to raise this at recent meetings of the UN Security Council, and decisions on how to move forward to provide protection for innocent people will be taken with international partners.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): With thousands of women being killed in this war, the catastrophic humanitarian crisis particularly impacting women and the fact that women comprise over 70% of the internally displaced people in Sudan, what measures are the Government taking to protect women in El Fasher?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady raises a really important point about an incredibly worrying situation. Women and girls are at particular risk of a significant escalation in gender-based violence. In July last year, the UK and 15 of other members of the international alliance on preventing sexual violence in conflict published a statement urging all parties to prevent violence, particularly sexual violence, and to ensure immediate humanitarian access. This issue continues to be at the front of the Deputy Foreign Secretary’s mind and of the minds of all of our team, and we have pivoted our bilateral programme delivery to ensure that women and girls are at the heart of the support we are providing.

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

Business of the House

10.59 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 20 May will include:

MONDAY 20 MAY—General debate on Ukraine.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—Consideration of Lords message on the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Increase of Borrowing Limits) Order 2024, followed by a motion relating to the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 22 MAY—Motion to approve the draft Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (Risk of Being Drawn into Terrorism) (Revised Guidance) Regulations 2024, followed by a motion to approve the draft Licensing Act 2003 (UEFA European Football Championship Licensing Hours) Order 2024, followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Holocaust Memorial Bill.

THURSDAY 23 MAY—General debate on UK arms exports to Israel, followed by a general debate on potholes and highway maintenance. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 23 May and return on Monday 3 June.

The provisional business for the week commencing 3 June includes:

MONDAY 3 JUNE—General debate, subject to be confirmed.

TUESDAY 4 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Criminal Justice Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 5 JUNE—Opposition day (6th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition—subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 6 JUNE—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

Lucy Powell: May I join Mr Speaker in thanking the Speaker's Chaplain, the Rev. Canon Patricia Hillas, for all her wise counsel and support through some difficult and celebratory moments in her time as Chaplain? We all wish her well on her elevation. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) on their cross-party parliamentary inquiry into birth trauma this week. All of us who have gone through childbirth can recognise their stories and findings, although I did have good experiences with mine. I fully support their calls for a national birth strategy.

I also thank all those Members who took part in the debate on risk-based exclusions on Monday. We had a good discussion. The House has now taken the view that a process of risk assessment for Members under arrest for serious sexual and violent offences shall be put in place. Since Monday, I have been struck by how many women, in less privileged or powerful positions than mine, have approached me to say thank you, and how that decision has changed how they feel about

working here. It might not always feel like it, but there is a watching audience wanting to see us, as a workplace and as employers, make progress on those issues. This week we did.

Last week, the Leader of the House and I launched a guide for MPs and candidates on tackling conspiracy theories. We agreed that conspiracy theories are a form of radicalisation, and we must all do everything we can to combat them. Is she therefore as disappointed as I am to see the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) sharing in campaign literature a conspiracy theory featured in that guide relating to 15-minute cities, which is closely linked to antisemitism and far-right movements? Just last week, the hon. Lady gave a staunch defence of her actions, showing no contrition for the damage she has caused. Will the Leader of the House send her a copy of the guide, and tell her why she has made a big mistake and why she should quickly and strongly renounce it?

Does the Leader of the House think it is acceptable to Members that on the evening before the first day of the remaining stages of the Criminal Justice Bill, Members did not know which or what amendments were to be debated? This is an important Bill with a number of significant Back-Bench and Government proposals on issues of wide public concern, such as cuckooing, dangerous cycling, ninja swords, abortion, and one-punch manslaughter. The Bill came out of Committee in January. Why has it taken so long to get to Report? Having taken so long, why were Members left completely in the dark about what would be discussed and when? With more than 180 pages of amendments, including 22 new Government changes published very late the night before, that is no way to run business and it is deeply disrespectful to Members. It is just another symptom of the chaos at the heart of this Government's operation and the disregard they hold for this House, and that is just day one of our consideration of the Bill. Why is there such a further delay to day two? We should be doing it next week, not in another three.

Extended drinking hours for the Euros are welcome, but that does not need to be considered on the Floor of the House. Is that because the Government have more handling concerns and they are worried about defeats on the Criminal Justice Bill, or is it because, even during the Euros, they could not organise a booze-up in a brewery? Will the Leader of the House assure the House that any further amendments or programming changes for day two will be published in good time?

The future business is yet again so light that it is almost laughable, but it is actually not that funny. The country faces huge headwinds. Families are in a cost of living crisis, millions linger on NHS waiting lists and communities are beset by problems, yet the Government of the day seem to have nothing they want to change, nothing they are in a hurry to sort out and nothing to bring to this House. These could, we hope, be the last few months that the Conservatives are in power for some years. Do they really have nothing they want to do with it? If they have nothing that they want to use their parliamentary majority for, why are they even bothering to hold on to it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I assume that the hon. Lady will have informed the Member whom she referred to that she was going to do so?

Lucy Powell: I did.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Excellent.

Penny Mordaunt: First, may I send my good wishes for a full and speedy recovery to Prime Minister Fico following the horrific attempt on his life? I echo the comments from the hon. Lady regarding the Speaker's Chaplain and wish her well on her next chapter. I thank Mr Speaker for his statement this morning, which was very helpful. I also thank Anthony Wickins and his colleagues for coming to Parliament this week to promote and help us all understand the importance of dementia support in this important week.

I join the hon. Lady in thanking not just the two lead Members, but all Members who helped to bring forward the important report on birth trauma, which has had a huge response across the country. I know that not just the Prime Minister and Ministers on the Front Bench, but many organisations concerned with the care of mums-to-be and new mums are taking this report seriously. I hope it will do much good on this important matter.

The hon. Lady mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and I am sorry that she made those comments and implied that my hon. Friend has antisemitic views. That is quite wrong, and I am afraid it is a pattern of behaviour of inciting unpleasant things. We have seen it this week following Monday's vote, which has led to the statement that Mr Speaker had to make. I am pleased that we brought that motion forward, with the work that the Commission did and that we now have a scheme in place. I am sorry that all Members did not have an opportunity to vote on that final motion, and I am sorry that one result of the debate is that our environment has become less safe for certain Members—ironically, female Members of Parliament—following some of the actions since that debate.

The hon. Lady talks about the Criminal Justice Bill. She will understand that it is normal for the Government to talk to people proposing amendments before a Bill comes back, but that does not mean work is not being done on the Bill. The Bill deals with complex issues, and Members will of course be given a good opportunity to have oversight on any amendments or changes being brought forward.

The hon. Lady talks about business being light. I just remind her that in this short final Session of this Parliament, we have already introduced more Bills than Labour's last four Sessions in office by a considerable margin. If business collapses, it is not the fault of those on the Government Benches, but those who are here to oppose. We have even had that happen in Opposition day debates. It is our business, and we are getting it through the House. If it takes less time because the Opposition fail to show up, that is not our problem.

Today, we have had the Leader of the Opposition setting out his first steps, but he has already been on quite a journey. He got on at Islington North with a flexible principles ticket. He claims that he is taking his party and us to Dover and Deal, but it is becoming clear that, due to industrial action, fewer trains under a Labour Government and running out of other people's money, he will have to join a rail replacement bus service terminating at Rayners Lane. I hope for the sake of those at Dover waiting on a promise of a train that will never arrive that there is a compensation scheme in place—perhaps a daily allowance in the other place.

I do not think that the public, who have long memories, will fall for the stunt going on in parallel to business questions. They have long memories and can look at what is happening in Labour-run Wales. They will not fall for today's pledge card.

Economic stability? The author of the "there is no money" note still sits on Labour's Benches.

Cut waiting lists? The only NHS cuts that Labour has ever made have been not to waiting lists but to its budget; it cut the NHS budget three times.

Border security command? Labour would end the new systems command and legislation that is having an effect on small boats, even when it agrees that that is working.

Public ownership of energy? How is that working out for Nottingham Council?

Tackle antisocial behaviour? Under Labour, crime was twice what it is now. Those in a Labour police and crime commissioner area are 40% more likely to be a victim of crime.

New teachers? There were 30,000 fewer teachers under Labour than there are now. Labour has plans to tax education, destroying a ladder for many children and increasing the burden on the state sector. There is nothing there—no vision, no plan and no principles on which to steer—which is why that pledge card will go the way of all the others.

With apologies to The Beatles, this Leader of the Opposition is a nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody. He doesn't have a point of view. He's no good for me or you. Judging by this latest pledge card, he is nowhere near good enough for Britain.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In this Dementia Action Week, will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box and talk about plans to ensure that the NHS is ready to roll out early diagnoses of dementia so that people can benefit from potentially transformative drugs such as lecanemab, which, for the first time, will treat the actual condition rather than just the symptoms?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising awareness of that important point. We have new opportunities through these fantastic new drugs and therapies that are coming online and it is vital that people have access to them. It is also important that we learn from the huge amount of research into dementia support, which not only can be hugely beneficial to those with dementia and their families and carers but will save the NHS billions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): First, I will take up the Leader of the House on last week's offer of a deeper briefing with a Minister on what she described as

"some minor issues to resolve"—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 696.]

in the border operating model. If, as she told me last week, she is paying "great attention" to what is going on and still did not see huge lorries as they wait 20 hours at border posts, perhaps she should take a trip to Barnard

Castle. I would like to take the chief executive officer of the Cold Chain Federation, whose members certainly do not agree with her that there are no fundamental issues to sort out, with me to that briefing to deliver a dose of reality.

May we have a debate in Government time on the careful use of words in politics? The Prime Minister has refused to apologise for his offensive outburst on Monday when he quite deliberately associated the Scottish Government with Hamas terrorists, North Korea and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. The good folk of Edinburgh North and Leith have elected a dangerous extremist—who knew?—along with the vast majority of MPs from Scotland who also want independence. All along, we thought that we were democratically elected Members of this House, just like the Leader of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you might think that the Conservatives of Brexit Britain would respect a nation's right to self-determination as a perfectly honourable political position. Is it just Scotland's that they do not respect? We will always defend our nation's best interests. Maybe that is what terrifies the PM and the likes of the Scotland Secretary, who wants to force ruinously expensive, untried nuclear reactors on renewables-rich Scotland. Now, he is frightening our bairns with threats of a Unionist regime and Scottish Labour back in power to push through our overlords' cunning plans—what a Better Together reunion that would be. Would the Leader of the House remind me what happened to that respect agenda?

It would almost be funny if it were not coming from this particular Government: an unknown number of prisoners let loose around England, the Home Office losing thousands of migrants under its watch, and an English courts and justice system on the verge of collapse. But what is on the Prime Minister's new hate list? What keeps Tories awake at night with fear? People like me, apparently. How laughable. Could the Leader of the House confirm whether she believes that the Prime Minister was right to associate Scottish democrats with Hamas terrorists and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, or will she take the opportunity to distance herself from this laughably desperate baloney?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me first reassure the hon. Lady that, first, there is nothing wrong with my eyesight and, secondly, she does not keep me awake at night. Could I draw her attention to the news this week that the eurozone economy is growing half as fast as Britain? Let me repeat that: the eurozone economy is growing half as fast as Britain. The SNP's time would be better spent not trying to re-fight past referendums of all types but focusing on the issues today, such as the housing emergency that has just been declared in Scotland due to its rent control policy.

The hon. Lady raised the very serious matter of the Prime Minister's language. I understand that, thanks to the Scottish Government, people can now fill in a hate report form. If she has any concerns, she can just fill in a report and pile more work on to her hard-pushed police officers.

On the plans to put a nuclear power station in Scotland, it is sensible to plan for a Unionist party to be in government in Scotland. Given the timescales involved in nuclear construction, that is a sensible and pragmatic

thing to do. It is clear to everyone, except the SNP, that the party is in its final death throes. I predict that at the tragic finale, when the SNP finally completely implodes and meets its end, there will still be no ferry to carry its members across the Styx.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Tourism is a vital component of Bournemouth's economy, and half of visitors to our fantastic seaside resort come by car. But if Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council gets its way, Bournemouth could soon be subject to a default 20 mph speed limit, which will simply slow everything down. We will all spend more time stuck in traffic, increasing pollution, rather than at our destinations. We already have designated 20 mph zones around schools, for example, but a default limit across the town would not just impact on the visitor experience, but slow down public transport, delivery vans and parents doing the school run. The policy did not work in Wales, and it will not work in Bournemouth. Please may we have a debate on councils imposing unwanted speed limits?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that this is happening in my right hon. Friend's constituency. One would hope that local authorities would learn from mistakes made elsewhere, and stop inflicting policies that do not work and cause huge damage to public services and the local economy. I am sorry to hear that his council is determined to press ahead with this. The experience has been dreadful in Wales, where there have been deep concerns from the emergency services, which have found it difficult to go about their business, and massive costs have been piled on to business.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for making the business statement, for announcing the Backbench Business debates next Thursday 23 May, and for making Thursday 6 June a Backbench Business Committee day. The Committee has provisionally offered debates for that day on hormone pregnancy tests and the recognition of the Republic of Somaliland. The Committee is still open for business, and we very much welcome applications for debates in Westminster Hall, particularly on Thursdays.

I was also wondering if the Leader of the House would join me in—a pleasant little thing from my perspective—wishing the warmest congratulations to Gateshead football club, who were victorious and lifted the FA trophy at Wembley last Saturday?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very helpful advert for forthcoming Backbench Business debates. I will, of course, join him—I think the whole House will join him—in celebrating this wonderful achievement by his much-loved club, Gateshead. We send our congratulations.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): May I first thank both the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for their kind cross-party support for our landmark report this week into birth trauma? The all-party parliamentary group on birth trauma published a major report called, "Listen to Mums: Ending the Postcode Lottery on Perinatal Care". This is the first cross-party

[*Theo Clarke*]

report by MPs on the issue, and we received over 1,300 submissions from the public. I am delighted that the Prime Minister announced yesterday that there will now be a comprehensive national maternity strategy, which we asked for in our recommendations. Will my right hon. Friend provide Government time for a debate to discuss the important recommendations made in our national inquiry? May I also ask her to write to the Prime Minister and ask him to confirm that he has now read the report in full, and to ensure that our recommendations are being implemented to improve aftercare for mothers in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: I know the whole House would want to extend our thanks to my hon. Friend for this landmark piece of work. I will certainly make sure that the Prime Minister has studied the report in detail. When I last visited my hon. Friend's constituency, I had the privilege of not just meeting her lovely daughter, but the man who saved my hon. Friend's life. This is a very important report and I hope its recommendations will be implemented swiftly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I lift the mood of the Leader of the House this morning? She seems a bit down. Can we have more of a celebration of the people who work here? They are now going to have greater protection in one part of their lives, but is it not about time we looked around us every day at everyone in this Palace who works here: the people who clean this place, the security people, the Clerks? We have so many people with long-term service in this place. Yes, we could have a debate, but is there a way we could do something to make the lives of these people who give us so much better?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to raise the hon. Gentleman's suggestion with the House of Commons Commission to see what more we can do. I thank him for giving us the opportunity, which I hope is echoed by all in this Chamber, to put on record our thanks for everyone who works on the estate to enable us to do our jobs and keep British democracy going.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): The Seret International Israeli Film Festival runs for a couple of weeks from today. Wonderful independent films will be shown in arthouse cinemas across the world. But of course antisemites are trying to bully and intimidate cinema chains into not showing the films and, in some cases, are sadly succeeding. Would the Curzon or Picturehouse cinema chains decline to show films made by the black community because of a war in Africa? Obviously, the answer is no, and the reason is because that would be racist. So it is with those sick antisemites whose loathing for Jewish people is so extreme that they are now trying to boycott Jewish culture in the UK. Will my right hon. Friend agree to organise a debate in this place to support Jewish art and culture? Perhaps Parliament could even show one of the independent films, which have nothing to do with the conflict in the middle east, here in one of the Committee rooms, for example.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for giving us a very good example of how antisemitism gets a hold. It starts with things like this,

which might seem a reasonable thing for a venue to do but clearly is not. The way he sets it out illustrates why it is not. It is really disturbing and I hope that all Members recognise that this community is really under attack. We need to be absolutely unequivocal and say that we stand with them, and that we will do everything we can to protect them and call out antisemitism wherever it is.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This is Mental Health Awareness Week, and Bath Mind, a wonderful charity in my constituency that supports 6,000 people, is worried about the reform of personal independence payments, which may plunge thousands of families into destitution and homelessness—with the associated mental health impact—and affect the charity's capacity to deliver services in the face of increased demand. May we have a debate in Government time about the PIP reforms and their impact on mental health?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Lady will know, many of the reforms introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions to provide support have massively increased the number of people with a mental health condition or hidden disability who are able to access that support, and that is a good thing. However, I thank her for raising an important matter during an important week, and I will ensure that those in the DWP have heard what she has said.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): The Leader of the House may be aware that Cramlington, which is in my constituency and is one of the largest towns in Northumberland, lacks a police station. Its stand-alone police station was closed in 2014. More recently, Northumbria police opened an office in Manor Walks shopping centre, but it is not an adequate replacement for a full station. Despite the critical need, successive Labour police and crime commissioners in Northumbria have not taken action to reverse the closure. Given Cramlington's population of more than 30,000 and its history of serious crimes including multiple murders, its residents are in desperate need of a dedicated police station to provide reassurance and support for neighbourhood officers. Will the Leader of the House please schedule a debate in Government time so we can consider what can be done to ensure that constituencies nationwide receive the necessary resources to combat crime?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will know that the Government have confirmed a total police funding settlement of up to £18.5 billion for the coming financial year, an increase of £886 million on the previous year's settlement, and overall the police funding available to police and crime commissioners is up by 6.3% in cash terms. The resource is there, and we know that with that resource our incredible police forces are halving crime. Except in a few areas notably controlled by Labour, we are making good progress, but of course these community facilities are extremely important to the communities that they serve. I will ensure that the Home Secretary has heard my hon. Friend's specific point, and I will write to him this afternoon.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Blackpool Rock is under threat from cheap imitation imports from China in particular, and I have joined Stanton & Novelty, a third-generation traditional confectionery manufacturer in my constituency, in leading the charge in safeguarding

the status of British-made confectionery. Our seven remaining rock factories are at risk of closure and are experiencing a 40% drop in sales, which is jeopardising the livelihoods of local employees and the viability of historic businesses. Just 50 people in the UK have the skills required to properly “letter” sticks of rock, most of them in Blackpool. These traditional skills will soon be lost without intervention, so may we have a debate in Government time to discuss securing our historic British confectionery, and save Blackpool rock?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Penny Mordaunt: For the benefit of *Hansard*, I should emphasise that the hon. Gentleman’s question was met with roars of approval from Members in all parts of the House, and I thank him for raising an important issue. This is an iconic project: everyone knows what Blackpool rock is, and I shall certainly ensure that the relevant Minister has heard about the hon. Gentleman’s campaign.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last Thursday, I accompanied the Secretary of State for Business and Trade on her visit to my constituency, and we toured the port of Immingham. Immingham is the largest port in the country, and the Humber ports contribute £75 billion to the national economy. May we have a debate in Government time on our port industry and the benefits it gives to international trade?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. Our ports play a vital role in the long-term growth of the economy, and provide essential access to global markets. I know that this issue is a focus for many Members across the House, even those without a port in their constituency. It would be a very good topic for a debate, and my hon. Friend will know how to apply for one.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is Mental Health Awareness Week—an opportunity for us all to redouble our efforts to tackle the stigma and call for improved mental health service provision. Unfortunately, thousands of people, including my constituents in Battersea, are paying the price for the Government’s incompetence and failure to deliver their manifesto commitment to update the Mental Health Act 1983. The crisis needs to be addressed. Can we have a Government statement on the actions that will be taken to address this crisis? When will the Government finally bring forward the mental health Bill?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. I know that many hon. Members across the House have spent a great deal of time on the Bill, including those who were directly involved in the pre-legislative scrutiny of it. We will bring forward further business and announce it in the usual way. In the meantime, I will make sure that all the relevant Secretaries of State, not just the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, have heard the hon. Lady’s ask today.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): This week Care4Calais, a pro-asylum seeker British charity, contacted me to ask for my support for its legal efforts to prevent the deportation to Rwanda of asylum seekers in Dudley whom the Government have assessed for deportation.

I do not think the charity got the memo. As a result, I have written to the Home Secretary, asking him to speed up the deportations. Can we have a debate on how we can stop organisations such as Care4Calais—which, as a charity, either directly or indirectly receives Government funding—actively undermining Government policy to stop illegal migration?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points, and I will make sure that the Home Secretary has heard them. He will know that the processing that has been going on in the Home Office has speeded up immensely—by close to 300% during the Prime Minister’s tenure. Those cases are being cracked through, but we cannot have a system with finite resource that allows endless appeals. That is why we have brought forward legislation and why those who have exhausted the process, who should not be here and who do not have the right to be here, need to be sent either home or to a third country. That is very clear, and the legislation will enable us to make best use of the finite resource that we have.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am going to give it one more try. Given that the Prime Minister now thinks that around half of the people in Scotland, who believe that it should be a self-governing, independent country, are extremists, will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out whether she agrees with his assessment? Can she confirm, for the purposes of clarity, whether she believes that those who wish to rejoin the EU are also dangerous extremists in our midst?

Penny Mordaunt: The Union of the United Kingdom is critical to our strength. Were it to be torn apart, which is the prime objective of those on the SNP Benches, we would be weaker as a nation and the component parts of the United Kingdom would be weaker. Scotland would be weaker, England would be weaker, Wales would be weaker and Northern Ireland would be weaker. That is certainly a threat to our stability, which is what the Prime Minister said. If the hon. Lady thinks he said something else, she can fill in a hate form.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said that we should celebrate long-serving members of staff in this place, which is exactly what I would like to do. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Terry Wiggins MBE, who joined the House service in September 1974—he will be leaving soon after 50 years of service to us—and Nick Wort, who joined this place shortly afterwards in 1979? Between them, those two gentlemen have 95 years of service to the House of Commons. They are well worth celebrating.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for doing that. As he heard very clearly, we all send our good wishes, thanks and appreciation to both Terry and Nick for their incredible service to this House.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Neither the Leader of the House nor anybody else in this House needs any reminding of the risks and dangers of political violence, so I am sure she will share the concerns of the

[Dan Jarvis]

whole House following yesterday's assassination attempt on the Slovakian Prime Minister. This incident is the latest example of political violence across Europe, and it has brought into sharp focus the heightened and growing threat to politicians across the political spectrum.

Given that, does the Leader of the House think it would be timely for a Minister to update the House on the important work being done by the Defending Democracy Taskforce to keep politicians safe in our country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this very important point. He will know that not only the Defending Democracy Taskforce but the House authorities, our security and intelligence agencies, the Home Office and many other bodies are very focused on ensuring that not only us in this place but all elected individuals have the protection they need to go about their business.

The hon. Gentleman will know that some issues cannot be aired on the Floor of the House, but I will make sure that all the Departments involved have heard his request for the House to be updated. Perhaps they could offer more in-depth briefings on matters that should not be aired on the Floor of the House.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Earlier this week, I met guests from Police UK Disability Sport who were hosted by my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson). Police UK Disability Sport provides adaptive sports to the police community regionally and nationally, and will soon do so internationally. It proposes that a portion of the annual proceeds of crime money be made available through a central trust or under a police covenant committee, to which all police charities and not-for-profit organisations can apply, to support all serving and retired police officers through recovery, rehabilitation, treatment, and physical and mental health and wellbeing services.

More than £330 million was seized in 2023, and £1.75 million could protect a five-year project to fund sports events. Police UK Disability Sport is looking to create a police version of the Invictus games called the Intrepid games. May we have a debate on using proceeds of crime funding to help to establish opportunities for these amazing police officers?

Penny Mordaunt: What a good idea. I will make sure that the Home Secretary has heard it. It would be a fantastic initiative to have an Invictus games for the fantastic police officers who are disabled, whether in service or through another situation.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Earlier this week, the Secretary of State for Scotland seemed to outline an intention to disregard democracy and run roughshod over devolution. The dangerous extremists on the SNP Benches believe that democracy is not a one-time event so, as we mark 25 years of the Scottish Parliament, could we have a debate in Government time to consider how this place can better respect devolution as Scotland advances towards becoming an independent nation?

Penny Mordaunt: That is shocking news about the Secretary of State for Scotland. I thought he was a man who respected the result of all referendums, which I think is supporting democracy.

I think that a debate on how devolution is working and the possibilities for the future would be very well attended, and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is listening. I would just say that, when devolution was envisaged, the plan was set in place by parties and nations working together for the benefit of all, as opposed to working against each other.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Mr Speaker has generously given permission for a reception to be held in Speaker's House later this afternoon to mark the 50th anniversary of the Spinal Injuries Association, which I am delighted to sponsor. Stoke Mandeville Hospital in my constituency is home to the national spinal injuries centre and is the birthplace of the Paralympics. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Spinal Injuries Association on half a century of work to support people who have spinal cord injuries and their loved ones, and does she agree that that is a topic worthy of debate in the House?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. A debate on such a topic would be well attended and he knows how to apply for one. I am sure that all hon. Members would join him in thanking the Spinal Injuries Association and everyone who supports it for its incredible work to support people with such injuries.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Yesterday, the Trussell Trust came to Parliament to update hon. Members on the latest figures for the distribution of food parcels. It reported that more than 3.1 million emergency food parcels were provided by food banks in its network last year. In Gateshead alone, 8,464 people needed support, of whom 2,694 were children. I pay tribute to the important work being done by the Trussell Trust, the Gateshead food bank and other charities, such as Feeding Families, in my constituency. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can end the need for food banks?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important issue. She will know that the Government have put together a cost of living support package, which now stands at £108 billion, and that the household support fund enables local authorities to give grants directly to individuals who might fall through the cracks. We have taken other measures, such as our reform of welfare. The large share of people who were going to food banks under the last Labour Government were being transferred from one benefit to another, which is a situation that we have ended. There are also more sustainable alternatives to food banks in most communities. There is still an issue and there is more work to be done, and I will take what the hon. Lady has said to the relevant Secretary of State's attention.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the Greenway landfill site? I am grateful to Councillor Becky Clarke, Ben Collins, who was The Stig in a former life, and the Sampford Peverell Church of England Primary School for standing up against it. Mid Devon District Council, which is not the ultimate authority for this, has been absolutely useless, as usual. In fact, the former chair of its scrutiny committee, who was supposed to be scrutinising it, has done a runner. I am not

surprised: it turns out that, according to locals, she was sacked from the National Farmers Union and the Environment Agency, and then sued it. I have gone on and on about local government not standing up for local people, and I will continue to do so. It is something that we need to talk about, so please can we have time for a debate?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend makes a good case, not necessarily for a debate on that topic but for an entire debate—perhaps an entire afternoon on the Floor of the House—about his council alone. As I do every week, I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard what he said.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The Guernsey cardiologist Dr Dean Patterson has written to the General Medical Council to call for an immediate suspension of the mRNA vaccines after witnessing at first hand in Guernsey the damage that they have done. Guernsey has only 63,000 residents, 93% of whom have had at least two jabs. Dr Patterson stated that he saw only five cases of myocarditis a year until 2021 when the jabs were rolled out. He then saw a 500% increase in cases: there were 25 cases in 2021 and 23 in 2022, but in 2023, when fewer jabs were administered, the number of cases dropped to 11.

Because the Channel Islands are a Crown dependency, they have no representation in this House. Although the residents of the Channel Islands are British passport holders, they have no access to the UK vaccine damage compensation scheme. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on how Dr Patterson and other concerned medical professionals in the Channel Islands can publicise their concerns about these novel treatments and protect their patients, and how the people of the Channel Islands who have been harmed by the vaccines can get the compensation that they deserve?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman has found his own answer. Not only has he given an example of a healthcare professional who is writing to healthcare professional bodies, and many other organisations that scrutinise and have oversight of vaccines policy, but Members of Parliament can raise the issue on the Floor of the House. It is very important that we ensure that the public know there are statutory bodies, third sector organisations and democratic organisations with elected representatives that have scrutiny and oversight of all these matters. That is why we have a very safe vaccines regime, and why any concerns about vaccines or ongoing trials are all put in the public domain.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Last week, a constituent who is dyspraxic came to my surgery to raise concerns about the lack of awareness of dyspraxia. That has been exacerbated by the collapse of the Dyspraxia Foundation, so there is now no dedicated dyspraxia organisation in the country. I would love to say that the trouble I had with my voter ID was an ingenious way of raising awareness of dyspraxia, but it was not. Will the Leader of the House support those with dyspraxia by tabling a debate in Government time to raise that awareness? Millions of people across the country have it—a huge number of our constituents—so will the Leader of the House support me?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the closure of the Dyspraxia Foundation. I know that my hon. Friend will be doing all he can to ensure that people have the support and advice they need. I will certainly ensure that the Secretaries of State for Education and for Health and Social Care have heard what he has said. He can raise this with them on 17 June and 4 June respectively. I thank him for his ongoing work, which is incredibly important.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Next Monday, having taken evidence for six years, Sir Brian Langstaff will publish the final report on the contaminated blood scandal. It will be a momentous day for all those who have campaigned for so many decades to get that public inquiry. Does the Leader of the House know how the largest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS—and, I think, the biggest cover-up by the state—will be debated in the House? Will the Prime Minister be making a statement? Will the House have an opportunity for a full debate on Sir Brian's findings and recommendations?

Penny Mordaunt: May I thank the right hon. Lady, her co-chair and the whole of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood? They have performed important work throughout the process, including through the inquiry we established and through looking at highly technical issues, the compensation study and the work that the Paymaster General is doing to ensure that the scheme is properly established. It is hard to find an example that is more extreme than this appalling scandal and the successive decades of cover-up. There are still issues being uncovered and coming to light. Monday will be an historic day—I wish it had come decades earlier, but it is happening on Monday. Although I cannot give the right hon. Lady exact answers to her questions, she can take it from me—I hope she understands that it is sincerely meant—that the report needs to be given the attention it warrants on the Floor of the House.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): As I am sure the Leader of the House is aware, today—the 16 May—is Middlesex Day. Will she join me in commending the Prime Minister for continuing the tradition, started by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, of proudly flying the Middlesex flag from No. 10 Downing Street to recognise the historic county of which London is a part? Will she congratulate Middlesex Heritage, the Association of British Counties and Russell Grant, in particular, for all the work they do to promote the importance of the historic counties and the part they play in the life of our nation?

Will the Leader of the House also bring forward a debate in the House on making statutory provision for the restoration of Middlesex as a ceremonial county, with its own lord lieutenant or deputy lieutenant, and indeed on all our treasured historic counties, ending the many years of confusion and loss of county identity? This is particularly so in towns such as Romford, which takes great pride in being part of the historic county of Essex.

Penny Mordaunt: I am very pleased to hear that the Prime Minister is continuing this tradition at Downing Street. It is important that we celebrate our counties and everything about their cultural identity: their food,

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their amazing landscapes and their heritage. Having heard what my hon. Friend has said today, I think there is no danger of our losing sight of that importance, with him on these Benches.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): A significant issue across Oldham, Chadderton and Royton is the rapid increase in the number of houses in multiple occupation. It was previously a big issue for our pub industry, with pubs being converted into HMOs, but it is now increasingly an issue with family homes. Those homes are being taken off the market and sold at inflated prices, because of their potential rental income, which drives the end value. The result in Oldham is 500 children living in temporary accommodation in single hotel rooms, because of the lack of supply of family homes. This issue also brings into question the issue of Serco's Home Office contracts. Can we have a debate in Government time on the overall impact of housing policy, which includes HMOs, the lack of supply and the Home Office allocation policy?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important matter. He is speaking to somebody who represents, bar London, the most densely populated city in Europe, so I understand the issues he is talking about. He will know that we have done a number of things nationally to help ensure that, where HMOs are being built, they are of good quality and do not cram people in—for example, the reforms that we have made to the Valuation Office Agency and council tax rebanding. I recommend that he speaks to his local authority, which should have a clear map of where HMOs are and have its own local policy about the density of those HMOs. It has the powers to do that, and that is what it should do, and its planning committee should be making decisions on that basis.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Sadly, we all know that misogyny can lead to acts of violence and sexual attacks, and it is right in those circumstances that we use exclusions to safeguard staff and Members in this place. But we should not forget that misogyny can also be part of everyday culture in workplaces in this country, where women are talked over, their ideas ignored until men put them forward, and inappropriate comments are made—so-called banter culture. All of that can lead to so much more, which we want to prevent. Can the Leader of the House set out what more the Government want to do to attack that culture? Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss how we can protect women in the workplace?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before the Leader of the House responds, I just wish to say that we still have a statement and a debate to come. To ensure that everybody can get in, brief questions and brief answers would be helpful.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important matter. I am glad that we have taken measures to protect people who work here, and of course the environment in which people work is incredibly important. Equalities Question Time was yesterday, but I will ensure that the Government Equalities Office has heard what she has said and will raise it with the Secretary of State.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): A constituent has contacted me about how he is remortgaging at an increased rate of 5.68%. If he did not have ongoing cladding issues, his mortgage lender would have still given him an increased rate, but it would have been 4.67%. An extra £600 will now be added to his monthly mortgage payments. I am confident that other people up and down our country are experiencing that double jeopardy, due to the Conservative Government's failings. Will the Leader of the House say what conversations she has had with her Cabinet colleagues on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that ensuring that our economy is growing, inflation is curbed and interest rates can come down is a priority for the Government, and she will know from the statement put out by the National Audit Office earlier this week that the plan is working.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Merthyr Tydfil's old town hall, more recently known as the Redhouse, is an iconic building with much historic significance. It was from the balcony of the building that Keir Hardie spoke to the people of Merthyr Tydfil after being elected to this place as the first Labour MP in 1900. This week, the Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust, the current tenant of the building, closed its doors—the latest episode in a catalogue of failure. My Senedd colleague and I have written to the Charity Commission, asking it to investigate the failings of the Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust, but may we have a debate on what more can be done to bring this faceless and seemingly remote organisation to account?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the issue in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He has done his community a service by raising the matter on the Floor of the House and creating pressure for that dialogue to happen, and for heads to be cracked together in his local community to ensure that his constituents are better served.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): A few weeks ago, I brought up the case of my constituent who was savagely attacked by a former partner while on holiday in Spain, and saved only by the intervention of five men from Newcastle, whose statements, along with that of another witness, were never taken by the Spanish police. We wrote to the Foreign Secretary to seek his assistance with persuading the Spanish authorities to reopen the case to avoid a miscarriage of justice, but the reply that I received from the Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), was one of the most disappointing ministerial replies I have received in my nine years here. Indeed, the only suggestion for help was a broken hyperlink to a list of lawyers. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to urge the Foreign Office to do more to assist my constituent?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's experience. I will certainly ensure that he gets a better service than that.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Before coming to this place, I was a modern foreign languages teacher—I taught in Wigan and south Wales. I absolutely loved it and took so many pupils overseas to give them that

fantastic experience. May we have a debate in Government time on what the Government can do to enable young people to travel post Brexit and have those opportunities, which are sadly missing now?

Penny Mordaunt: I admire the hon. Lady's passion and thank her for her previous service. It is an excellent topic for a debate, because it would allow us to get on record the benefits of the Turing scheme, which is now running—the same benefits that have been there before but on a global basis, not just focused on the EU.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I briefly associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), who talked about Terry Wiggins. They did not mention that he served for 40 years playing on the parliamentary rugby team, and just a few weeks ago helped us to a glorious victory at Twickenham.

As will concern anyone approaching retirement, figures from the Department for Work and Pensions have revealed that the number of pensioners using food banks doubled after the Government's economic mismanagement—up 101% in my constituency. Can we have a debate in Government time on whether the £46 billion blackhole in the plan to axe national insurance will hit pensioners once more?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman may like to talk to some more pensioners; he may find out all sorts of things, because they have long memories. Labour may not think that our elders have a good memory, but in fact they do. They remember the 25p rise to their pensions under the last Labour Government. They remember the pension credit maladministration—I think £10 million was owed to pensioners in my constituency alone. Under the last Labour Government, 200,000 more pensioners were living in absolute poverty, and we had the fourth highest pensioner poverty in Europe. Pensioners also remember which party introduced the triple lock, increasing the state pension by £3,700 since 2010: the Conservatives.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In 1900, in this Chamber, a Bill was passed into law to promote Alexandra Palace as the people's palace for recreation forever—a palace for the people of London. It is now an international venue, but will the Leader of the House and the shadow Leaders of the House congratulate the staff, volunteers and everyone who makes this fantastic venue? Particularly in tough times when people cannot take holidays as much, they can enjoy Alexandra Palace and Park—and while they are at it, they can volunteer with the Friends of Ally Pally Station, to make the entrance to Alexandra Palace all the more beautiful.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for giving us all an opportunity to thank the staff, friends and volunteers of Ally Pally and Park. She has given a great advert for anyone who is at a loose end and wants to do something for that community.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Rohanna had hoped to have her indefinite leave to remain application expedited, so that she could fly to the Philippines to attend her father's funeral. My

office put in an urgent inquiry, but got minimal interaction, and unfortunately my constituent had to attend the funeral online. It turns out that had the decision been made in time, the need for a biometric card would have prevented her from travelling anyway. Can the Leader of the House make sure that the urgent ILR application process is just that, and find a way for people to travel without a biometric residence card on compassionate grounds?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear that that happened to the hon. Gentleman's constituent, particularly at such an awful time for them and their family. If he will give my office the details of the case, I will raise it with the Department concerned and make sure they do a "lessons learned" exercise. We want to ensure that people are able to travel, especially at such moments.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was recently contacted by a constituent regarding her 16-year-old son, who has sadly been diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. As if that was not enough to deal with, the chemotherapy started at the end of last month and he is taking his GCSEs right now. It is very difficult, and we have found a whole raft of rules regarding when his situation can be taken into account in those GCSEs. Clearly he will miss some of the exams because of treatment or its effects. We have found out that the pathway is not at all clear and straightforward. On some occasions, only a certificate of recognition can be awarded, rather than an actual GCSE. We would really like a debate about what more we can do to make sure that the pathway is made easier for children in very difficult circumstances and their parents.

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear that, and I am sure I speak for us all when I send our good wishes to the hon. Gentleman's constituent and his family. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education makes a timely appearance; she may have saved me a stamp. However, I will write to her formally and make sure that she has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. He will know how to apply for a debate, and that is an excellent topic for one.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Northumbrian Water repeatedly refused to release information on the scale of raw sewage dumping at Whitburn and into the North sea. An appeal tribunal has ordered that data to be released, thanks to the persistent work of Steve Lavelle and the Whitburn Neighbourhood Forum. The decision found that Northumbrian Water had a desire to "avoid media or political attention".

Can we please have a debate on why the Government have enabled water companies to not only dump sewage into our waters, but evade scrutiny?

Penny Mordaunt: First of all, what the hon. Lady says about this Government is not true. If she goes to the Water UK website, she will see real-time information about the projects going on across the country with every water company. That is the largest infrastructure investment of its kind in the world, and it will dramatically reduce storm overflows. The reason why we have these releases, as she will well know, is because of legacy sewerage systems that mix storm water and waste water. We have to make the investment to put that right.

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When the Conservatives came into office, less than 6% of such overflows were monitored. That figure is now 100%, and that information is in the public domain. Fantastic local activists like Steve—I have many in my constituency—are not only holding water companies to account, but working with them to improve monitoring. This would be an excellent topic for a debate, because we will very shortly eradicate that kind of overflow.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Leader of the House re-registered her leadership campaign website on polling day, so can her colleagues look forward to more “pints with Penny” over the coming weeks? If not, she is more than welcome to a gin with Gwynne.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that the House is very keen to hear the story behind this, but I am afraid that what the hon. Gentleman has said is not true. I have done no such thing.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I have recently been contacted by constituents about the imminent closure of the Hall, a small community space in East Village, Stratford—one of very few in the area. As we know, such spaces are absolutely invaluable. Ours hosts loads of events, including meetings of the Brownies and the Girl Guides. I am making representations to Get Living, the developer responsible for that decision. It has, frankly, been responsible for a whole bunch of questionable decisions over recent years, including during the cladding scandal and on exorbitant service charges. Can we have a debate in Government time on how the actions of developers have undermined the Olympic legacy and failed local residents?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear of the situation in the hon. Lady’s constituency. She will know how to apply for a debate on the issue, which I think is an excellent topic for discussion. I will also ensure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard her concerns. Clearly, a huge amount of work has been done to enable community asset transfers, and funding is available to facilitate that. I will ask one of the Secretary of State’s officials to contact her office with any advice that they can furnish.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for this chance to ask an important question—all questions are important, and this one is on an important subject. This week, I would like us to turn our attention to Vietnam. I am troubled by the recent arrest and conviction of Christians belonging to the Montagnard minority ethnic group for their peaceful advocacy of freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam. One Christian, Mr Bya, was targeted and killed, yet the local police have failed to make any arrests in relation to his death. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning such violations of freedom of religion or belief, and will she ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to raise the issue with its counterparts in Vietnam?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for shining a spotlight, as he does every week, on atrocities going on all over the world. I am very sorry to hear

about the killing of that gentleman, and the response by the local authorities. As I do every week, I will ensure that the FCDO has heard his concerns, and I will raise the matter with the Foreign Secretary.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My constituent Mrs Houria Nicoll is an Algerian-British dual national. She went to Algeria to deal with the estate of her deceased parents, and travelled out on her Algerian passport, as her British passport had expired. She has been denied entry to the UK on her Algerian passport and is now stuck in Algeria. She is unwell and cannot access any care or support from family or friends. The British embassy has denied her help because of her dual status. Time is running out. Will the Leader of the House do everything she can to work with her Foreign Office colleagues to give my constituent some support and get her home?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about that. I will, after this session, ensure that the Home Office and the Foreign Office—particularly consular services—have heard the situation that the hon. Lady describes. If she wants to give my office more details and the record of correspondence that she has had, we will do everything we can to ensure that she is given the right support to get her constituent home.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful to you for allowing me to raise a point of order from the Front Bench. It relates to comments that the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), made at the start of business questions. She did notify me that she was going to make those comments, but after business questions had started. However, this point of order is more about the content of the comments, which I personally found very difficult.

I did write to my constituents over a year ago about a consultation that is being run by my local council on 15 to 20-minute communities. In that letter, I pointed to some of the rumours about 15-minute cities, because that is something that constituents have raised with me. That consultation is still live on the council’s website—it is on page 45 of its planning and appraisals document—so this is very much a constituency-based issue.

However, I find it very difficult to be accused of being a conspiracy theorist on the back of that, especially as the vaccines Minister. Whenever there is a debate in this place on that subject, the number of death threats and the amount of abuse that I get is overwhelming at times. I realise that colleagues sometimes have valid points to raise, but there is a backlash whenever those debates are held.

More importantly, being linked to antisemitism when my family in London are actually Jewish, and have had a very difficult time over the past few months, was devastating. I kindly ask the shadow Leader of the House to either withdraw those statements, or just to reflect that while we all play politics in this space, sometimes things are very personal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Does the shadow Leader of the House wish to make a further point of order?

Lucy Powell: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for her point of order. Can I put on the record that I did not say or imply that she was either a conspiracy theorist or antisemitic? I do not believe that she is either of those things. I was highlighting the dangers of sharing, however inadvertently, campaigns that featured in a guide to conspiracy theories that the Leader of the House and I published last week for MPs. That guide is in the Library, and I would urge the hon. Member for Lewes to read its section on 15-minute cities and the link to organisations.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for Lewes for giving me notice of her point of order. I am glad that the shadow Leader of the House was here to hear and respond to it. There are two important points. The first is on giving advance notice; I did check with the shadow Leader of the House that she had given advance notice. Secondly, I hope that this has led to some clarification of what was said and what was meant. I am not responsible for what Members say in the Chamber, but I remind everybody that good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. I am sure that everybody in the Chamber would agree with that. I think we will leave it at that.

Relationships, Sex and Health Education: Statutory Guidance

12.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to the House setting out the Government's proposals for updating the 2019 statutory guidance on relationships, sex and health education, which my Department has published today for consultation. I thank my Department's staff for their hard work in getting us to this point.

This Government have a plan to deliver a brighter future for Britain, one where families are supported and given peace of mind that their children are safe, and are being equipped with the skills that they need to succeed. Good relationships, sex and health education—RSHE, as it is known—plays a key role in that. However, following disturbing reports from parents of pupils being taught inappropriate content in schools, and requests from schools that wanted more clarity about when to teach certain topics, the Prime Minister and I decided to bring forward the review of RSHE. We have listened to colleagues from across Government and the House, gathered evidence from stakeholders, and considered advice from an independent panel of experts who generously gave their time, experience and knowledge to support the review last year. I put on record my personal thanks to each individual panel member.

We need to make sure that the content of lessons is factual and appropriate, and that children have the capacity to fully understand everything that they are being taught. We need to make sure that our children are prepared for the world in which they live, but not in a way that takes away the innocence of childhood. In short, we need to allow our children to be children. That is a fine line to tread, and schools need clarity on how to approach the issue. Overall, this guidance is underpinned by three core values: first, that parents have a right to know what their children are being taught; secondly, that teachers are there to teach children facts, not push the agendas of campaign groups; and thirdly, that schools should not teach about the contested issue of gender identity, including that gender is a spectrum.

There are five major policy changes that I would like to set out, the first of which is the introduction of age limits for teaching sensitive subjects. The purpose of the new age limits is to make sure children are not taught things before they are ready to understand them. Informed by the advice of the independent panel and others, the guidance places specific age limits on the teaching of certain subjects. In primary schools, children learn about the importance of boundaries and privacy and that they have rights over their own bodies, but no 10-year-old should be taught about the details of intimate sexual acts, sexual harassment or sexual violence. In primary schools, sex education is not a requirement, and should only be introduced from year 5 onwards. Its content should align with the national curriculum's science teachings on conception and birth, ensuring that it is rooted in fact. It should absolutely not be preparing primary-age children for sexual activity.

The second flagship change is complete openness with parents. Parents are their children's first teachers, and they must know what they are being taught. The guidance contains a new section that makes the need for

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transparency with parents crystal clear and clarifies the scope within the law to share materials. The bottom line is that curriculum providers should not be seeking to hide their materials from parents. That practice is completely unacceptable: parents have a fundamental right to know what their children are being taught about healthy relationships, sex and development.

The third area is teaching about gender reassignment. Many schools have told us that they need clear guidance to help them teach about this highly sensitive and complex issue in a way that is factual and safe. We are making it absolutely clear that the contested topic of gender identity should not be taught in schools at any age. Schools should not be providing classroom materials that, for example, include the view that gender is a spectrum. While protected characteristics such as gender reassignment should be taught about, that must be done on a factual basis at an appropriate age and must not be based on contested ideology. That reflects the cautious, common-sense approach that we have taken in our guidance on children questioning their gender, and also reflects the recommendations of the Cass review.

There is also a dedicated section on sexual harassment and sexual violence. The growth of malign influencers online who pose a risk to children and young people has been significant. It is one of the key ways in which the world has changed for young people since the guidance was originally published—and, indeed, since all of us Members were in school. That new section covers some specific types of abusive behaviour that were not previously discussed, such as stalking, as well as advice for teachers about how to address dangerous, misogynistic online influencers.

I would now like to consider the sensitive, but important, issue of suicide prevention. Ministers and I have met bereaved families, experts and teachers to explore how suicide prevention could be taught as part of RSHE, and I pay tribute to the incredible work of 3 Dads Walking, who have used the unimaginable tragedies in their lives to campaign for important change. The current RSHE guidance already includes content about teaching pupils to look after their mental wellbeing and support themselves and their friends. We have now made clearer how that content on mental wellbeing relates to suicide prevention. Of course, the topic of suicide itself needs to be handled sensitively and skilfully, and not before pupils are ready to understand it. Obviously, children's maturity varies, but our engagement suggested that children typically develop the necessary understanding from when they are in year 8. We have made sure that the updated guidance acknowledges that it can be important to discuss this topic with pupils, and have added advice to set out how schools could address suicide prevention in their teaching.

Finally, the guidance also includes the new topic of personal safety, which covers additional content on understanding the laws on carrying knives and knife crime, and on the dangers of fire, roads, railways and water.

Together, I am confident that this guidance will give teachers and headteachers clarity about what should and should not be taught. It will provide parents with the peace of mind that their children are being taught in a safe and factual manner, and it will reassure everyone

across society that pupils are being taught what they need to know at the right age and time in their lives. A copy of the guidance has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

12.20 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

Labour's approach starts from the belief that education should prepare our children for the world in which they live and the future that they, together, will shape. To achieve that, and to give each and every child the opportunity and the future they deserve, relationships, sex and health education must be an integral part of every child's education. The content of such education must be both age-appropriate and taught in a respectful manner, as well as tailored to the realities of children's lives. The Secretary of State has set out that the Government intend to achieve this through the introduction of age limits on certain aspects of this curriculum.

Today's statement has been long in the making. Alongside school leaders, we have consistently pushed for clearer guidance on these issues to be introduced so school leaders and teachers can feel confident and supported in what they are teaching. While we are pleased that the guidance has at last been published, there is deep concern about the lack of consultation with school leaders in developing the guidance so far. If the Government are serious about ensuring that RSHE is taught in a dignified and respectful manner, and in a way that schoolteachers and school leaders feel they can confidently deliver, they must ensure that the voices of school leaders and teachers are heard.

I want to ask the Secretary of State to address a couple of concerns in particular. The first concern arises from the reality that education is one of our strongest levers for preventing child abuse. It is crucial at a time of rising levels of sexual offences against children, especially our youngest children, that children are empowered to recognise when something is not right. The Secretary of State will know that sometimes such issues arise urgently, in a class or a wider school community, outside the timeline that a teacher may have in mind, and perhaps even before the age limits she is proposing. So will she say something about the ability of teachers to respond to and reflect such concerns in future in the context of age limits, especially when they arise among younger children?

The second concern is about the importance of children learning not just about their own relationships tomorrow, but about their own and other people's families today. The Opposition believe that what matters about families is not the shape they have, but the love they give. Teaching children about the facts of the world in which they grow up must include an understanding that there are people who are transgender, that people can go through a process to change their gender and that the law provides for that. The Secretary of State outlined a little of her thinking in her statement and on Radio 4 this morning, but could she set it out in more detail for the House?

On some of the other issues raised by this guidance, Labour very much welcomes the intention of the guidance to remove the barriers that some parents face when asking what is being taught to their children. Of course parents should know what their children are being taught. While providers are already required to do this, it is acknowledged that there have been issues with interpretations of copyright legislation, and it is absolutely right that Ministers seek to clarify this issue.

We also welcome the fact that there will be additional content on suicide prevention in the secondary curriculum, as well as on the risks of self-harm and suicide content on social media. However, it needs to be backed up with support in schools to adequately address the challenges that far too many children and young people face with their mental health. Labour has a funded plan to ensure that every young person will have access to a specialist mental health professional at secondary school, and a plan for mental health hubs in every community. While we await the next Labour Government, this Government must urgently set out how they will get down the waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services, and deliver support to the children and young people who need it most.

We also welcome the inclusion of content on sexual harassment and sexual violence. Yesterday, I joined the leader of Redbridge Council and teachers to hear about the innovative Step In programme that they are delivering in schools to tackle sexist harassment and misogyny. It was really inspiring to see the students so confidently addressing the issues with their peers and changing attitudes. I hope that, as part of the review, the Government will look at some of the fantastic resources local authorities have developed while waiting for the Government to act.

We will now need to look at the exact detail of the draft guidance, as will schools. It is really important that stakeholders from across education are able to feed back their views on this, and I hope the Government will reflect on them when finalising this guidance, and listen to the voices of schools, parents and young people in doing so.

Gillian Keegan: I would like to address the hon. Lady's points; I think I made a note of all of them. First, on this being long in the making, I just want us all to be aware of the timeline. This guidance was issued in 2019, and it was made statutory in 2020. Ofsted conducted some work to see how it was bedding in, which gave us some feedback and comment about how more clarity was needed. That was in the second half of 2021. Obviously, we have taken leadership on this issue—leadership on which I think Labour-run Wales could take a leaf out of our book—and worked with a broad range of organisations. I have mentioned the expert panel, but we have worked with 86 other organisations as well. Of course, this step is out for consultation, so we do expect that everybody who has a view—parents, teachers, local authorities and everybody—will be able to fully engage with the consultation.

On the question about when an urgent issue comes up, or a child wants to ask questions or deal with something specific that they have seen or that has occurred to them, we of course expect that children can always ask questions. We build safe and trusting environments in schools, and there is a difference between a pupil asking a teacher a question or trying to discuss something with a teacher and a teacher standing up in front of a whole class and teaching on a particular subject.

On the question about knowing about transgender—that gender reassignment exists, a law provides for it, it is a protected characteristic and it is something adults can do when they are older—and understanding those facts, we have of course made it clear that that is the case.

On mental health support teams, the Labour party seems to have missed what we have been doing on mental health. In every school in our country, we have given a grant to train a mental health support leader, and most of that work has been done. Our schools have been engaged on that for a long time, and 4.2 million pupils, up from 3.4 million pupils last year, now have access to the mental health support teams that we are rolling out in all of our schools. That is rather different from the Labour policy in that we do not have to completely raid any other sector such as support for special educational needs and disabilities or private schools to do that. We are also doing that for primary and secondary, because we think that is very important.

The hon. Lady mentioned materials, and I just want to update the House that Oak materials will be available in RSHE in the autumn.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for putting forward proposals that children need and that teachers, parents and school leaders have wanted. It seems to me that a lot of people are now saying, “Of course, what she’s doing is right”, and a year or two ago they were not saying that.

I would just say in passing that some people who have been providing sex education lessons and gender lessons in primary schools boast that they have presented to 100,000 children and trained over 4,000 staff, and I think that kind of infiltration has to end.

Can I also say to the Secretary of State that I hope her permanent secretary and others are listening to their SEENs—sex equality and equity networks—when they raise, or try to raise, the point with their Departments that when Departments ask questions about gender, they should be asking questions about sex?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the Father of the House, who, as usual, shows true leadership in this area, as in many others. He is absolutely right that there are examples of organisations with material on their websites that we think is inappropriate, because it is teaching contested views as facts, boasting about how many schools they have worked with. Some organisations—I will not name them—have been teaching children about gender, gender expression, gender roles and different kinds of gender identities, and they claim to have worked with over 500 schools. There are many examples of that. That is why we had to show leadership on this. This is important: we have showed leadership in the area of gender questioning, and we have been clear about biological sex and how to teach that in schools. In Labour-run Wales, I believe they have removed all reference to “man” and “woman” in the curriculum, and they recommend that sex is not just about male or female. I want to look into whether those reports are true, but I would be happy to support the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Education with that, because it needs to be taken seriously. People have very much changed their views on this issue.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Children's Commissioner has found that exposure to pornography is affecting children as young as eight—I am sure none of us would want that to be the case, but we have to deal with the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be. How will the Secretary of State support schools to manage pupils' reactions to what they are seeing online—we know they are being exposed to things online that we wish they were not seeing—if those issues cannot be addressed in RSHE?

Gillian Keegan: Part of leadership and showing leadership is also dealing with those things we are not happy with. We are not happy that young children are having access to porn, which is why other measures are also being put in place through the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Of course, it is always possible that children get access to things that they should not see, and they might raise questions as a result of that. Usually, parents are the first educators of their children. Parents would be the first people to get that question, and they would certainly expect to help their child through those things. As I said, if a child raises a question with a teacher, the teacher will deal with that, but that is different from teaching and showing anything that is sexually explicit in a classroom. We want to ensure that children are not exposed to such things in the first place, because this is something that has changed, and we must show leadership to address that.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In answer to a question on 29 April, the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), strongly endorsed the importance of sections 406 and 407 of the Education Act 1996, which respectively ban the promotion of partisan political views, and require the balanced presentation of opposing views when politically contentious subjects are brought to the attention of pupils. Gender ideology is certainly politically contentious, and I was concerned to be alerted by Mrs Clare Page, the educational commentator and campaigner, to the Department's "Political impartiality in schools" guidance 2022, which states:

"Legal duties on political impartiality do not supersede schools' other statutory requirements. Schools should take a reasonable and proportionate approach to ensuring political impartiality, alongside their other responsibilities."

I do not know how you would read that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I read it as an attempt to undermine the firm guidance given in statute law that partisan political views must not be promoted in school. I hope the Secretary of State will look into that matter.

Gillian Keegan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that point. Political impartiality is important, and the guidance he read out is meant to cover some commonsense exceptions. For example, some people would argue against democracy, and we do not want to give them a platform; some people would argue for racism, and we do not want to give them a platform, and so on. Those are the sorts of exceptions and contentions, and I will ensure that we look at the guidance to see that it is clearly understood by everybody. It is important to be clear. This issue has developed and grown, and our understanding of this area has grown over time. That is what the guidance is meant to do; it is not to undermine political impartiality or the rule of law.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): In reviewing the 2019 guidance, does the Secretary of State share my concern that not enough is being done on child safeguarding when it comes to child sexual exploitation, and in particular awareness raising, so that children and parents understand the warning signs? Across many towns a play called "Somebody's Sister, Somebody's Daughter" was rolled out to secondary-school age children, and that led to 150 disclosures of concern by children about family members or other pupils at the school, where they had seen those patterns of grooming potentially at play. Does the Secretary of State accept that however we want the world to be, 43% of year 3 children—seven and eight-year-olds—have access to a smartphone? If we do not teach these things in schools, they will find out information through other routes, and that will not be at all helpful for the safeguarding of children.

Gillian Keegan: Another approach is obviously looking at access to smartphones at a very young age. On the point raised by the hon. Gentleman, the most appropriate guidance is "Keeping children safe in education", which is a substantial piece of guidance and used regularly by schools. It is also regularly reviewed. Of course there is a live discussion about our concerns regarding children having access to harmful content through mobile phones at a young age. We will continue to consider that, and that is why I took a step to also ban the use of smartphones in schools.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The poet John Betjeman said:

"Childhood is measured out by sounds and smells and sights, before the dark hour of reason grows."

Darkness falls when very young children are forced to know too much, too early, and their innocence is stolen. In warmly welcoming the Government's approach, will the Secretary of State look again at those third-party organisations that are often invited into schools, sometimes witlessly, sometimes carelessly? For they steal children's innocence, often in the name of diversity and inclusion, and in so doing, promote, promulgate and perpetuate every kind of horror.

Gillian Keegan: Not only will I now be able to look at the materials, but so will parents, and so will Ofsted when it reviews what is happening in schools against the guidance we have issued. Transparency is important. Obviously we should ensure that materials are appropriate and the guidance is there as well, but I believe that transparency will act as a great guide to ensure the right materials are in our schools.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Secretary of State and I grew up in the same part of the world, a few hundred yards away from each other, albeit at different times. In my time, there was no way in which children could discuss these issues with their parents, who did not feel that it was at all appropriate. They were certainly never discussed in my school, just as I am sure that in the Secretary of State's later time they were not discussed. The most I can remember is being shown a second world war film by a PE teacher about sexually transmitted diseases, which frankly terrified me. I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that it is time that teachers got the guidance they need so that they can have sensible conversations with young people and—for

that matter—parents as well. Does she agree that we need to have this conversation respectfully, and create not dividing lines but common ground? In that respect, will she urge some of her Government colleagues to stop using the issue to create dividing lines?

Gillian Keegan: Let me reassure the right hon. Gentleman. Although we were a couple of years apart in Knowsley, sex education did not change an awful lot. We had two lessons—one where girls and boys were apart, and one where they were together, where we were shown a film about childbirth. I think part of the class collapsed at that point, and a couple fainted, and that was it. Times have moved on a lot. Even education in Knowsley has moved on a lot. I am delighted that we now have some good schools. Indeed, 90% of our schools are now good or outstanding, and that includes Knowsley, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman and I are delighted about. It is important to show leadership on these issues, but it is also important to do so respectfully. That is something I have always sought to do, to answer and respond to a problem, and these concerns have been raised by parents and by teachers, requesting more clarity. I have tried to respond to that with the gender questioning guidance, and with the guidance under discussion. It is important that we respectfully discuss these matters.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Today is a very good day. From what I have read and from what I have heard the Secretary of State say at the Dispatch Box, this guidance is what we have been waiting for. I thank the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who is sat to her side, for listening to me and many other colleagues. Some of those debates have been extremely heated, but I feel so passionately about this, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) and the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield).

It is a very good day. I will be studying the guidance over the weekend, and I hope we can have further meetings about it over the coming weeks. Parents do not want their children being taught by Stonewall and Brook. They do not want them teaching an ideology not based in anything. Children need teaching the facts by all accounts, but they have to be facts of truth—that is where we need to be. Age appropriateness is also extremely important, and I welcome that measure, too. Children are children, and they should be kept as children as long as possible. It is a precious time that we all wish we could go back to. We do not want to be putting our children into adulthood far too soon. I welcome this guidance.

I have three issues that I would like to raise quickly, if that is okay. There is literature within the school system that we need to ensure is removed. There is an awful lot, and one of the biggest problems we have had is the denial of that literature being in schools. It is in these schools, it is online, it is in paper, it is all over the place and it needs to come out. *[Interruption.]* Very quickly, we need to enforce this guidance, once it is done, because we have schools that still do not want to enforce it. Finally, I still believe we need a public inquiry into how we got to this point and how we put 9,000 children on a damaging health path. We need to address that. The guidance is very good news; I welcome it.

Gillian Keegan: I thank all Members of the House who have discussed this matter respectfully, as well as contributing to and developing our understanding of what is going on in schools. On what is there in schools—I welcome my hon. Friend's welcoming of this guidance—materials will now have to be shown to parents, no ifs, no buts, and we have made that crystal clear. The materials will need to be in line with the guidance. On enforcement, Ofsted will, as part of what it usually does, go round and look at schools. It will also look at the guidance and what is being taught against it, so there is an enforcement process, too. It has not been easy to put this guidance together, and I thank all the members of the teams and Members of the House who have helped us in that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement today, although I fear it is a bit overdue. Will she concede that this debacle originated at least in part from the World Health Organisation's "International technical guidance on sexuality education"? It is happening across the world, not just in this country, and that has led to a deeply damaging situation, where unscientific gender ideology has been pushed to our children in our schools. Will she explain to the House how many children she believes have been exposed to this abuse? What steps will she take to correct the mistakes that have already been made? What assurance is there for parents that nothing like this can ever happen again and that it is being stopped today?

Gillian Keegan: I take responsibility for England, and I welcome the hon. Gentleman's welcoming of the guidance. I think we have shown leadership. We issued gender questioning guidance in December last year. We have updated the relationships, sex and health education guidance. Within the United Kingdom, there have been different views on this, and I reiterate my offer to Wales and Scotland, if they want to work with us, because the evidence has been emerging on this. I can only show leadership in the areas for which I am responsible.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I welcome this guidance. It goes further than I thought, and it is unambiguous. It is not about creating dividing lines. I was quite late to this debate, until I realised it was an actual issue. I came across evidence of some worrying practices that were going on, and then I became involved in the issue. It is so important that the statutory guidance has teeth. Even after this unambiguous guidance, if a school repeatedly breaches it, what mechanism is in place to hold that school to account? On transparency, parents need to know what their children are being taught. If there are examples of schools being evasive, even after this guidance, what powers are in parents' hands to ensure that they can find out the facts?

Gillian Keegan: The guidance is very clear. It is unusual to have guidance that is largely aimed at schools, but that has some parts for parents, too. We will put more communication for parents on the education hub so that they know what their rights are as a result of this guidance. When taking these positions, we can always think, "What does the counterfactual look like?" It would be ridiculous to suggest that parents should not see the materials that their children are being taught

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from in schools. On enforcement, as I have mentioned, the guidance will become part of the usual school enforcement. Ofsted will look at this guidance and at what is happening in schools, and use that as part of its inspections.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Seven years ago, before I came to this House, I spent 20 years teaching, some of the time in the north-west of England and some of it in Wales. I knew, as a modern foreign languages teacher, that relationships and sex education was something that I had to deliver. The majority of teachers who have to deliver RSE are not trained, and that still concerns me. I saw at first hand how lobby groups have easily been able to permeate this area in England and Wales.

While the guidance is welcome, it is very late. I appreciate the comments that the Secretary of State has made about the devolved nations. That shows why it is important that we take politics out of this debate. We must present facts, and we must work together. Will she share the expert panel's findings with the new Education Minister in Wales and have a grown-up conversation? Let us take the politics out of this, because these are people's lives.

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely. I hope the hon. Lady will have seen that that is just not my style. I try to see problems and fix them in a reasonable and respectful way. Quality materials are important. The hon. Lady may have had that training, but not every teacher will have. The quality of materials is vital, and it is clear, as we have heard from others, that there have been some poor-quality materials and some materials that were spouting nonsense, let us be honest. That is why we will be producing our own materials, which the Oak National Academy will produce in the autumn.

I would very much welcome a meeting with the Education Minister in Wales, who as the hon. Lady says is new and may not yet have looked at this matter in detail. To remove references to "man" and "woman" in the curriculum sounds ridiculous, and recommending teaching that sex is not just about male or female sounds ridiculous. Some of those materials may have made their way into the curriculum, and I would welcome the opportunity to work with any of the devolved nations to get those materials out of our schools.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): That the statement has been so necessary today is a measure of the fact that some members of the teaching profession have taken leave of their senses. In that light, will the Secretary of State consider to what extent the remedy is guidance or statutory requirement?

Gillian Keegan: It is statutory guidance. It will also be transparent, as the materials will now be available to parents. It is not only statutory guidance, but this area will be under the scrutiny of every parent in the school. It is clear that we need to support our teachers and headteachers to ensure that they get this right. The vast majority will be getting it right, but it is an area that not everybody is specifically trained to teach, so it is important that we provide the materials and the guidance and make sure that Ofsted enforces it.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In 2023, more than 400 young people were diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection every day. Earlier this year, the Women and Equalities Committee found

"compelling evidence that Relationships and Sex Education...in schools is inadequate, including in relation to contraception and...STIs".

The Children's Commissioner has similarly attributed that shocking increase to the fact that we are not teaching our kids what they need to hear. Will the Secretary of State explain to the House how she thinks the new guidance, which seems to suggest that STIs will not be taught about before year 9—age 13 or 14—will address those shocking rates?

Gillian Keegan: The new guidance will be supplemented with materials that will be available from Oak National Academy, which we will ensure address any of the concerns raised. I look forward to working with the Children's Commissioner and others to make sure of that.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I welcome the focus on tackling misogyny online and the influencers who peddle it, but I worry that year 5 will be a little too late to stop that influence taking hold. I want to ask the Secretary of State about providing positive male role models for young boys, which is a really important part of this. Will she address that in the consultation?

Gillian Keegan: Yes. Indeed, many Members of this House are positive male role models—there are many positive male role models—and we want to ensure that we celebrate and support positive male role models, not misogynistic online influencers. We need to teach children about the dangers of those people and ensure that their influence is countered by people who are real role models for children.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Secretary of State for her statement and the wisdom she has shown. The Democratic Unionist party welcomes the guidance issued to let kids be kids and to prevent sexualised content from being taught to under-nines. Indeed, the Government's rationale is similar to that which I gave in the Chamber when I asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland not to change the RSE regime for Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State speak to her Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the innocence of our children is protected in all regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and that parents who are genuinely seeking to safeguard their children are afforded respect in terms of the classroom syllabus and have their rights to reasonably held views protected?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Of course, what makes this subject difficult is the need to tread that fine line carefully—letting kids be kids while making sure that they are equipped in a world that is increasingly more complex than the world that we grew up in. We have sought very much to ensure that we get that balance right.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the Secretary of State and Opposition Front Benchers for their attendance.

Backbench Business

Women's State Pension Age: Ombudsman Report

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Work and Pensions Committee on 7 May 2024, on PHSO report on women's state pension age, HC 740.]

12.52 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes the findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report on Women's State Pension age; and calls on the Government to deliver prompt compensation to women born in the 1950s who had their State Pension age raised.

I am delighted to have secured today's debate on this very important issue. The motion urges the UK Government to deliver prompt compensation to women born in the 1950s who had their state pension age raised, following the report from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman on the Department of Work and Pensions' communication of changes to the state pension age for women. I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. I lament the fact that it will not be possible to press the motion to a vote, as Tellers from both sides of the argument would be required for such a vote to be held.

Although I am disappointed that there will be no vote, there is nothing at all to prevent the Government from bringing forward such a vote in Government time. Indeed, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has invited the House to express a view by laying its report before Parliament, so that clearly needs to happen.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the hon. Lady address the prejudice touched on at the Work and Pensions Committee last week, namely that there has been an element of contributory negligence, in that the change was not a state secret—it was advertised and covered in the newspapers—and that some women who were approaching retirement or early retirement did not take proper notice? Will she knock that on the head?

Patricia Gibson: If the right hon. Gentleman reads the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report, he will see that it makes it very clear that action was not taken to inform women in the appropriate way that one would expect and, indeed, that the DWP was negligent in that regard.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend has started off powerfully, as I knew she would, knowing what a huge advocate she is for the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality. The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a helpful contribution. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is ludicrous for anyone to suggest that people—in this case, those women—should have found out about a change to their pension arrangements by happening to read advertisements in the correct newspaper on the correct day? Surely none of us should be planning our lives in that way.

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We know, do we not, that many impacted women found out at the last possible moment that their retirement age had been raised because they had not been given due notice to make plans in the way we would all expect? The DWP has been found to be negligent. I will say more about that in a moment.

The issue before us goes to the heart of our sense of justice and fairness and the social contract that the Government of the day have with their citizens. A whole generation of women had their pension age raised without the notice that they were entitled to expect, robbing them not just of tens of thousands of pounds in pension payments but of their retirement plans, of financial peace of mind and of the contract they believed that they had with the society in which they worked hard, paid their dues and fulfilled their responsibilities. They thought that they could enjoy some sort of retirement in later life—after all, they had earned it, had they not? The social contract is an agreement that we all think we should be able to rely on, but when the Government tear at the edges of that contract or rip it through as though it never existed, what retirement can any of us—or should any of us—count on?

I have met a range of women in the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign over a number of years. Of particular note are the Ayrshire WASPI group and the Cunninghame WASPI group, who represent WASPI women in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran and, indeed, WASPI women across Ayrshire. All women in the WASPI movement have distinguished themselves by their effective campaigning against the gross injustice that has been perpetrated against them, in the face of extreme provocation by a Government who have been tone deaf to their pleas for justice. I have been inspired by those women's dignity, their resilience in the face of great financial hardship and their persistence, and by the compelling justice of their case.

I know many of the women involved; I know their stories. I note the hugely helpful insight provided by writer Dee Wild Kearney, the author of "Not Going Away!", who joins us in the Gallery. Dee's book, which is available in all good bookshops, outlines the struggles of some of the women involved in the campaign. I pay tribute to her work to disseminate this injustice to an even wider audience. I welcome all the WASPI women in the Public Gallery, some of whom have travelled a considerable distance to be here today. They are entitled to have their voices heard and their case answered.

When a whole generation of women find themselves victim to injustice on such a grand and heartbreaking scale, those MPs who champion their cause feel the weight of their frustrations, the weight of their hardships and their profound sense of having been screwed over. In turn, as MPs we feel our own frustration when faced with an intransigent Government who refuse to listen and appear wilfully blind to the facts.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): One of my constituents, who I have worked with since 2017, was one of the ombudsman's six test cases. In fact, I am unable to make a speech today because I am meeting the ombudsman on behalf of my constituent at 2 pm. My hon. Friend is frustrated with the Government's lack of action so far, but is she as disappointed and

[Gavin Newlands]

angry as I am about the Labour party's refusal to back the WASPI women, despite promising tens of billions in compensation at the last election?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before the hon. Lady proceeds, I note that 21 Members wish to participate in the debate. I understand that this is an important subject and I have no desire whatsoever to curtail either the debate or the right of hon. Members to intervene—I appreciate only too well the urgency of getting one's point on the record—but if those on the Front Bench, or indeed any other hon. Member, give way too many times, not all will be called to speak. It is important that every hon. Member who wishes to speak can do so, and I therefore hope that we can resist the temptation to intervene whenever not necessary.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I take on board your comments.

None of the UK Government's intransigence has distracted from the dignity with which with the campaigners have conducted themselves over the long years that this swindle—and it is a swindle—has been carried out. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) raised a good point about our disappointment—some would say disgust—at the Labour party's current position, but I will respond to his concerns in due course. After years of marching, lobbying, letter and email writing, attending surgeries and tireless campaigning, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has finally reported. The report vindicates the WASPI women and highlights the DWP's failure to communicate, which

“negatively affected complainants' sense of personal autonomy and control over their finances.”

The report found:

“the DWP did not adequately investigate and respond to complaints”.

In a damning condemnation, it highlighted that, despite all of that, the DWP

“will not take steps to put things right”

and that its refusal to do so was unacceptable. It concluded:

“Parliament needs now to act swiftly, and make sure a compensation scheme is established. We think this will provide women with the quickest route to remedy.”

This is surely one of the gravest injustices of our time, alongside the contaminated blood scandal and the Horizon scandal. It is another example of citizens having things done to them, which by every measure is wrong and unjust.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend for securing today's debate. On behalf of the Midlothian WASPI women, I thank her for all her work, and all Members who have contributed to making this debate happen. Does she agree that the fact that these injustices happen over and over again shows how out of touch the Government in this place have become?

Patricia Gibson: One would be forgiven for thinking of a real disconnect between those we seek to serve and those who serve. When that disconnect repeatedly happens, and this systematic failure perpetrates such injustice, it is a very bad day for democracy. The difference between this case and the contaminated blood and Horizon scandals—both were awful injustices—is that the Government

at least appear to wish to take action on those scandals, albeit very slowly. They appear to wish to make moves to address those injustices. In this case, of changing the state pension age with little or no notice, with the devastating consequences that it has brought, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has been moved to say:

“It is extremely rare that an organisation we investigate does not accept and act on our recommendations.”

It added that it has “no legal powers” to enforce compliance. A failure to comply with the ombudsman's recommendations represents a constitutional gap in protecting the rights of citizens who have been failed by a public body, and in ensuring access to justice.

By laying this report, the PHSO has asked Parliament to intervene, to agree a mechanism for remedy and to hold the Government to account for its delivery. Here we are. We are holding the Government to account, while they and the incoming Labour Government enjoy a cosy “do nothing” consensus, sacrificing WASPI women on the bonfire of austerity that they have built together in a deliberate and conscious way.

For the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman to issue such a statement is unprecedented, but it illustrates how shocking it is that this Government, supported by the loyal Opposition—loyal in ways we could only imagine—appear to be trying to ignore, obfuscate and gaslight their way out of this crisis, and it is a crisis for the women impacted. Neither Labour nor the Tories in government have even accepted the principle of financial redress for WASPI women. How do I know that? Because when the Secretary of State made a statement shortly after the long-awaited publication of this report, he made no mention of redress or compensation, but instead listed how great it currently is to be a pensioner in the United Kingdom because of the sheer munificence of the UK Government. The shadow Secretary of State's response to that statement studiously avoided mentioning compensation as well, instead delivering a patronising yet supine eulogy on treating pensioners with dignity. Empty words do not pay bills, and no one is fooled by that nonsense.

Perhaps we should not be too surprised, since Labour has a track record of letting women down, particularly working-class women. After all, the Labour administration in Glasgow City Council spent £2.5 million of taxpayers' money fighting equal pay claims by female council workers over 10 years. That shows beyond any reasonable doubt just how far Labour was prepared to go to fight equal pay—an incredible waste of public money. It took an SNP administration in Glasgow council to ensure that legal action was stopped and the pay claims were settled. That was a priority of the incoming SNP administration.

We know that Labour has a track record of denying justice to women, so we cannot expect much from that quarter, and anybody who does will be disappointed. However, the WASPI women I have spoken to feel particularly betrayed by Labour MPs and MSPs, who have spent the last umpteen years posing for photographs, smiling broadly alongside WASPI campaigners and pledging what turned out to be empty words of support, only to abandon them at the very moment they were vindicated by the ombudsman.

The same debate was held last week in the Scottish Parliament. Incredibly, Labour MSPs—who are not just Members of the Scottish Parliament but members

of the Scottish branch office—abstained, as ordered by their high command bosses in London, on a motion that called for higher compensation to properly reflect the financial harm suffered by WASPI women. That motion sounds pretty reasonable to me—it would to anybody.

The sums mentioned in the ombudsman's report are simply too low. I think most people would agree with that. They must be considered in the context that the UK Government have saved £181.4 billion purely by raising the state pension age of these women. So it is time to get real. The UK Government could perhaps examine the private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and go from there. Instead, all we have is silence from both the UK Government and the Labour Opposition.

The Leader of the Opposition has himself benefited from a special law passed in Parliament: the Pensions Increase (Pension Scheme for Keir Starmer QC) Regulations 2013. It relates to when he was the Director of Public Prosecutions in England, and his personal pension is protected. It is quite literally one law for him and another law for everybody else, especially if you are a WASPI woman and even more so if you are a working-class woman. It does not escape anyone's notice that the Leader of the Opposition is now very silent on the injustice suffered by WASPI women and supports less generous pensions for everyone else. What a brass neck. What shameful hypocrisy. Maybe he is just so cocksure of a thumping Labour majority at the next election that he thinks WASPI women are expendable. Who knows?

Meanwhile, around 280,000 WASPI women who have been impacted have died since the start of the WASPI campaign. Around 6,000 have died since the publication of the ombudsman report. Why is there no urgency to address this injustice? No wonder WASPI women's impatience and sense of injustice is fast turning into outright fury. Who could blame them? Because of the evasions and mis-directions used in previous debates, I wish to say to the Minister that this is not a debate about returning the retirement age back to 60; this is not a debate about the triple lock; and this is not a debate about anything except the injustice suffered by women born in the 1950s who have been vindicated by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I think all of us in this Chamber have spoken to our WASPI women. I have Barbara and Lynn from Hartlepool here today. They informed me earlier that every 13 minutes a 1950s woman dies. That 280,000 is growing as we speak.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. All she does is emphasise how desperately urgent this matter is. Every 13 minutes a WASPI woman dies, so how many will die while we are having this debate? Another half dozen? Who knows? It may be more than that.

There are no more hiding places. It is time for swift compensation to be delivered to these women who have already endured far too much hardship and distress. The redress that they are accorded must reflect that suffering and there must be no barriers to accessing it for any of the women affected. No one can any longer deny the rightness of their compelling case. It is time to

pay up. It is time to deliver. As the Minister and the Labour leadership must surely know by now, these women are not going away.

It is my hope that when the Minister gets to his feet he will have something meaningful to say to the House today, and to all the WASPI women who have already waited too long for justice. Perhaps he can at least set out some kind of timeframe for when the Government will bring forward redress proposals for those impacted. It is a travesty to drag this injustice out one moment longer. I hope the Minister agrees and does the right thing by this generation of women, or will these women continue to suffer while his Government pontificate? I hope not, but I say today to the Minister, and I say today to the WASPI women who are listening both at home and in the Public Gallery that the SNP unequivocally stands with you. We will not abandon you, as others have done.

1.14 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in the debate. When my constituents who have made a complaint come to see me, we quite often get to a stage at which I recommend the ombudsman to them. I regularly say to them, "Have faith: ombudsmen quite often find in favour of the complainant." Ombudsmen are there for a purpose. We cannot merely support the institution of the ombudsman when it makes a convenient finding for the Government of the day. We have to accept its decisions if we are to have an ombudsman. We all know that trust in politics, politicians and MPs is at something of a low point at the moment, no matter what party we are in. I think that is very unfair, because most people in this House, of all parties, are decent people doing their best for their constituents and working very hard, so that reduction in trust really worries me. The response of the Government and Parliament to the ombudsman's report is really important, because it touches on the issue of trust in our institutions, which have been through a very difficult time.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I warmly welcome the thrust of my hon. Friend's argument. For the benefit of the record, I draw his attention and that of the House to paragraph 459 of the report, which states:

"For most sample complainants we consider the primary injustice is that they were denied opportunities to make informed decisions about some things, and to do some things differently, because of maladministration in DWP's communication about State Pension age. That is a material injustice."

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. What he says is accurate. He quotes from the report; it was in July 2021 that the ombudsman found maladministration. In the report on 21 March, it said that that had led to an injustice. Like my right hon. Friend, I will quote briefly from the ombudsman. It said of the Department for Work and Pensions that

"in 2005 it failed to take adequate account of the need for targeted and individually tailored information. In 2006, DWP proposed writing directly to women individually to let them know their State Pension age had changed, but it then failed to act promptly. We found that if DWP had made a reasonable decision about next steps in 2005, and then acted promptly, it would have begun writing to affected women by December 2006."

My right hon. Friend and other Members will have seen that in the back of the report, there is a table showing what should have happened when.

[Andrew Selous]

I, too, have constituents who wrote to me to say that they were very close to the age of 60 at the time. Some had worked all their working life, since the age of 15 or so. They had made all their plans on the basis that they could get their pension at 60, and they literally found out about the change from colleagues in the workplace, sometimes very shortly before they thought they were due to retire.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: I will, briefly, but it will probably be the last intervention, as I take heed of what Mr Deputy Speaker said.

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The point he makes rings true for me. The very first constituent who came to me with a problem when I was elected seven years ago was a WASPI woman. She was less than two years away from retirement when she learned by accident of the change. Seven years on, she is no better off; in a lot of ways, she is much worse off. A lot of those who are not WASPI women now wonder if they know the truth about when they will get their pension. Does he agree that although this issue is fundamentally about the WASPI women, it is about trust, and women having trust in this institution?

Andrew Selous: I agree. The issue of trust is really important, one that this House should not take lightly.

In my South West Bedfordshire constituency, it is estimated that there are 6,000 women in this situation. The cost of their compensation, at level 4, as recommended by the ombudsman, would be £6 million at the lower level, and at the upper level £17.7 million. If we extrapolate from that to the UK, I think the sum is £3.9 billion at the lower end and £11.5 billion at the upper end. We must be honest; I believe in honesty in politics. These are large sums—very large, when we add the amount that we will have to pay the postmasters and postmistresses, for whom we are also all campaigning, and the sums for the victims of the infected blood scandal, for whom most of us are also campaigning; and then there are other campaigns, such as the one relating to Equitable Life.

Patricia Gibson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: I will because it is the hon. Lady, but this must be the last intervention.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman talked about the way in which the bill for all these compensation schemes is mounting. Does that not merely underline the importance of competent government?

Andrew Selous: Of course it is best if Governments get these things right, but government is difficult, and Governments of all parties will make mistakes because they are human. However, I am making a different point on honesty about the overall Government finances. When I was taught economics, a long time ago, I was made aware of the notion of opportunity cost. We can only spend the same pound once, and if we are to spend billions on one thing, we must be honest about the other

things on which we cannot spend money—things that the WASPI women may very much want—or the services we will have to cut, or the taxes we will have to raise.

I have tried to find out from the Library how the Treasury reserves work, and how we can account nationally for a contingency fund to deal with issues such as this. We just need a bit of honesty here, as a Parliament. If we are to do the right thing by the WASPI women—as I believe we should; I want us to, and we should do the same for those other groups—we need to consider a fund in the Treasury reserves that is dedicated to contingencies, although it might not be large enough to pay out on every cause in the way we would like; perhaps the nation would not be able to afford that. While I absolutely back the justice of the cause of the WASPI women, and while I think we should honour what the ombudsman said, or at least move towards doing that, we need to be honest about the nation's finances and the other calls on the Exchequer.

Let me finish where I began—I will be brief, heeding Mr Deputy Speaker's injunction. This comes back to the question of trust. We agree with the umpire not just when we are in favour of the umpire's decision. Either we have an ombudsman or we do not, and while the ombudsman's finding may be uncomfortable or inconvenient, it is nevertheless the finding, and we should do the right thing.

1.22 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity for this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for opening it. I should make it clear at the outset that I was the Minister for Pensions between December 1998 and July 1999, and again between May 2005 and May 2006, which is part of the period covered by the ombudsman's report.

I draw the House's attention to the evidence that my Committee, the Work and Pensions Committee, took on 7 May on the ombudsman's report—we are grateful to all who gave evidence to us that morning—and to the letter that I sent to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions yesterday on behalf of the Committee, setting out our suggestions for a way forward. Those documents have been tagged for this debate.

The ombudsman opened an investigation of all this in 2018, six years ago. After receiving more than 600 cases, it stopped accepting new ones and selected six sample cases to investigate, one or two of which have been referred to today. The investigation was split into stages. The first report, published in July 2021, found maladministration in the way in which the DWP had communicated the changes to affected women. A further report, published in March this year, concluded that this had meant that “some women had lost opportunities to make informed decisions about their finances”,

which had

“diminished their sense of personal autonomy and financial control”

and

“caused unnecessary stress and anxiety”

and

“unnecessary confusion”.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Let me say at the outset that the right hon. Gentleman was a distinguished Minister, well respected across the House in his various Government jobs. Is

communication not the nub of this? Of course the decision itself is a matter for a debate on pension entitlement, but there is the entirely separate issue of how the decision was communicated, and the injustice lies in that failure to communicate. When we change people's circumstances with notice and they have time to deal with it, cope with it, make alternative arrangements, that is one thing; but when we do not give them adequate notice because of their age, that is quite another. Disraeli, I think, said "Justice is truth in action", and that is the truth of the matter.

Sir Stephen Timms: The right hon. Gentleman has echoed a number of the points that the ombudsman has drawn to our attention, but I think we should be clear about the fact that a great many people did know about this change. The passage of the legislation was widely reported at the time, nearly 30 years ago, and I vividly recall that in the first of my two stints as Pensions Minister, I spent a fair chunk of most days signing replies to MPs who had written on behalf of constituents who were unhappy about the impending change, or were calling on the then fairly new Government to reverse it. The replies that I signed were robust, and made it clear that the decision would not be reversed. The decision was quite well known, and—the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a useful point in this regard—I think that citizens have a responsibility to keep themselves informed, by listening to the radio or reading the papers, of changes in the law that will affect them.

However, the ombudsman has established and made clear in the report that the Department found out, at around the second time I was Pensions Minister, that only 40% of women had known about the forthcoming pension age change. Forty per cent. is a large number, but 60%—the proportion who did not know about it—is even larger. The Department found that out as a result of research done in 2003-04, but did nothing about it until 2009. That is the maladministration that the ombudsman has identified. We do not know why nothing was done—well, I certainly do not—because the ombudsman has not told us, but it cannot be credibly argued that this was not maladministration. When a Department discovers information and then does nothing, there is clearly a problem.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for describing his experiences in connection with this matter. We have a clear finding of maladministration, but Government acceptance of that does not automatically follow, so we are having a debate today about whether we accept the findings when, given the timescale, we ought surely to be thinking more about how we deal with issues relating to who is eligible and who is not.

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree, and I will come to that point when I talk about the Select Committee's discussions last week. It is worth adding that the problems caused by that maladministration were exacerbated by the decision in 2011 to increase the state pension age not to 65, as provided by legislation in 1995, but to 66, with very little notice given of that change.

The ombudsman said that had it reported directly to the DWP, it would have recommended that the Department apologise for the maladministration and take steps to put things right. As we all now know, the ombudsman did not report directly to the

Department because of concern that no remedy would be forthcoming. The interim ombudsman, Rebecca Hilsenrath, told the Committee last week that her office had been

"given repeatedly to understand that the Department did not accept our findings."

Perhaps, when he winds up the debate, the Minister can tell us whether the Department now recognises that there was maladministration in this case.

In laying its report before Parliament in March, the ombudsman asked us in the House to "identify an appropriate mechanism" for providing a remedy. It set out its thinking, namely that the DWP should first acknowledge the maladministration and apologise; secondly, pay financial compensation to the six sample complainants at level 4 of the severity of injustice scale; and, thirdly, identify a remedy for others who had suffered injustice because of the maladministration. As we have heard, the ombudsman estimated that this would involve a sum of between £3.5 billion and £10.5 billion.

We need to find a resolution to this issue, and to find it quite quickly, because it has dragged on for a very long time. Angela Madden, the chair of the WASPI campaign, told the Work and Pensions Committee last week that a woman from the affected cohort dies every 13 minutes, which is a powerful point to make.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I want to ask the right hon. Member about resolution. Given the maladministration and the points made by the ombudsman, the conclusion needs to happen through political choice. That political choice is between either the Government sitting there or a Government who might replace them at some point this year. Surely the WASPI women in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire, and those in everyone's constituencies, need political agreement—not obfuscation or an abdication responsibility, but a clear political choice.

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree. The Government have said that they will respond without "undue delay", and that they are considering the report in detail. Can the Minister tell the House this afternoon whether the Government will bring forward proposals for remedy, as the Work and Pensions Committee believes that they should, before the summer recess? We should set a clear timetable.

We need a scheme that is easy to administer. The ombudsman said that, in principle, redress should reflect the impact on each individual, but it recognised that the need to avoid delay, and the large numbers involved,

"may indicate the need for a more standardised approach".

Jane Cowley, the WASPI campaign manager, told the Work and Pensions Committee that given the need for action

"within weeks rather than years",

the scheme should be based on three principles: speed, simplicity and sensitivity. The evidence that has been gathered points to a rules-based approach to working out the compensation that should be paid.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I have read the evidence given to the right hon. Member's Committee, which was taken in April this year. If the Government agreed that they had to accept responsibility for this

[Jeremy Corbyn]

issue and to go forward with it, how quickly could we start to see the highly justified compensation being paid to these women?

Sir Stephen Timms: I would hope quite quickly, and I will explain why.

The payments involved would be adjusted within a range, based on the ombudsman's severity of injustice scale. It would depend on two variables: first, the extent of the change to the individual's state pension age—how much it increased by—and, secondly, the notice that the individual received. The less notice someone had of the change, and the bigger the change to their state pension age, the higher the payment they would receive. An arrangement like that would not be perfect, but it would be quite quick and relatively inexpensive to administer compared with a more bespoke system, because it would involve applying known data to a formula to work out the amount that was due. I ask the Minister whether he accepts that, in principle, a rules-based system would be the best way forward.

Beyond that, it was suggested to the Work and Pensions Committee that there should be some flexibility for individuals to make the case, after the standard payment has been calculated, that they experienced direct financial loss as a result of the maladministration, and that they should therefore be entitled to a higher level of compensation. Flexibility would be needed, because although the ombudsman did not see direct financial loss in the six sample complaints that it looked at, it did not exclude the possibility that there could be in other cases. For example, Angela Madden, the chair of the WASPI campaign, suggested to us that somebody whose divorce settlement was less than it would have been because it was based on the expectation that she would receive her state pension at the age of 60, might well be entitled to a larger amount because of that particular development.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Looking at the experience of other compensation schemes—the one that comes to my mind is the Icelandic trawlermen compensation scheme—it is clear that the longer we leave these things, and the longer the passage of time, the more difficult it gets to resolve them. Does that not underline the need for speed here?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree that we need to get on and resolve this issue after a very long period.

The ombudsman suggested a remedy based on level 4 of its severity of injustice scale, given the finding that individuals had experienced indirect financial loss. We on the Work and Pensions Committee did not seek to question that view, and I do not intend to do so this afternoon. Regardless of the level of remedy or the means by which remedy is delivered, it will need parliamentary time, financial resources, and the data and technical systems that are available only to the Department for Work and Pensions. Even if a Back Bencher brings forward a private Member's Bill, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has done, it cannot become law without Government support. It will need a money resolution that only the Government can bring forward,

so it is not realistic to say that Parliament can resolve this issue; it must have the Government's full-hearted involvement.

There will be different views on the findings of the ombudsman's report. However, as the interim ombudsman told the Work and Pensions Committee last week, she is appointed by Parliament to carry out these investigations and is accountable to it through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I will read out what Karl Banister from the ombudsman's staff told the Work and Pensions committee last week. He said:

"We want everyone to comply with our recommendations, but it is implicit in the scheme that because we don't have enforcement powers, it may be, sometimes, that an organisation thinks it doesn't want to. Then the partnership is that Parliament, as our supervisor, will do something about that."

That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) earlier. Mr Banister continued:

"I think what would damage the standing of the ombudsman is if Parliament declined to do that."

It is important for all of us that we see this through. We have asked the ombudsman to undertake this role, and it has done the job that we asked it to do. We now need to play our part in ensuring that this matter is resolved. Time is not on our side, and the Government have been aware of this issue for a while.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): The right hon. Member is giving an incredibly well-informed speech on this matter. I have met Angela Madden and various WASPI women in Dudley, and it is clearly a highly complicated and difficult issue to resolve, especially if it is necessary for the Government to look at appropriate and proportionate remedies, having first identified the women who have come to harm. Does the right hon. Member agree that whatever solution is come to, it is necessary to accelerate the work on this incredibly complicated issue at pace? While the clock does not stop for anybody, it certainly seems to accelerate for those of us of a greater age.

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree that we need to get a move on. That is why the Government should commit to bringing forward some proposals before the summer recess, so that we all know where we are heading.

The Government have all the information they need. It is a difficult and costly matter, but I hope they will be able to bring forward proposals in time for the House's summer recess.

1.38 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who has encyclopaedic knowledge of this subject. I am grateful to him for his speech.

It is no surprise that I want to speak in today's debate, as I represent the oldest cohort of constituents in the entire country. In North Norfolk, there are somewhere in the region of 5,000 WASPI women who have been impacted by this issue, and not a week goes by without my receiving correspondence from women who have been affected terribly. I will come to the report's findings in a moment, but I will first reflect on the real impact of this scandal and on what has happened to the women

caught up in it. The problem with this place is that we often forget about the real people and the real suffering. We sometimes get very preoccupied with the political and financial problems in front of us and questioning why they happened in the first place, but that is somewhat secondary, because we must not forget about all the women who have really been affected. Across the country, thousands of women in our constituencies are affected.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about finding a resolution. It has been over 1,000 days since the ombudsman found the Government guilty of maladministration. We have heard the shocking figure that a WASPI woman dies every 13 minutes, which means that over 100,000 affected women have passed away since the ombudsman's finding. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that we need to work together to ensure that the Government get a move on in bringing forward compensation proposals before the summer recess, because people are passing away and time is of the essence.

Duncan Baker: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is now about speed, and I will come to that point later in my speech.

WASPI women have already suffered for years and years and, now this report has been published, we should learn from the other injustices we have seen, such as the Post Office scandal, that speed is of the essence. We need to come up with a remedy as quickly as possible.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech about the impact on individuals, as well as the numbers. Does he agree that this is about fairness, taking into account the individual facts of each case? Leigh lady Maggie Briley retired four years before she turned 60 to look after her parents with dementia. Not getting her pension, as she fully expected, at 60 meant that she had to sell her home and take up a low-paid job to make ends meet, and of course she could not look after her parents, who suffered as well. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is about not just fast compensation but fair compensation, based on the individual circumstances of each case? That is not necessarily just for Maggie, but for the 5,220 WASPI women in my constituency.

Duncan Baker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about individuals, and every single individual who has been impacted has a different life story to tell. It is very difficult for the Government to come up with a redress scheme that covers every eventuality because, as my hon. Friend says, individual circumstances affect everyone who has been impacted.

All right, some ladies have coped. They might have had savings, earnings or private pensions, and in some cases they were lucky enough to have family who were able to help, but an awful lot of women had absolutely none of that. Huge numbers have suffered through absolutely no fault of their own. As has been repeated many times, many WASPI women have died in recent years.

We cannot imagine just how difficult it must have been for some of these women, who have had so little, to cope through the time delay they have suffered. It was not their fault. Back home in North Norfolk, like my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna

Firth), I hear of dreadful cases of women who gave up work to care for a sick or dying husband. They were totally reliant on the pension they thought was going to come, but it did not, and they were perhaps not able to go back to work or find employment. It is not easy. In those cases, the injustice has had a profound impact on people's lives, livelihoods, mental wellbeing and, in many cases, financial standing, which has been so damaging for so many women.

I am a new MP—not so new any more, I guess—and we see so many injustices. It is a privilege to try to fix them, whether it is infected blood, the loan charge, Hillsborough or the Post Office, which is particularly pertinent to me. We in this place should learn how we can try to sort out some of these injustices.

Both Ministers are excellent, decent, empathetic people. I have previously spoken to them about this issue, and I know they care deeply about it. As has already been said, we should be honest about today's debate. The public purse does not have billions of pounds of spare capacity at the moment, and the people of this country who are watching are intelligent. They can see that the financial scarring of the pandemic weighs very heavily on us.

In this debate, we should be practical with our suggestions, and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) proposed a set of in-depth, practical steps. Many of the WASPI Campaign's briefings and requests are entirely sensible, and it has a real right to be heard. There is no longer any debate about the ombudsman's report, as far as I am concerned. It clearly found that there was maladministration between 2005 and 2007 and, as we have heard time and again, that delay led to this problem.

We need to get over that point. It has happened. There is a problem, and there is no point denying it. I hear the odd cursory comment from constituents who say, "Well, they should have known about it. It was advertised enough." That is not fair. The ombudsman's report makes that very clear. These women were failed, in many cases, by the state.

The redress, the compensation mechanism, must be clear and fair. As we heard, there must be speed, sensitivity and simplicity. The WASPI Campaign's brief is very sensible in saying that the Government should come forward with a two-pronged approach that delivers a higher level of compensation to those with the shortest notice of the longest delay to receiving their state pension. Why is that fair? Because those are the women who are impacted the most. If they were impacted the most, they are the ones who have suffered the most, and they deserve that redress. But that is not enough not to think about everybody else. It is sensible to put together some eligibility criteria that enable all the other impacted cohorts to be able to make a claim for compensation. It is right that we come forward with that as quickly as possible.

One thing I have learned in this place, not to be too facetious, is that things do not happen very quickly, but this is something that should be happening quickly. When the public mood moves, as we saw with the Post Office scandal, we know that we can move quickly. We have the report, and the WASPI women have already suffered for an inordinate amount of time. I urge the Government to come up with that remedy, and to get on with it quickly.

1.49 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the debate to take place. I suppose that I should congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on her opening speech, and I do, but I caution her that using it to promote division in the House of Commons is not the way to advance the issue. If she is serious about it, and if she has listened to all the speeches that have been made so far, she will know that there is consensus in the House. Our efforts need to be put into finding a way to move that forward.

I will be brief. The case for righting this injustice is convincing. Although the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's inquiry noted that,

"timely and accurate information was available about changes to the number of qualifying years needed for a full State Pension as a result of the 2014 Pensions Act",

it did find,

"maladministration in DWP's communication about the 1995 Pensions Act".

In addition, the report found that,

"maladministration in DWP's complaint handling caused complainants unnecessary stress and anxiety and meant an opportunity to lessen their distress was lost. For some complainants, it also caused unnecessary worry and confusion."

That is pretty clear about the extent of the maladministration. In the context of this debate, the ombudsman stated:

"Given the scale of the impact of DWP's maladministration, and the urgent need for a remedy, we are taking the rare but necessary step of asking Parliament to intervene."

I stress the use of the word "urgent", which I will return to and on which several hon. Members have already commented.

I will first say a few words about the women who have been affected by this wholly unfair and unacceptable matter. We need to remind ourselves that the women born in the 1950s did everything required of them to ensure that reliable arrangements were in place when they reached pensionable age. That is the crux of the matter. I strongly believe that we as Members of this House have a responsibility to accept our duty to remedy the situation.

To return to the ombudsman's emphasis on the word "urgent", my fear is that we will not deal with the situation urgently. Let me be clear: I do not believe that allowing the clock to run down to the forthcoming general election is an acceptable option. My fear was confirmed yesterday at Prime Minister's questions when, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the Prime Minister said:

"Following the ombudsman's multi-year investigation, it is imperative that we take the time to review the findings thoroughly."—
[*Official Report*, 15 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 255.]

The problem with that is the facts are already well known, and it certainly does not reflect the ombudsman's conclusion about the urgency of the issue.

I will make a suggestion that I urge both Front-Bench spokespeople to adopt. I believe that we could do the right thing in this Parliament if the Government and Opposition parties held talks, convened and chaired by Mr Speaker, with a view to putting a Bill before the House as speedily as possible. I am mindful and supportive of the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) that we could do something seriously before the summer recess.

As other hon. Members mentioned, every generation experiences injustices. In my time in the House, they have included the thalidomide victims, Hillsborough, Primodos, contaminated blood and, most recently, the Horizon scandal. For me, they are all debts of honour that we have a duty to redeem. I suspect that a majority of Members of the House would agree, so please let us have the opportunity to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. After the next speaker, I will impose a time limit of 10 minutes, which, as they say, is not a target but a maximum. If hon. Members adhere to it, we will have time for the Front-Bench spokespeople and we will have the ability to accommodate every hon. Member who seeks to speak. I call Peter Aldous.

1.55 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee on granting it. The purpose of the debate is to consider the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report of 21 March and how best to implement its recommendations.

In brief, the following issues arise from the report. First, the PHSO found that in 2005, the Department for Work and Pensions,

"failed to take adequate account of the need for targeted and individually tailored information"

to be shared with women affected by the changes to the state pension age. That amounted to maladministration and resulted in the six complainants whose cases were considered not being able to do things differently or make informed, mitigating decisions. The PHSO concluded that they should be compensated for that.

Secondly, the PHSO took the highly unusual step of laying its report before Parliament, due to its concerns that the DWP would fail to provide a remedy. Although the PHSO has put forward a suggestion as to what the compensation should be, it has asked Parliament to intervene to agree a mechanism for remedy and to hold the Government to account.

Thirdly, the PHSO points out that it is "extremely rare" for an organisation that it investigates not to accept and act on its recommendations. It makes the observation that a failure to comply with its recommendations represents a constitutional gap in protecting the rights of citizens who have been failed by a public body and in ensuring access to justice.

My interest in the injustice arises from the fact that, for approximately eight years, as regular as clockwork, constituents have been highlighting to me the enormous challenges and hardship that they have faced and endured. For the past four years, I have had the privilege of co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women with, first, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and, more recently, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey). I take the opportunity to thank our predecessors, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

It is important to thank the PHSO for its work and the duty that it has carried out. It has received criticism for the time that it has taken and for the narrow remit of considering six cases that some are concerned do not fully reflect the injustice that 1950s-born women as a whole have had to endure. However, it would have been very easy for the PHSO to have decided that this was not a case for it to investigate. Instead, it has not shied away from the past. The investigation has taken a long time because it is complicated and there was a need to get it right.

The PHSO has provided us with a snapshot. It is up to us—Parliament, Government and the DWP—to extrapolate and put right a problem that may well extend much more widely. To do that, the PHSO has provided some guidelines that we need to follow. Parliament should take immediate steps to find a resolution for those who do not have time on their side. Each case should be considered on its own merits. Finite resources are not an excuse for failing to provide a fair remedy. If Parliament chooses to do nothing, that will undermine the ombudsman. The Department for Work and Pensions should respect what Parliament recommends. There must be a commitment from Government to take on board the PHSO's findings and to work collegiately with Parliament in finding and then implementing a fair and just remedy.

A wider issue that needs to be considered, perhaps in the first instance by the right hon. Member for East Ham and his Committee, is the breakdown in communication and implementation of policy in the DWP, going back over 30 years. I accept that the Department's remit is large, challenging and complicated, but the PHSO highlights repeated failures in the Department's communication of state pension reforms.

Sir John Hayes: We must not let cause become more important than effect. As my hon. Friend described, it is right that we look at why and how this happened, but what really matters is what happened, because what the WASPI women need is action quickly. If we were to spend a great deal of time looking at the genesis of the issue, I am not sure that quick action would be delivered, so I endorse what the right hon. Member for East Ham said about establishing criteria that can be effected with reasonable speed.

Peter Aldous: I thank my right hon. Friend for that point, which he makes quite well. I am diverting slightly from the main cause and theme, but I think he and I are on the same page.

As I said, I am concerned about repeated failures in the Department's communications. Only last Saturday, a constituent highlighted to me how the introduction of the new state pension penalises those women born in 1951 and 1952. The End Frozen Pensions campaign points out that 85% of frozen pensioners did not know of the policy's existence prior to moving abroad.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Aldous: Very briefly, because this is a side issue.

Sara Britcliffe: The report acknowledges that the DWP is now modernising its system so that people are informed, but does he agree that moving to a modernised

system might pose a risk, specifically to pensioners who are digitally excluded, that something similar could happen again in future?

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is a side point to the main point, but nevertheless the PHSO has pinpointed that issue. These are debates for another day. I suspect the right hon. Member for East Ham and his Committee need to look at these issues in more detail, but the PHSO has shone a spotlight on a wider problem.

The aims of the APPG that I co-chair with the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles are threefold: first, to represent those women who have been treated unjustly by the short-notice changes to the state pension age, 280,000 of whom have died, according to WASPI, since the start of the campaign; secondly, to develop and promote policy solutions to support 1950s-born women and their families who do not have access to their pension and are facing mental and physical health consequences; and thirdly, to feed the views and experiences of 1950s-born women into future policy decisions relating to state pensions and welfare.

Over the years, the APPG has had regular evidence-gathering sessions with various representative groups, and we have considered policies and initiatives to best help and assist them. In January 2022, the APPG made its own submission to the PHSO about the level of compensation that should be provided. I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish for the work that he and his office did putting that together. Based on the evidence presented to us from across the UK, we reached what, for us, was the logical conclusion that level 6 of the PHSO's compensation scale should apply. Subsequently, we refined that recommendation by proposing that compensation should be provided in a bell curve, with those who received least notice of the longest postponement receiving the most compensation, and those who received longer notice of shorter increase receiving lesser sums.

Sir Julian Lewis: May I take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for his key role in the APPG? I put on the record the dignified and well-informed views of local WASPI co-ordinators in my part of the world, Shelagh Simmons and Sal Robinson. We heard an intervention suggesting each case should be judged on its individual circumstances. I can see the merit in that, but it would have a devastating effect on the speed with which we would come to conclusions. What balance does my hon. Friend think should be struck on those two factors?

Peter Aldous: My sense is that there is a need to strike a balance, as the PHSO says. A way forward is beginning to emerge from the work of the APPG and the Select Committee, and I will elaborate on that.

Since the PHSO published its report on 21 March, the APPG has sought to play its role, as part of Parliament, in finding a fair and just mechanism, as quickly as possible, as the PHSO asked Parliament to do. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles and I wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and we have subsequently met the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is now back in his place. I thank him for the hearing he gave us.

[Peter Aldous]

Last Tuesday, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles and I appeared before the Work and Pensions Committee—likewise, I am grateful to the right hon. Member for East Ham and his colleagues for the fair and full reception they provided. We are holding our own evidence sessions with the various representative groups; the first three sessions took place on Monday and there are more to follow. This is a complicated matter. While the APPG is yet to reach a settled and final recommendation about the form a compensation mechanism should take, it is fair to say that ideas are fast evolving and are pointing in a direction.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman advise the House, as well as WASPI women in West Dunbartonshire and across the UK, on whether one of those recommendations will be for a ministerial apology, on behalf of the Department, for where we are now?

Peter Aldous: PHSO suggests an apology from the DWP should be encapsulated in what it comes up with as a way forward. The DWP's own guidelines include an apology as well.

I will focus on the form of compensation redress, which is emerging in a little more detail. While the PHSO has suggested that compensation should be paid at level 4 on their scale, there is disquiet among those affected that that is too low and that level 6 should apply, in line with the APPG's recommendations. The PHSO comments that a flat rate is easiest to implement but not perfect, and that there may well be a need for a balancing act, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) suggested in his intervention.

The PHSO also suggests that the National Audit Office may be able to provide guidance on how to structure a compensation scheme. The WASPI group has emphasised, as we have heard, the need for speed, simplicity and sensitivity, and it recommends that the DWP should bring forward proposals for a financial redress scheme to Parliament before the summer recess. It also proposes that higher payments should be targeted at those most impacted.

The Work and Pensions Committee is to be commended for getting out its recommendations in less than 10 days after its evidence session. It also asked the Government to bring forward proposals for the summer recess. It, too, proposed that payments should be based on the extent of change to an individual's state pension age, and the notice of change that they received. It adds that there should be some flexibility for individuals to be able to make the case for a higher level of compensation based on experiencing direct financial loss.

Clear parameters as to the form that the compensation should take, I sense, are rapidly evolving. Parliament, in the past two months since the PHSO published its report, in its various different guises is playing its role to the full. I would suggest that now is the time for the Government to step up to the plate. A mechanism should be put in place before the summer recess. I acknowledge that the matter is complicated, and that there is a need for contemplation and reflection, but we should have in mind that the most notable achievement of this Government is that, under enormous pressure in

a very short timescale, they put in place a furlough scheme that saved hundreds of thousands of jobs and got us through covid. There is no reason why the Government cannot move with such speed and alacrity again. I would add that failure to comply with the PHSO's recommendations would be almost completely unprecedented over the 70 years that the ombudsman has existed and would drive a coach and horses through what is an integral part of our parliamentary system of democratic checks and balances. In conclusion, I support this motion.

2.12 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for her blistering and brilliant opening speech. She speaks for many of our constituents and for those Members who cannot be here today. We must remember, as other Members have said, that WASPI women are not just some distant, transient group, but real people with real lives, and that this injustice has had a real impact. They are mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers, sisters, aunts, carers and daughters. Many have passed away in the time that we have been trying to secure them justice.

I find it remarkable that the ombudsman has such little faith in the Government that it is turning to Parliament to try to find a resolution and a remedy. And we owe it to those WASPI women to do so. We have taken an oath of office to our constituents—all of us—to find a resolution and a solution. Sadly, it has become the business of this Government to kick the can down the road, whatever the issue is. Whether it is the Horizon scandal, Primodos or contaminated blood, it seems to have become an ingrained and institutional habit to kick the can down the road and make those who have suffered at the hands of Government to wait even longer.

A Conservative Member made the point about the cost of redress and remedy, and of course we must recognise that. But in doing so we must also recognise the money that has already been spent by the civil service and the money and the time that have been spent by our constituency staff and all of us. I suspect that the amount of money and time that has been spent on this report is almost equal to the money that needs to be paid to bring redress to the WASPI women.

While we are looking at what remedies we can find and what money can be sought, perhaps we should be looking at proceeds of crime money. Perhaps we should be looking at the Russian oligarchs who need to have their assets seized—or have had their assets seized—proper sanctions against those who launder money, and the dirty money that flows through the financial institutions of the UK. I have sat on Bill Committees in this House and seen the Government take lacklustre action. The money is there; it is about political will, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said.

I have had many representations from the 6,500 WASPI women in my Livingston constituency, and today I want to give them a voice. Shirley Sharp was born in October 1954. She took early retirement from the Scottish Government in December 2008, when she was 54. Before deciding to leave, she contacted the pension service and received her forecast. She said:

"I knew when I left my job I would receive my pension on 6/3/2019 when I was 64 years 6 months old.

After I left another 18 months was added to my pension age which I couldn't make provision for. To add insult to injury my husband is 8 months older than me and he received his pension 14 months before I did. If it was about equality why was I penalised 6 months more than men?

I have been in receipt of my state pension since 6/9/2020. I am still very angry about how this whole thing has been/is being handled."

Another constituent, who did not want to be named, took early retirement from the civil service and looked after elderly relatives for four years until 11 months before her 60th birthday. At that point, her sister asked her whether she was planning on getting a part-time job. She said that she was exhausted and that she could manage financially as long as she got her pension in 11 months' time. She could not believe it when she was told that her pension at age would be 66. She thought that her leg was being pulled. She phoned the DWP, which confirmed what she had been told, but she had "never had any communication" about this from the DWP.

Another constituent, Anne Seenan, missed out on £14,000, having had her state pension delayed by two years. She said:

"I never received any communication from the DWP".

Another constituent, Dianne Risbridger, said:

"Unfortunately I am one of the women affected by a chronic life limiting illness which adds to the distress, as well as being born a mere three weeks after the cut off date for appealing, so a double whammy in my case."

Another constituent, Jill Parton, is watching this debate. She is an incredible woman who I know well. She said:

"Unfortunately, I am one of the tens of thousands of women, born in the 1950s, who have been badly affected by the rapid rise in State Pension Age for women.

I worked part time while I was training to become a teacher and started full time working in August 1975 when I was 20. I always expected that I would receive my State Pension at age 60. I married in 1977 and continued working full time."

Jill took six months off to have her two children. She separated from her husband before her son was born. She found out that she would not receive her state pension at 60 during a staff meeting. She reminded me today that her divorce settlement, like those of many of her constituents, was predicated on when she would get her state pension. Unfortunately, she also lives with a diagnosis of Fuchs' corneal dystrophy. The unpredictability of the condition, and the impact of teaching under bright lights, meant that she could not teach. She said:

"I find it very difficult to understand the government position on this. While they are making tens of thousands of women work until 66 they have even more young people who can't get jobs. For the mental health of all concerned would it not be more economical to allow the 60+ women to retire and the young jobless to have their jobs?"

Mental health worries affect many people. Jill is deeply concerned about the impact that the issue has had not just on her, but on many others.

The bottom line is that we are talking about a social contract between our constituents and the Government. Many of these women have already suffered great discrimination throughout their lives and have not been able to pay their "full stamp", as it was called back in the day. They had no idea this was going to happen. It is not good enough for some to say that the communication was adequate. Putting out a press release is not proper communication.

The Government need to get a grip on this issue, and understand the profound impact that it has had on other constituents of mine: Susan Rankin, Chaw Atkinson, Elizabeth Donnelly, Linda Howieson, Meg Wilson, Marion Wight, Margaret Diamond, Anne Waugh and Gloria Fairgrieve. I wanted to read their names out because they are real people with real lives, and this is having a real impact on them. If there is one decent thing that the Government could do before they are booted out of office, it would be to give the WASPI women the justice that they deserve.

2.19 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I rise to speak on behalf of the 6,180 women across Stockton South affected by this issue—women I come across every day in all corners of my constituency, and from all walks of life. My mother is a WASPI woman. She found out while chatting to her sister. Knowing my mother, that will have been an interesting conversation. I have had many conversations with constituents about the issue, and the impact that it has had on their life. None of them disputes the need to equalise the pension ages for men and women, and they all understand the challenges of communicating that change to the public, but they want justice and fair treatment from the system that they have spent their life paying into.

After years of debate under Governments of both colours, we have arrived at the point at which an independent ombudsman has told us that the WASPI women were wronged; maladministration occurred; and there should be compensation for those women affected. The system that they paid into all their life was meant to provide them with comfort in retirement. They based their life plans around it, and now the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report confirms that the change was made without adequate notice. That had a huge impact on those affected and their families. These women lost the chance to make informed decisions in preparing for retirement. I have heard stories of women who worked all their life and deserved to retire with dignity, but who have instead been forced to rely on help from their husbands or even their children. Those most affected were often those already vulnerable: widows and those living alone; those with health issues; and those already facing financial hardship.

I am glad that we now have the ombudsman's report, but this issue has gone on for way too long. These women have waited a long time for justice, and as we have heard, for some it is now far too late. I pay tribute to all the WASPI women in my constituency and further afield who have campaigned tirelessly for years, and exhausted every avenue to right this wrong. I urge the Government to consider the report as quickly as possible, and ensure that the WASPI women get the fair and fast compensation that they deserve.

2.22 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for his comments, which I associate myself with, and for his hard work over the years on the all-party parliamentary group. I also thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and the Backbench Business Committee for securing this important debate.

[*Rebecca Long Bailey*]

We all know how we got here. For people watching at home, many women born in the 1950s retired at 60 in the belief that they would receive their full state pension, only to realise that the Government had increased the retirement age by five years and not told them. Many had handed in their notice at work, and in many cases those women were forced to exist on meagre welfare benefits that left them living a hand-to-mouth existence. Many were left destitute. Some even lost their home. Many experienced depression, and some were even suicidal. That is a scandal and a clear injustice.

I give my warmest thanks to all the 1950s women against state pension inequality campaign groups, on behalf of myself, the hon. Member for Waveney and all members of the all-party group. I also thank the 5,000 women in my constituency of Salford and Eccles who were born in the 1950s, in particular a lady called Judith Robertson and the women of the WASPI Campaign 2018, who have set up stalls in our local supermarkets, and lobbied me and other MPs on this important issue. We all recognise the determination and strength of these brave women. Their relentless campaigning against this profound injustice is the reason why we are here today.

The issue is not whether these women faced injustice; the ombudsman's report makes it clear that they did, that the DWP was guilty of maladministration, that these women are entitled to compensation urgently from the Government, and that Parliament must urgently identify a mechanism for ensuring that. I will briefly make a few comments about the ombudsman's report for clarity. First, it is important to stress that the ombudsman has looked at only one aspect of injustice: maladministration by the DWP—that is, whether they adequately notified the women affected by the change to their pension age. The ombudsman's remit was not to look at the wider discriminatory impact of the policy; that has been left unaddressed.

Sadly, the UK's pension system systematically favoured men in this age group. They often receive higher state pensions, and even higher private pensions. Many of these women affected spent significant periods out of the workforce caring for their children and family members. That was coupled with a gender pay gap that was far more acute during their time in the workforce than it is today, so they were already at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to contribute to their private and state pensions. The only element that went some small way towards addressing the gender pension gap was that the national insurance pension was paid to women from age 60, whereas it was paid to men from age 65. Obviously, that advantage was taken away.

The fairness and the gender impact of the policy need to be urgently addressed, and I hope that we continue to fight for that in this House, but today we are focusing on the ombudsman's findings. The key finding was that the failure by the DWP to adequately inform thousands of women of their state pension age constitutes maladministration. The ombudsman also found that, as a result, some women had lost opportunities to make informed decisions about their finances, and that the DWP's failure had diminished women's sense of personal autonomy and financial control. The ombudsman also recommended that the DWP acknowledge its failings and apologise for its impact on those affected. The report concludes very clearly that the women concerned are entitled to compensation urgently.

We have discussed what the remedy could look like, and the report is very clear that it leaves that open to Parliament to determine. Crucially, it says that finite resources should not be used as an excuse for failing to provide a fair remedy. This is a clear injustice and should be treated as one. If we go down the path of deciding which injustices are and are not deserving, we are in very dangerous territory. The report also points out that HM Treasury requires compensation schemes to be efficient and effective, and to deliver value for money.

In particular, any administrative costs associated with compensation schemes should not be excessive. That leads the ombudsman to suggest that while Parliament might favour a mechanism for assessing individual claims of injustice, it might want to consider the point that a flat-rate payment would deliver a more efficient resolution. A note of caution here: it is important that we consider the impact of that carefully, as some women may be paid far less compensation than they are entitled to.

On the amount of redress, as we heard from the hon. Member for Waveney, the ombudsman's guidance on financial remedy sets out six levels of compensation. The ombudsman suggests that solely in the very small set of six cases that it assessed, the range could be within level 4, but in further sessions with the Work and Pensions Committee last week, it acknowledged that that small subset may not cover all the extreme financial situations that many women affected have faced; that could be addressed by an appropriate redress mechanism that Parliament looks at.

All the women's campaign groups that have contacted the all-party group so far have stated that setting compensation at level 4 would be grossly insufficient, and I agree. When gathering evidence, the all-party group found that in a vast number of cases the injustice was actually at level 6, and that was the recommendation that the all-party group made to the ombudsman.

A whole range of options are being discussed, from a flat-rate payment to a flat-rate tapered payment, the bell curve that the hon. Member for Waveney spoke about, a flat-rate payment with top-ups over a five-year period or mediation for 1950s women alongside an initial payment, to address the full scale of loss and discrimination faced. Whatever option Parliament chooses to take, it is important that it is not means-tested, that it is fast, fair and enshrined in legislation and, most importantly, that it garners the support of the women affected.

However, there is one major hurdle before us. Before we even get to the point of discussing and fine-tuning any proposals the Government have, they must first lay before Parliament their proposed redress mechanism. There is no excuse for delay. The report was laid before Parliament in March; it is now May, and still we have no Government response. It is just not acceptable. We have heard that nearly 280,000 women have already died waiting for justice and as we speak, at least one woman will die waiting for justice every 13 minutes. I say to the Government, "Just do the right thing and, as a matter of urgency, lay before Parliament a mechanism for redress so we can all act in accordance with the ombudsman's recommendations."

2.30 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I begin by commending my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), not only for securing this debate on the ombudsman's

report, but for her continued determination in representing the WASPI women and seeking the justice that they have been so cruelly denied by their own Government.

Those include women such as Mary Barclay from Bellshill, who came to my advice surgery just on Friday to ask me to come to this House today and ask this Government to do the right thing by her and the thousands of other women who have had the rug pulled out from underneath them. She also spoke to me about some of the 280,000 women who have died during this fight for justice and how, along with thousands across my Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill constituency, she will continue to fight for what they are entitled to. I put on record my thanks to Mary for the time she spent informing me of the real and deep impact that this issue has had on her in later life.

Across Scotland, it is estimated that almost 356,000 women were impacted by the WASPI pension scandal. Many of the women affected were already in ill health. Others had taken early retirement and were planning to get by until the age of 60, when they thought they would receive their state pension. However, Westminster Tories had a different idea. The UK Government instead invented reasons for countless delays in the hopes that the WASPI women would simply go away, but I think they have proven that they will not go away—no chance. Their campaign for justice continues.

I return to that figure of some 280,000 women who have passed away without seeing the justice that was owed to them. As many as 40,000 women are dying every year without getting any form of compensation. That is outrageous and wilful neglect of the duty of any Government. It is shameful. It is a betrayal of the most callous kind of those impacted by the UK Government's maladministration.

The SNP welcomes the findings of the PHSO's report, and it is clear that the Westminster Government must now take responsibility for the hardships that they have caused women born in the 1950s and make urgent amends for mistakes made. WASPI women have been struggling for years now with this injustice, and just about every other whim and decision that emanates from this place has also taken its toll. We have heard about the Horizon scandal and the infected blood scandal, but there is also the cut to pension credit for mixed-age couples, the freezing of the hard-earned state pensions of pensioners living overseas, and this Government's scrapping of free TV licences for the over-75s. All those decisions impact on WASPI women. On top of the self-inflicted cost of living crisis, it is just becoming too much for some of them.

The UK Government must not only apologise for the harms caused by their clear and obvious maladministration, but act urgently to deliver the justice and the compensation that these women so richly deserve. The report is clear and damning. It has made a finding of failings by the DWP in this case and has ruled that the women affected are owed compensation. The PHSO's chief executive Rebecca Hilsenrath said:

"DWP has clearly indicated that it will refuse to comply."

That is outrageous. She continued:

"This is unacceptable. The Department must do the right thing and it must be held to account for failure to do so."

To this very day the DWP has not acknowledged its failings. It has also failed to offer any apology or explanation, and has indicated that it will not compensate women affected by its failure.

The SNP here in Westminster and in government in Holyrood has always supported and will continue to support the WASPI women and their valiant efforts, yet many here in Westminster who were previously very vocal in supporting the WASPI women have now fallen eerily silent. The very same can be said for prominent Tory and Labour figures up the road in Holyrood as well. On 1 May the Scottish Parliament moved a motion on women's state pension compensation that

"agrees that the UK Government must now urgently deliver on the ombudsman's recommendations to pay compensation in full to those women without delay".

That motion passed in the Scottish Parliament with votes from the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Greens and the Alba party. The Tories and the Labour party shamefully abstained on that vote, and that speaks volumes. It certainly speaks a lot more than the silence that comes from their Benches. I have to say that, if the WASPI women are pinning their hopes on an incoming Labour Administration, they probably need to prepare themselves for yet more despair.

Why is that? They need only familiarise themselves with the lengths that the Labour administration in North Lanarkshire Council went to in order to avoid paying out on equal pay claims owed to women over many years—spending millions upon millions of pounds on legal fees in the process of fighting those justified claims, and then losing. The same happened, as we have heard, in Labour-run Glasgow City Council. Those two parties, the Tories and Labour, are not interested in equality for women; the evidence is before us, friends, so forgive me if I have no faith whatsoever in the change that the Labour party is purporting to offer.

Labour could, of course, surprise us; it could support the State Pension Age (Compensation) Bill in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), of which I am a co-sponsor. The UK Government and the Labour party could and should back his Bill and immediately set up a compensation scheme for all the women affected. We know that they will not, but we are asking them here today and reinforcing those calls.

It is clear that only a strong SNP voice in Holyrood and here in Westminster can hold this or any UK Government to account, whether it be a Tory or a Labour-led Government.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We have heard demands that the Secretary of State here in Westminster should apologise, and quite clearly he should, but my hon. Friend will remember that 10 years ago, almost to the day, a very senior former Labour Prime Minister was doing the rounds in Scotland, speaking at meetings of middle-aged and elderly people, promising them categorically that their pensions were safe with any United Kingdom Government. Does my hon. Friend believe that it is now time that an apology came from that politician for the way that he deceived and misled millions of people in Scotland?

Steven Bonnar: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That was just one of the mistruths we were told during that campaign—we were also told that we would maintain our place in the European Union. The WASPI women have been completely shafted, for want of a better word, by the politicians who were charged with delivering justice for them.

[Steven Bonnar]

The SNP and the Scottish Government in Holyrood stand ready to engage with the Department for Work and Pensions when the UK Government finally agree to compensate the WASPI women. There is still hope that this Government will agree to do so, because justice should be done. After years of promises made by Tory and Labour MPs and MSPs, both parties are now refusing to accept the report's recommendation to compensate fully the women who have been impacted.

It is time for the Tory and Labour parties to stop dithering and to put the funding in place so that these women can get the justice they deserve before it is too late. It should also be crystal clear once again—this is not an extreme proposition and it should not be seen as such—that the only way to protect Scotland's pensioners from the whims of Westminster Governments and to ensure dignity and fairness in retirement is for Scotland to have the full powers of its independence.

2.39 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): This issue is very close to my heart, and I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to speak about it in the Chamber. However, some Members are not working with good will and consensus and based on the cross-party work that has been done—in particular, that of the APPG led by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and her co-chair, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), whom I thank for their work.

I have been acutely aware of the 1950s women's state pension injustice for a long time. I have family and friends, as well as thousands of constituents, who have been impacted by it. Since I was elected in 2017, I have written to and met numerous women in Gower born in the 1950s who have shared their experiences and told me of the profound impact this issue has had on their lives. I led an Adjournment debate on the matter back in 2019, and have worked to represent women affected throughout my time as an MP, by supporting their complaints to the ombudsman and speaking at every opportunity.

The then Conservative Chancellor's decision to accelerate increases in the state pension age in the Pensions Act 2011 produced considerable hardship for many women, as it meant that a lot of them received little notice of an increase in their state pension age. The Government failed to communicate the changes effectively: some women were given only one year's notice, while others got up to five years' notice, but many received none at all. That put those women in a serious position. Women who had already made plans based on previous pension statements had to scramble on and continue to work to make ends meet. Women's income in retirement is already significantly affected by unequal and low pay at work, pregnancy discrimination, discrimination against part-time workers and a lack of affordable childcare and carer support.

Recently, my constituent Carrie Williams came to visit my surgery. She was in the first cohort of women affected. Initial leaflets on changes stated that the increase to 65 would happen in 2020. She then received a letter in 2013 informing her that the changes would be in force from 2018, and would gradually increase from then,

meaning that she would have to wait not until she was 65, but until her 66th birthday—an extra year—before being able to receive her state pension. Following a period of poor health, the knowledge that she would not be getting her pension for several years more made her increasingly stressed and—combined with other issues that she had with the DWP at the time, which were affecting her income—led to her again falling ill and having a seizure. Correspondence of the various changes was littered with suggestions that Carrie pay for a financial advisor, which as a single mother in poor health she could not afford to do. She did not have spare cash just lying around to set up a new savings pots, an ISA or anything else that was suggested as an apparent solution to her problem. I am glad to share that Carrie is now in good health, but unfortunately for her, as for many of the women affected, that was not the end of it. Not only did she unexpectedly have to wait until 66 to access her state pension, but the amount that she receives from it has drastically reduced year on year due to fiscal drag. I would not have believed it had Carrie not brought me about six or seven years-worth of evidence. This Conservative Government's recklessness with our economy is squeezing everyone's finances—I have seen it with my own eyes—and exacerbating the hardships that the WASPI women have already endured.

This has been a long and frustrating process for the women affected. Several groups represent them. The Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign is probably the best known, but there is also the Pension Justice for Swansea Women campaign, which includes women from my constituency and others in the local area.

A lot was hinging on the ombudsman's report. It took some time, but we now have it. It is a serious report that requires serious consideration, and the Government must not use it to continue kicking the can down the road, as they have done over the past 14 years. The report found the DWP guilty of maladministration. The Secretary of State said in March that he would provide a further update to the House on the matter, but is yet to do so. He should update Parliament, or tell us when he will finally do so.

Although there are strong feelings and a variety of asks, the overarching issue is that an injustice must be addressed. Lessons must be learned to ensure that this never reoccurs, and that everyone has the right to properly plan for their retirement.

2.44 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

It is my privilege to speak on behalf of WASPI women, particularly those in the Falkirk WASPI women group, who have been with me for a long time. I held a public meeting way back in 2015 for the approximately 7,000 women in my constituency who are affected by the state pension age change. I discovered that the overwhelming majority of those who attended had not received any notification of the changes.

The majority of women were only one year away from the original retirement age of 60 years, and faced a further six years of working life without any warning. Many had already started to make plans to retire because of ill health or their caring duties for grandchildren

and/or elderly parents. It was not just the women who were badly affected by these changes; family members also had to make changes or other arrangements in their lives.

A cohort of the Falkirk women got together and formed the Falkirk group in 2016. They made arrangements to join the very first demo down here in London in June 2016. Since then, they have participated in other demos—both here and in Scotland—and in 2019, they published a calendar, from which all proceeds went to Breast Cancer Care. Local co-ordinator Anne Campbell and I have had many discussions and meetings about this issue, along with other stalwarts of the group—namely, May Rookes, Mags Burns, Lorna Binnie, Sheila Harkness, Elizabeth Lumsden, Maureen Mcleod, Valerie Sutter, Ruth McIntosh, Helen Reeder, May Farrell, Elspeth Slater and many other women campaigning on this total injustice. I pay tribute to them all.

The Falkirk Women are positive and strong in their endeavour to right the wrong that was foisted upon them in the cruellest and most calculating way. I praise them and the rest of the WASPI women for their organisational skills. They would like an apology and compensation for the turmoil thrust upon them. They want respect, dignity, and, most importantly, a fair and fast compensation scheme to redress the injustice. It is fair to say that those women are not going away, so the Government ignore them at their peril.

The WASPI women need an answer, and they need it now—no more unnecessary delays. The Government can and should resolve this pitiful state of affairs here and now, and do the right and proper thing by putting an end to this bureaucratic shambles. They must not procrastinate any longer. Action is required, not more words. Stop insulting the WASPI women. Compensate them now, with speed and simplicity.

2.47 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I pay tribute to all the WASPI women and others campaigning on this issue in Wirral West and across the UK, and those who are in the Gallery this afternoon. I stand in solidarity with them—I myself am a 1950s-born woman. I pay tribute to all who have sadly passed away, too.

I believe it is important to consider the broader pensions landscape, and the discriminatory and quite frankly sexist nature of provision that has adversely affected 1950s-born women. For example, rules that required a fixed number of qualifying years to be eligible for a pension have disproportionately adversely affected women. In 1973, the right to a deferred pension was introduced for those who left service on or after 6 April 1975, provided that they were over 25 years old and had completed at least five years' service. One WASPI campaigner told me that she had worked for the Army for four years and then left after she had had her baby. She received no pension for those years, which is grotesquely unfair. That five-year qualifying period, which clearly discriminated against women, was reduced to two years from April 1988, and so it remains for the Army and civil service today. Again, I believe that this is discriminatory, and I ask the Minister to look into it.

Part-time workers have been similarly adversely affected by the design of pension schemes. There is insufficient time to provide detail today; however, women have clearly been disproportionately affected by that, too, as

they are by the current earnings threshold of £10,000 per year for auto-enrolment. Again, I ask the Minister to look at addressing that discriminatory element of what is otherwise a very important policy that affects large numbers of women and men on low pay.

Women born in the 1950s have already been adversely affected by pensions policy. The pensions gender gap is still high: analysis by the DWP published in 2023 put that gap at 35%, meaning that women have 35% less private pension wealth than men at age 55, the minimum age at which most people can start to take their pension. Women have less state pension, too: analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies last year showed that women born in the early 1950s receive around 5% less state pension income than men.

The reasons included having spent less time in paid employment compared with women born in later periods, and the way that the rules for entitlement to the state pension before the introduction of the new state pension in 2016 created a significant gap between pensions for men and women. For example, before 1978, married women could opt to pay a married women's stamp, meaning that they paid lower national insurance contributions and then received a lower state pension. It is scandalous, too, that many of the women who paid that married women's stamp did not receive all the pension that they should have been entitled to, due to the complex rules and computer errors by the DWP.

Then, of course, the gender pay gap means that women are paying on average less into their occupational pensions. All those things are still affecting women today, so it is in that context that I ask the Minister to act swiftly in relation to the parliamentary and health service ombudsman's report on women's state pension age. The WASPI campaign has shone a light on how the changes affected women: many 1950s-born women found out about the changes to their state pension age at a time that was too late for them to alter their retirement plans. Others have said that they had no idea that they would have to wait longer to receive their state pension. As a result, many women have suffered financial hardship and emotional distress.

A survey of around 8,000 WASPI women carried out in December of last year found that in the previous six months, 55% of WASPI women had seen their economic position get worse, 49% had struggled to pay essential bills, and shockingly, 25% had struggled to buy food. As we have heard from Members right across this House, our constituents have spoken about how they have been personally affected. One woman in Wirral West told me that she had struggled to feed herself and had had to sell her home as a result of how she was affected. Another constituent wrote to me recently to say that she feels robbed of her future, and still feels that she is being ignored. It is insulting to those women that the Minister has barely acknowledged the clear maladministration that the ombudsman says occurred. Can he tell us today when his Department will acknowledge that maladministration, and will he apologise for it?

Because of "significant concerns" that the ombudsman has

"that DWP will fail to remedy the injustice",

it has taken the "rare decision" to bring matters to Parliament's attention, and specifically to ask Parliament "to intervene and identify a mechanism for providing appropriate remedy".

[Margaret Greenwood]

The ombudsman's report sets out what that remedy might look like. It also says that it is
"open to DWP to forestall this process"

by acting on what the ombudsman says to Parliament. Will the Minister take this opportunity to do just that—to look carefully at what the ombudsman has said, and come forward with fair and fast compensation for the women affected? Jane Cowley, the WASPI campaign manager, said last week at a Work and Pensions Select Committee oral evidence hearing that

"We have attempted to meet with the Minister throughout our campaign but unfortunately those requests have never been accepted." This is incredibly disappointing. That campaign is acting on behalf of 3.5 million women adversely affected—it is utterly astonishing that the Minister should show them such little respect.

Time is of the essence for the Government to put things right. According to the WASPI campaign group, by this weekend, 280,000 WASPI women will have died since their fight for justice began. To put it another way, as has already been said in this House, one woman dies every 13 minutes. The Government talk about supporting all pensioners to have a dignified retirement, but can the Minister honestly stand at the Dispatch Box and say that his Government are treating these WASPI women with the dignity and respect they deserve? Last week, at the Select Committee's oral evidence hearing, Angela Madden, the chair of the WASPI campaign, expressed frustration that the DWP

"have never accepted that they have done anything wrong".

When will the Government remedy the injustice that so many 1950s-born women have faced? Ministers must apologise to those women who have suffered as a result of Government failings, and must bring forward fair and fast compensation as a matter of urgency.

2.54 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I commend the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. However, I do think it is disappointing that the Government have not sought to have a debate on this issue in Government time, particularly when there is quite clearly cross-party consensus about the need for speed on it following the ombudsman's report. I hope the Minister will be coming forward with some clear proposals today about where we go, and I hope he is also hearing how strong the feeling is across the House that the Government need to do something quickly.

On Monday, we had an impassioned debate in this place about the role of Members, and speech after speech stated that we in this place must uphold the highest standards and set the best example of good practice. There were arguments made by others about the importance of democracy and representation, and I may not have agreed with the conclusions they reached from those arguments in many cases, but I cannot fault their dedication to this place and to the job that we do here on behalf of our constituents. We should all therefore be able to support the basic idea that, when someone is wronged, and an independent body investigates and makes recommendations for recompense, those recommendations must be actioned.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is no longer in his place, made a very important point about the fact that we as constituency MPs refer constituents on to the ombudsman. How can any of us continue to do that in the future if the Government and indeed this place choose to ignore recommendations made by that ombudsman? The Government are not above the law, and we are here representing our constituents. It is damning that the report from the ombudsman had to be sent by the ombudsman to Parliament because, in its words, it had

"significant concerns...that DWP will fail to remedy the injustice" and acknowledge the maladministration. What does that say? I expect the Minister will say that the Department needs more time to consider its response, but having listened to the other Members who have participated in the debate so far, I think many of us have no time for that any more, and certainly the WASPI women do not.

I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) about the fact that female pensioners are most likely to be living in poverty. She made a very powerful and compelling case for that, and the reality is that the gender pension gap continues to this day because the gender pay gap also continues. We must have a social security system and a pension system that actually recognises the work women do and are more likely to do from a caring perspective. I did a lot of work on that in relation to my Carer's Leave Act 2023, but women generally are more likely to work part-time or have time out of the workplace, so they are always going to experience lower levels of state pension.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The injustice that WASPI women have faced is simply shameful. The financial burden has been outlined, but the anxiety they feel is also huge. A constituent has contacted me to tell me that the ordeal has had an enormous and horrible negative effect on her mental health, because she simply feels so powerless to do anything about it. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government should immediately confirm that they will honour the ombudsman's recommendations, and come forward with a proper plan to compensate the millions of affected women?

Wendy Chamberlain: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I absolutely agree with her. We have had the report for some time, and I think the Government should be making a statement to say that they support it. It is quite clear that plenty of work has been done by both the APPG and the ombudsman to outline what a compensation scheme should look like.

My hon. Friend is right about the mental impact. I met a constituent of mine, Heather, several weeks ago. She is a single woman, so she does not have a partner's or spouse's income—that is the assumption made about women—to rely on. She has had to give up work as a teacher earlier than expected due to ill health, and feels that the injustice is compounded by the Government not having yet acknowledged the ombudsman's report properly.

The DWP has had full notice of the investigation by the PHSO and its findings, and I would argue that they should therefore have had the opportunity to plan accordingly. With regard to the infected blood scandal, the Government have said that when the report is finally published on Monday, they will make a statement on

what they will do very quickly thereafter. I feel, therefore, unmoved by the argument that they need more time to respond to the ombudsman's report, when they have known for some time that it was coming. The first report on maladministration was published almost three years ago, so I just do not accept that the Government and the DWP have not had the time to consider the likely outcome of the findings. We knew that a recommendation for compensation was likely, so I would have expected the DWP to have started making plans for administering it.

While sitting in the Chamber, I have been notified by my researcher that I have had a response to a written parliamentary question, which states that the Department did not have sight of a draft copy of the PHSO's report at the end of last year. My researcher has also confirmed with the WASPI campaign—I have met Angela Madden and others several times—who say that that is not the case, and that the Government did have sight of the draft report. I would be grateful for clarity from the Minister on that. I am happy to give way to him now—*[Interruption]*—or perhaps he can comment on that written response to the parliamentary question in his closing remarks. Is it correct that the Government did not have sight of the draft report at the end of last year?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Opposition Members are complaining about the fact that I dip my head in order to listen, and suggest that is somehow evidence of me not listening. I take exception to their criticism of my body position.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Your comments stand on the record.

Wendy Chamberlain: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I certainly was not suggesting that to the Minister. I am saying that I have two different versions of events. The WASPI campaign is saying that the draft report was seen by the DWP at the end of last year, and I have a written response from the Government saying that it was not. If the response to the written parliamentary question is found to be inaccurate, I would be grateful if the Minister wrote to me to confirm that. If he is unable to conform that in his closing remarks, I would be grateful if he would place that letter in the Commons Library. I have done a lot of work with the Minister. Previously he was heavily involved with me in the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks, so I know that he cares about people, but I really do not want to hear in his closing remarks that this is just the Department being thorough.

Like many here, I have met WASPI women, and the campaigners who stand in the rain outside Parliament on Budget days. I have spoken to group leaders and to my constituents. The one message they want me to bring here today is that they are dying. They are dying without the DWP admitting to its errors, without any acknowledgement of the impact that this has had on their lives, without compensation, and without resolution. Frankly, they now feel that the Government are waiting for them to die, in order for the problem literally to cease to exist. WASPI women deserve compensation—that is not just my view or the view of many Members in the House; it is the view of the ombudsman. If we in this

place cannot adhere to the findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, what message are we sending from this place generally?

3.2 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker:

“I was plunged into huge anger...upset...distress. I felt like I had been scammed. Why hadn't anyone told me my pension age had changed? Why hadn't I known about it?”

Those are the words of Hilary, who, like millions of other women born in the 1950s, was hit by the change in the state pension age. Hilary was left tens of thousands of pounds worse off. She had budgeted for her state pension beginning at 60, not six years later. She struggled to make ends meet and started to look for another job, but she asked, “Who's going to employ a woman in her late 50s?”

Hilary was not alone. Millions of women born in the 1950s were robbed of their pensions. A survey carried out by the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, to whose tireless advocacy I pay tribute today, particularly those WASPI women in Coventry South, found that half the women surveyed struggled to pay essential bills, and one in four struggled to put food on the table. But it was not just the financial hit; it was the worry, stress and the feeling that they had made a mistake, and that it was their fault they did not know that the pension age had changed. The ombudsman's report puts that to bed once and for all. The fault for not knowing was not with those women; the fault was with the Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. There was maladministration in communicating the changes and an injustice was done. That is what the ombudsman concluded, and it utterly vindicates the WASPI campaign.

Justice delayed is justice denied, and every 13 minutes a WASPI woman passes away and is forever denied justice. Since the beginning of their campaign, 280,000 women affected by the pension change have passed away, never to see this wrong righted. It is utterly scandalous that the Government seem intent on dragging their feet for as long as they can. On 24 March, after the ombudsman's report was published, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions told the House that he would respond “without undue delay.”

Almost two months have passed, another 6,000 WASPI women have passed away and still this Government are doing nothing. The Government have still failed to heed the report's recommendation

“to identify a mechanism for providing appropriate remedy for those who have suffered injustice”,

and that is no surprise.

The report concludes that it strongly doubts that the DWP will provide a remedy to the injustice, so it is up to this place and all our colleagues to rise to this challenge and to right this wrong. We have a recent example of that happening. After the Post Office Horizon scandal was brought to life in a TV drama, the Government responded to the public outcry and introduced legislation to address that injustice. It was the right thing to do, but it should not take Toby Jones and ITV for the Government to do their job. They need to act, and act now.

I will finish with this: the ombudsman's report is right that an injustice was done. These women lost out. Some were made tens of thousands of pounds worse off by

[Zarah Sultana]

these changes. They were made to feel like they had made a mistake, as if the fault was theirs. The stress and pain has been immense. I will conclude by saying that not only must the Government compensate these women as a matter of urgency, but they must go beyond what has been recommended by the ombudsman, which is not nearly enough to cover the hurt, distress and lost income faced by many of these women. I join the WASPI campaign in calling for fast and fair compensation, giving justice to women who have been denied it for too long already.

3.6 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate, and for her unflinching commitment and support for WASPI women everywhere. This has been an important issue for me for a number of years. In fact, it is so important to me that I chose to raise it as a matter of urgency during my maiden speech in this Chamber in 2020, when I highlighted the scandalous situation experienced by these women.

There were an estimated 3.8 million WASPI women, although 280,000 have died since the start of the campaign, including my constituents Margaret Meikle and Morag Syne. Those women died without receiving the compensation, apology or justice that they rightly deserved. There are about 6,800 WASPI women in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. To some people, they are just numbers; to me, every single one of them is an individual—a daughter and possibly a mother, a grandmother, a wife, a sister, an auntie, a carer and a friend. They are important. They matter. They have all had their hopes, expectations and aspirations of retiring at 60 with a reasonable pension crushed by a lack of notice of a change to their pension age by the Government. Each and every one of them deserved to be treated properly, and the grave injustice they have suffered should be put right by the Government.

Since my first contact with a WASPI constituent nine years ago, many have written to me and met me, expressing their frustration, dealing with burnout, caring for elderly relatives and missing out on time with partners, children and grandchildren, all in the context of a cost of living crisis. Many have also commented on the lack of pension income and having to use savings to survive, preventing them from buying clothes and presents for their grandchildren and seriously restricting any discretionary spending that would have been spent in the local economy. Above all, they are left with an overwhelming sense of injustice at not being informed of changes to their state pension age, which has left them understandably angry and resentful. The lack of information and the denial of choice by the Government has resulted in a reduced quality of life, serious financial losses, and sustained damage to their sense of worth, mental health and wellbeing.

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend mentions the enormous toll on the mental health and wellbeing of so many of these women. Does he agree that that damage has been deliberately made worse by the fact that they, almost alone of the millions of people who have suffered from grave injustices and miscarriages of justice, have had a Government who claim to be looking after them publicly

say, “We will ignore the results of an independent inquiry and deny the fact that any injustice has been carried out against them”?

Allan Dorans: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

How much might it cost to properly compensate the WASPI women? In March, *The Times* estimated that to pay them the ombudsman's paltry offer of between £1,000 and £2,850 would cost between £3.5 billion and £10 billion. The WASPI campaign is calling for about three times as much—£10,000—which would put the cost to the public purse at about £36 billion. It may be slightly more or slightly less, but by not paying the WASPI women the pensions they rightly deserve to date, the Government have already saved £181.4 billion. In only the last eight months of 2023, according to the Office for National Statistics, UK Government total expenditure was £755 billion. The compensation demanded by the WASPI women is insignificant in that context.

The failed covid test and trace system in England cost £37 billion, paid to former TalkTalk chief executive—and wife of a Conservative Member—Dido Harding for no reason whatsoever. That amount alone would have paid full compensation to all the WASPI women to date.

As many as 3.8 million women were given the news that their state pension age was to increase from 60 to 66 just as they were about to retire, so too late for them to do any proper financial planning. Many were already in ill health or worse, and others had taken early retirement with a plan to get by until age 60, when they thought they would receive their state pension and look forward to a reasonably comfortable retirement.

This is a long tale of suffering, misery and injustice not only for the women affected, but endured by their immediate and extended families. It has been allowed to go on for far too long. It needs to be concluded without further delay. I therefore call on the Government to apologise unreservedly and to act to compensate women affected by the worst pension scandal in history. They must do so immediately before even more WASPI women die without having received an apology, compensation or justice. I urge the DWP to bring proposals to Parliament for a financial redress scheme for all Members to debate and vote on, including a mechanism for MPs to put forward alternatives before the summer recess. In those proposals, the Government should set out eligibility for the compensation scheme, the amounts of compensation to be paid, the administration of the scheme and the timeframe for compensation to be paid.

WASPI women everywhere have campaigned to right this injustice, but may I pay tribute to the tireless work of Frances Brown and Lynn Paterson, the local WASPI co-ordinators from my area, who have given their best and their lives to obtain compensation for all the other WASPI women in our area and across the country? I thank them for their support.

3.13 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), and I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this important debate. I was rather disappointed that she used the opportunity to bash the Labour party. With all due respect, I point out that, had we won the

election in 2017—my right hon. Friends the Members for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) can confirm this—this matter would have been settled. Had the SNP not lost 13 seats to the Conservatives, we would not be having this debate; we would have delivered justice for the WASPI women and for the miners, who are desperate to have pensions justice.

I want to extend my personal appreciation to the dedicated women of the WASPI campaign who have tirelessly campaigned for nearly a decade for fair and timely compensation for 1950s women affected by the DWP's maladministration.

I do not recognise the criticism of Labour Members. I think that I have raised WASPI cases on 25 occasions in 12 different debates and remember how many Members were in their place. I remember a Westminster Hall debate where Members were sitting on the window sills because it was so crowded. Every effort has been made to bring this injustice to the attention of the public and the Government.

I thank the Sunderland, Durham and Hartlepool WASPI groups, who have worked diligently and assiduously in my constituency. I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with those remarkable women over the past decade, and I am full of admiration for their dedication and selflessness. There are around 5,000 WASPI women in my constituency, who have been waiting patiently for the final ombudsman's report, which was published in March. I am appalled that the DWP refuses to comply with the report's recommendations. This unprecedented response undermines the ombudsman's authority and credibility. The Library found no other instances of a Government Department rejecting an ombudsman's findings.

The DWP must own its mistakes, apologise to the 3.8 million women affected and swiftly deliver adequate compensation. There is no doubt that the DWP failed to notify 1950s women of their state pension age change, and now it denies its wrongdoings, as the PHSO highlighted. Ignoring the ombudsman's findings sets a dangerous precedent, allowing Government Departments to evade accountability. We MPs have a responsibility to ensure that the Government establish a mechanism for redress. The urgency is critical. I do not want to rehearse the statistics, because they have been given many times, but the 1950s women are dying in numbers because of the age profile.

In March, the Secretary of State promised an update, but as far as I am aware we are still waiting for that. The Government's standard delay tactics—evident in cases such as the mineworkers' pension scheme, the contaminated blood scandal, the Post Office Horizon scandal and now the WASPI women—must end. The impact of the state pension age rise on those women, with little or no notice, is profound. The APPG on state pension inequality for women, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), highlighted that women felt worthless, ignored and disempowered, leading to severe mental health issues and, in some very sad cases, suicide.

There is no doubt that the DWP's maladministration has caused immense stress. The evidence aligns that with the PHSO's definition of level 6 emotional injustice, warranting compensation of up to £10,000. As Members have said, the Government have saved £181.5 billion by

accelerating the raising of the women's state pension age. Compensating WASPI women by up to £10,000 would cost around £36 billion. That is a fraction of the savings accrued by the Treasury to date.

I recently met my constituents Denise McKenna and Kathleen Kerr, who illustrate the severe impact this issue has had. Both started work at 16. Kathy joined the British Army and Denise started work at the Inland Revenue. In their late 50s they took early retirement due to ill health. They carefully managed their finances. They had only a few years, they thought, until they reached their retirement. As a married couple who were both WASPI women, Kathy and Denise suffered a double whammy—an immense financial loss, due to the pension age change. They received no written notification of the change. The five-year delay to their pension meant that they lost in excess of £80,000. They exhausted their life savings and were forced to sell their home. Surely that is not how we respect those who have worked and served our country.

Many WASPI women like Denise and Kathy made significant life decisions without knowing that their pension age had increased. That injustice demands financial redress. Women were forced to return to work, despite disabilities and conditions. That highlights this Government's disconnect from the realities that these women faced. A former Pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), now a Transport Minister responsible for buses, suggested in a Westminster Hall debate in 2017 that the affected women should retrain and take up apprenticeships—[*Interruption.*] It was greeted with a similar reaction at the time. That ignores the challenges of re-entering the labour market, and the disproportionate care-giving responsibilities that these women bear.

Successive Governments have failed these women. It is our responsibility and the duty of this Parliament to right this wrong. Sadly, it is too late for the over 200,000 WASPI women who have passed away since the campaign started in 2015, but we cannot delay any longer. Compensation is not just financial reimbursement, but recognition of the harm inflicted on these women. My appeal to the Minister is this: heed the calls for justice, and acknowledge the emotional and psychological harm caused by the Government's decisions and the DWP's maladministration. As representatives of thousands of 1950s women, it is our responsibility as Members of Parliament to ensure that justice is served.

3.21 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a considerable pleasure to follow my friend, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). We have worked together on many issues over the years. I remember the debate in Westminster Hall that he mentioned, and the revulsion when it was said that 1950s WASPI women should go on apprenticeship schemes. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and the Backbench Business Committee have secured this debate.

It is worth reflecting that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has asked Parliament to find a remedy for the WASPI women who have suffered injustice; it strongly doubts that the DWP will provide a remedy. Let us just consider that. The ombudsman has proclaimed that maladministration has taken place, so it would be fair to expect the DWP to accept its moral

[*Ian Blackford*]

and ethical responsibility to the women affected and their elected parliamentarians, and to bring forward effective remedies for that maladministration.

The report was published a couple of months ago, but we had the interim report three years ago, so the report is not a surprise to any of us here. The Government knew this day was coming, and must now act with haste to bring forward remedies for the WASPI women.

The Government, if they are meant to be anything, are supposed to be rooted in fairness, recognising their duty to citizens, and when a judgment is made that there has been maladministration, they should respond in an appropriate and timely manner. It is a damning indictment that the ombudsman has no faith in the Government to provide the remedy, and has therefore taken the unprecedented step of asking Parliament to intervene. It means that we parliamentarians must in effect do the Government's job for them. Collectively, Members from right across the Chamber have to rise to that challenge. All of us here, every single Member of Parliament, has a responsibility to their constituents, many of whom will be looking at us today, whether from the Gallery or on television, waiting for us to take action. We cannot have any more procrastination. We need to take action.

Let us remind ourselves that there were 3.8 million WASPI women—1950s-born women who were affected by changes to the state pension age. They suffered from poor communication, which adversely affected the life choices that they were forced to make. This issue must be resolved by this Parliament. It must not be kicked down the road until after the election. The Scottish National party Westminster group commissioned a report on potential financial remedies for WASPI women, which was presented to the UK Government as long ago as June 2016 but which, sadly, was ignored. If the Government need advice, they might want to turn to Landman Economics, which produced that report.

Parliament has, of course, debated this issue many times, in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall, and the work of the APPG should be commended. On 29 November 2017, I opened a SNP Opposition day debate on a motion calling on the Government to improve transitional arrangements for women born on or after 6 April 1951 who were adversely affected by the acceleration in the increase in the state pension age. There was a vote at the end of the debate; 288 Members voted for the motion, and none against. The voting was cross party: five Conservative Members voted for the motion. If the Tory Government had accepted that proposition, we would not be here now. Why did the Government ignore that instruction from Parliament?

Kirsten Oswald: Does my right hon. Friend not think that that was, regrettably, typical of the attitude of this UK Government to the WASPI women? The Government hope that they will simply go away if they are ignored. That is heaping insult on indignity, and it is wholly unacceptable. The lives of constituents such as mine have been destroyed by the UK Government's inability to see what needs to be done. They deserve so much better from this Government.

Ian Blackford: Of course they do. We have heard today from a great many Members in all parts of the House about the 5,000, 6,000 or 7,000 WASPI women—

more, in some cases—in every constituency. We have all heard the heartbreaking stories of those who simply could not afford to carry on working, and who were not given adequate notice of the increase in the state pension age. It was an injustice, and it needs to be dealt with.

I should emphasise that this was never about the equalisation of men's and women's pensionable ages; we all accept that there had to be such an equalisation. However, some of us will remember the 2016 Cridland review of pensions. Cridland said that there should be no more than a one-year increase in anyone's pensionable age in every decade. The problem was the pace of the increase in women's pensionable age. Let us also remember that this is about women who paid national insurance in anticipation of receiving a pension, and who were hit with the bombshell that their pensions were being deferred, in many cases by up to six years, with, in some cases, only 15 months' written notice. A state pension should be seen as a right, but the Government changed the terms and conditions of that right without consulting those who were paid their pensions.

Some time ago, thanks to freedom of information requests, we learned that the Department for Work and Pensions did not begin writing to women born between April 1950 and April 1955 until April 2009, and did not complete the process until February 2012. Despite the need to inform women about changes to legislation dating back to 1995, the Government did not start the formal notification period for 14 years. What were they doing? Where was the responsibility to the women affected? Taking 14 years to begin informing women that a pension that they had paid into was being deferred is quite something. Can we imagine the outcry if a private pension provider behaved in such a way? There would be an outcry in this House, and no doubt there would be legal action.

Given that entitlement to a state pension is earned through national insurance contributions, with many women having made contributions for more than 40 years, that is quite staggering. A woman born on 6 April 1953 who, under the previous legislation, would have retired on 6 April 2013 would have received a letter from the DWP in January 2012 with the bombshell that she would not get a pension until July 2016.

Think about receiving such a letter. You think you are on the verge of retirement, and the rug has been pulled from under you—no wonder there is a need to pay compensation to those affected. The new pensionable age was three years and three months later than such an individual might have expected. With just 15 months' notice, what she thought was a contract that she had with the Government was simply ripped up. The implications of all this have left women with no time to put alternative plans in place, despite many having looked forward to imminent retirement.

Then we have the issue of the change supposedly being phased in gradually. We were dealing with a three-month increase in women's pensionable age for each calendar month that passed. It was simply scandalous that women's pensionable age was rising so rapidly. That is why today we have the moral duty to immediately correct a wrong. This has gone on for too long. As has been said, sadly, 288,000 WASPI women have died since the campaign started. Another dies every 13 minutes, and a number have no doubt died while we have been having this afternoon's debate.

We have the ombudsman's report, and we have to put in place remedies now. The DWP has to play a part in bringing forward proposals for a financial redress scheme before the summer recess, and those proposals must be amendable. Most importantly, any scheme must clear the parliamentary process before the summer recess. We do not have long—less than nine weeks of parliamentary time. This means that within days—I have respect for the Minister, as she knows—the DWP must come forward with proposals. Will the Minister respond appropriately to that demand?

It is now nearly two months since the ombudsman's report, and we cannot wait any longer. So many of the WASPI women who have suffered as a result of maladministration should have received financial remedy, which is why we must now take action, and this must not be a party political matter. It ought to be about all of us recognising a wrong that needs to be righted, and I appeal to Members from right across the Chamber to recognise our responsibility to do the right thing. Let us make sure that the WASPI women get an apology and get compensation.

3.32 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): This has been a timely and very powerful debate. We have heard some incredible contributions from many Members, who have shared first-hand knowledge of their constituents and the way they have been treated. I was very moved by what was said by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) about the couple in his constituency who have basically lost everything because of this whole sorry saga. Some 3.8 million women have been affected by this issue, and many have now died—possibly over 270,000.

This debate would not be happening if it was not for the bravery of the WASPI women campaigners over many years. I have always been impressed by their verve and the demands that they bring to any occasion, and by their dressing appropriately in suffragette colours—one cannot miss them at any event or meeting anywhere. We should pay tribute to all of them for the incredible work that they have put into drawing attention to this grotesque injustice over many years. They deserve to know that they will get an answer that will give them some comfort and hope.

In the last decade, only three or four ombudsman's reports have gone to Parliament because the Government have refused to acknowledge or accept them. The whole principle of the ombudsman is that it is an independent, non-political office that makes recommendations on the basis of the evidence it has collected. It went to a great deal of trouble to collect evidence and chose a sample of cases to give a holistic view on the situation, so the very least we can do is expect that the Government will undertake to act on the report.

I was very impressed by the Work and Pensions Committee's evidence session on 7 May. I was impressed by the campaign's detail, by the evidence it presented and by the commendable speed with which it responded to the Committee and to the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, chaired by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey). We need to thank the campaign for its work.

The WASPI women came up during the last two general election campaigns, and let us be absolutely clear that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and I committed that an incoming Labour Government would have dealt with this issue, compensated the WASPI women and accepted that a grotesque injustice had been done. That would have been expensive but, as I tried to explain in my interview with Andrew Neil, it would only have redressed an injustice. It would not have been throwing Government money around willy-nilly. Treating people properly is a moral issue.

Many would say that Parliament is now confronted with a problem not of its own making, and that it has to do something to try to resolve the issue. Well, we are always confronted with problems not of our own making. We do not make problems—[*Interruption.*] Well, I hope we do not make problems, but we have to deal with them. In the case of the problems that have recently come before us—the injustice of the miners' pension scheme, the injustice of freezing the pension rate for overseas pensioners, the Horizon scandal, and the enormous question of the contaminated blood scandal—we are here to resolve those problems and secure justice for people who have suffered a grotesque injustice. People look to Parliament to achieve that.

We have the report, the information and the knowledge. We understand the injustice that has been done, the poverty that many people have been forced into and the insult when a person in their 60s finds that they cannot access their pension and is told by a DWP job adviser to take an apprenticeship, which is ludicrous. They know full well that they are not going to get it. Those people feel a sense of hurt. They believe that they did the right thing, and they believe that the Government and the DWP have done the wrong thing by them.

Rebecca Hilsenrath answered question 51 of the Work and Pensions Committee's evidence session, on whether information should have been made better available, which obviously it should have been, by saying that services should be "user-focused". She thought that the information system was poor, and that the advertising of it was poor.

Clearly many very well informed people were not aware of the dangerous situation they were moving into with their own personal finances. There is an opportunity to resolve this, and it could be resolved with a statement from the Government today undertaking that, by 18 July, when I understand the summer recess starts, they will put forward a proposal for a simple compensation scheme based on a formula, as the Chair of Work and Pensions Committee set out, to ensure that compensation can be speedily paid. If compensation was individualised, we would clearly have to deal with several million individual cases, which would take a very long time.

What we need is justice, and it is up to this Parliament to deliver that justice for women who worked so hard to deliver the services from which we have all benefited. We owe it to them, and we can do it now.

3.38 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my good friend and comrade, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing and leading this debate. She started with some very hard

[Chris Stephens]

truths that have to be heard, including the simple fact that we would not be debating this subject today if the Government had allocated their own time to discussing the report and how we go forward, which is exactly what should have happened.

I am getting good at the game of anticipating what is in the Government's prepared text. We will no doubt be told that the pension changes were made for the great cause of equality—that if we punish people equally, it is a great stride towards equality. The simple and brutal dynamic is, however, that women born in the 1950s have been discriminated against throughout their life. It started with growing up and not having a cheque book or being able to hire a television unless they had the express permission of their father or husband. There was the expectation that if they fell pregnant, they were to leave their employment and give up their careers to raise children. As my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, if they were divorced, the expectation of the financial settlement was that their pensionable rights would be there at the age of 60.

The discrimination against 1950s-born women has been going on for a long time. To say to those women with very little notice, as if it is an episode of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?", "We don't want to give you that. We want you to work an additional six years in the name of equality," is frankly ludicrous. We need to recognise the injustices and discrimination that many 1950s-born women suffered throughout their life.

We also need to recognise that this change was not about some magical equality formula; it was to make women work longer. We need to have a serious debate about the huge difference between someone's working age expectancy and their life expectancy, because they are two entirely different things, particularly for women whose work involves hugely physical tasks, as in the care sector and the NHS.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making an important point. I want to go back to the Cridland report; I remember meeting Cridland at the time. On the issue of healthy life expectancy, to be told that the DWP did not hold such information because that was the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care shows the dysfunctionality and the lack of concern about people's healthy life.

Chris Stephens: My right hon. Friend is right. I have always been told that there is joined-up Government here—[*Interruption.*] Well, I am often told that by Members on the Government Benches, but all too often, hon. Members on the Opposition Benches meet that with the surprised and quizzical look that I just got from the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on the Labour Front Bench when I said that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is correct that we need to consider such things in future, because someone, particularly a woman, who works in a physical environment such as the care sector, the NHS or any other line of work, will not be able to work until they are 66. That is a brutal dynamic.

Several hon. Members, including my good friend the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and

Lochaber, mentioned the former Pensions Minister who rose to his feet in the great Westminster Hall debate that was packed to the rafters and said that one of the solutions was for women to apply for an apprenticeship in a new phase of the economy. Those were the most ludicrous comments that I have heard—I have heard many ludicrous comments in my time in this place, but that was No. 1 on the list.

I pay tribute to the WASPI campaigners in Glasgow and Lanarkshire, particularly the great Kathy McDonald and Rosie Dickson, who have campaigned rigorously and vigorously over the last few years, including after the 2019 election, when many people thought that this issue was finished and was not getting anywhere. Those WASPI campaigners—the 1950s-born women who have campaigned consistently on this issue for the last five years in particular—should be commended in this House.

This Parliament has issues to grapple with. Next week we will discuss the report on infected blood; we will have a piece of legislation—rightly so—for the postmasters; and we have the issue before us. I agree with everyone who has spoken so far that we need to conclude this matter before the summer recess, so that we can all say, as a Parliament, that we know and accept the cost. Then we can debate matters going forward. I am very clear about justice for the 1950s-born women, the infected blood community and the postmasters. Those groups should not be blamed for a lack of investment in public infrastructure. The country badly needs those things, and we should not use those wonderful campaigners as an excuse.

I mentioned the great Rosie Dickson. She contacted me earlier with a quote from one of my favourite political philosophers, the great Jimmy Reid, who hailed from Govan, in my Glasgow South West constituency. He said:

"From the very depth of my being, I challenge the right of any man or any group of men, in business or in government, to tell a fellow human being that he or she is expendable."

The view of many 1950s-born women is that this Government have viewed them as expendable. I want to send a clear message to the House on their behalf, as many of us have today, that they are not expendable. They deserve justice. If justice is delayed, the price tag will go up; I hope the Government recognise that. I hope the Ministers will confirm today that we will see action and justice for those wonderful, brave 1950s-born women.

3.46 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I have lived this campaign for about 10 years, as have a number of other hon. Members. Today, we have heard unanimity from speakers from all political parties across the House. Unless we can get some action quickly, I despair of what parliamentary procedure is left to us. I do not want to go back to swinging the Mace about again, but something needs to happen fairly quickly because anger is building up, in the Chamber, outside and among the WASPI women.

I do not share the view of some hon. Members about the equalisation of pensions. I supported the equalisation of pensions, but not on the basis of the retirement age for women increasing. I thought we were entering a period when we would be reducing the age that men had to work until, so we would equalise pensions that way.

The argument then was about whether the economy could afford it. The reason I was trying to equalise pensions by reducing men's working age was largely for working-class people.

In many of our cities, the difference between the life expectancy of the rich and the poor is something like 20 years. We were told then that life expectancy would be continuously improving, but it has stagnated. Many people do not work in a sedentary role, so as we increase the retirement age—it is now going up to 68 and beyond—they will work until they drop. That is not acceptable, particularly in the economy that we have, where we could redistribute wealth, lower people's retirement age and give them a decent pension.

I was involved in designing the scheme proposed in 2019. We commissioned Lord Bryn Davies, who is one of the most respected pensions experts in the country, and worked for two years with WASPI and the different groups to design the scheme. My commentary on the proposals by the ombudsman reflects some of the work that was done. We looked at a straightforward scheme. Going into individual cases would take decades, to be frank, so we looked at a flat-rate scheme for everybody, based on an average loss of £100 a week. That resulted in an average payment of £15,000, which is a lot of money. We costed it at more than £50 billion, which seemed a lot of money at the time, but it is less than a third of what the Government saved by increasing the pension age for these women. In addition, we looked at different options: should we pay it over a four or five-year period and reduce the cost to £12 billion a year. When I said during the debate that this was a large amount of money, somebody said that we had just paid out £500 billion to bail out the banks when they had crippled the economy. Then we went into 2020 and covid hit us.

Grahame Morris: The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) made some excellent points, but he asked us how we could fund decent pensions and the requisite compensation. I looked up the figures. As a percentage of GDP, the UK spends 5.7% on state pensions and pensions benefits. In Italy, the figure is 16%. In France, it is 13.9%. In Denmark, it is 10.1%. The OECD average is 8.2%. By any measure, we are miles adrift.

John McDonnell: I also looked at what had been provided in tax cuts to some of the wealthiest in our country since 2010. It was £100 billion. I looked at how much had been given in corporate welfare benefits, and, again, it was £100 billion. Therefore, although it sounded like a lot of money at the time, in the context of fairness, it was the right amount. That is why the ombudsman's offer of between £3,000 and £10,000 is derisory; it has to be more than that. The reason for having a flat-rate compensation scheme is for ease of administration, and I would recommend that wholeheartedly.

We have heard today about the individual hardships that people have endured. We cannot allow that to go on any further, which is why this scheme must be expedited. The ombudsman reports and is accountable to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on which I serve. We have considered each of the reports as they have come forward. We were critical about the delays that were taking place, so we impressed on the ombudsman the urgency of the situation.

When we got the report back, we found that it had at least accepted that there had been an injustice and that there needed to be a compensation scheme. We waited with bated breath for the Secretary of State to announce at least the timescale and the timetable for that compensation scheme, but all we heard was that the Government would go away and consider it. That was weeks ago.

PACAC wrote to the Secretary of State and asked for a timetable, stressing the urgency of the matter, because, exactly as Members have said, people are dying. Some people cannot wait, because they either will literally not be here any more, or they are living in poverty and hardship.

We received a reply this week. The Secretary of State said that he would be bringing forward a statement "in due course". What that means is nothing; it is meaningless. As a Committee, we have agreed to write again to say that that is unacceptable and that we need a clear timetable in which this matter will be addressed and proposals brought forward that we can vote on and, if necessary, amend in this House.

If this Parliament is sovereign and the Government are accountable to this House, I believe that there is a majority, an overwhelming majority, of Members who will vote for a compensation scheme that is readily accessible, and also at a level that reflects the hardship that people have suffered and the scale that most Members would want to see.

As we go into a general election, the issue will not go away. The WASPI women and their campaign will not go away. People have expressed admiration for that campaign, which is not just impressive; it is terrifying. Unless a proposal is brought forward, it will become an election issue. I think people's votes will stand or fall in many constituencies on the basis of the decision coming out of all the political parties. Voters will, however, blame the Government the most, because there is an opportunity now, as others have said, to make a statement by the recess with a timetable for implementation. We could almost certainly agree the funding. We looked at how to raise the funds. Some could be borrowing, but the Government normally have contingencies for legal liabilities. This is a legal liability. We have the opportunity to act now, and I urge the Government to wake up and listen to what the whole House is saying. If today's response is not satisfactory, we will be back next week, and if necessary every day until the recess until we get some sense out of the Government.

3.55 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as ever, to follow another expert speech from the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for taking forward his Bill. Both are real WASPI champions, and they make a fierce campaigning duo on the Front Bench.

The state pension is relied upon by more than 12 million of our citizens, and certainty about when they will be able to claim it is pivotal for many more who are planning retirement and making huge decisions based on that date. We now know that when changes to pensions impacting 1950s-born women were being implemented,

[Stuart C. McDonald]

those changes were not communicated properly. Many received no direct communication at all. Others found out what was to happen too late, having already made major decisions that they would not have made had they known the changes that were ahead. Communicating changes to the state pension must be done well in advance, and using all means possible. That did not happen with the WASPI women. That is the nub of what the ombudsman found, and it is what the Government have to acknowledge.

As the ombudsman said, an apology is due and compensation is owed. Parliament has been asked to take the lead on this, and so the first and most important point that Members have been making unanimously is that the Government must hurry up and deliver. It has already been a long and arduous road to justice for the WASPI women. It has taken far too long, and as has been noted, tragically too many will not get to the end of that road with us. Once again, I pay tribute to my constituent June Miller, a key figure in establishing our Cumbernauld WASPI group. It was an honour to work alongside her and the local team as they were establishing their campaign group, hosting public meetings and running WASPI surgeries. June marched outside Parliament with her WASPI colleagues from across the UK in October 2018. She made the case forcefully, eloquently and patiently—typical of the WASPI campaign.

It is heartbreaking that June is one of more than 280,000 WASPI women to have died during the lifetime of the campaign. That is why the most important message that we are conveying today is that the Government must move swiftly. The Work and Pensions Committee is absolutely right: let us have proposals before the summer, and as has been said a couple of times, those proposals must be amenable to amendment by MPs. It is Parliament specifically that has been tasked with this, not just Government Ministers. As others have said, there is no excuse. The Government should have seen this coming months and years ago.

The big point of contention is clearly the level of compensation. While the ombudsman spoke of level 4 compensation, most of us know that that reflects only the handful of cases that the PHSO looked at, and almost certainly not the range of experiences faced by the WASPI women as a whole. My view is that such a level of compensation feels significantly understated, and is not a fair reflection of the impact that the maladministration had on many of my constituents. I know that lots of hon. Members feel the same way. I therefore join others in commending the work of the all-party parliamentary group, which has argued that fair compensation means level 6 compensation, because of the

“profound, devastating or irreversible impacts”

that the changes had. The point that that went way beyond a financial impact, and caused

“extraordinary emotional, physical and psychological distress”

is consistent with the experience of WASPI women in Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East.

I also think that there is considerable merit in a system that allows for higher payments for those who suffered the shortest notice and faced the longest delays until their state pension age. There will be WASPI cases that have not been examined by the ombudsman where

compensation for direct financial loss is absolutely appropriate, but again, speed is important. A general payment for lack of notice should not be delayed, but thereafter I do not see why claims for additional awards for direct loss could not also be proceeded with and considered. In that, there would be a parallel with the Windrush scheme, where concerns about the slowness of decision making led to pressure from the Home Affairs Committee for provisional or interim payments to claimants, which thankfully were implemented. It is possible to have speedy payments for all and thereafter to go on and have detailed consideration of individual claimants.

Another, perhaps even more important, lesson from Windrush that I do not think has been mentioned in this debate is that surely it would be wise for the compensation scheme to be run independently of the DWP, and preferably independently of Government altogether. That is surely sensible if people are to have faith in it, particularly when the Department is proving so reluctant even to recognise that it has done anything wrong. The perception of a lack of independence certainly hindered the Windrush compensation scheme and undermined people's confidence in coming forward to claim from it. We should learn a lesson from that.

Finally, on another day we will need to come back to the question of why it has taken so long to get here. I do not mean any of this as a criticism of the ombudsman or its staff; it is more to do with the resources available to them and the parameters within which they have to work. However, whether with WASPI, Windrush, Horizon, infected blood or any other recent scandal, time and again the mechanisms for putting right injustice and Government maladministration seem to have been slow, and sometimes even more of a hindrance than a help. We need to revisit and overhaul how such failings are examined and remedied. As we have heard, justice delayed is justice denied, and that has certainly been the case for too many WASPI women.

In conclusion, our constituents are not asking for the earth—they never have been. They are quite realistic about what can and cannot be done, and now they have the backing of the ombudsman. The Government need to recognise, to apologise and to compensate, and more than anything they need to do so urgently.

4.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak today on behalf of the WASPI women. Every right hon. and hon. Member who has spoken in this debate has done so with a heartfelt desire on behalf of their constituents, and I wish to do the same. A lot has been said, but I want to offer a Northern Ireland perspective in the debate. It unites the voices of those in this Chamber when we speak on behalf of all our constituents within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland there are some 77,000 WASPI women—ladies who deserve to have their pension but have been denied it. Tragically, many have passed away. In my Strangford constituency we have approximately 5,000 who should qualify as WASPI women. Although I am the only Northern Ireland MP in the Chamber now, I know that many of my colleagues from other parties have spoken on this issue. I had a well-attended debate on 12 March; it was unfortunate that in that

debate Members only had about three minutes. In today's debate at least Members have had at least 10 or perhaps even 15 minutes, depending on when they came in. I asked a question on the same issue on 25 March in this Chamber and again on 2 May.

This debate is vital, but—and I say this almost as a question—is it necessary? Hon. Members will say, “What do you mean, is it necessary? That's almost a contradiction.” But it is not. The debate is not necessary: the problem is crystal clear and undisputed, at least by every person who has spoken. That being the case, we should recognise this and grant the compensation in a timely manner. That is what the debate is about. That is what we are asking for, and everyone from all political parties is united on that. We have the ombudsman's report. Why, then, do we need to debate this issue again today, if the problem and the solution are clear and expected? That is the way I see it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), as I often do, on setting the scene; I know this issue has been a passion of hers in this House. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who will sum up for the SNP at the end of the debate, on his Bill, which I have signed, along with others. The Government could grasp that Bill, push it through and have it all done by July. I also did not know until this debate, when the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke, that he and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who is not in his place, had a Bill or a process ready to bring forward. Would it be onerous or unrighteous of me to say that perhaps that is something that could be used as a text to move it forward? Right hon. and hon. Members have brought lots of ideas forward.

I say this with great respect to the Minister, who is an honest man and a gentleman, and who does his job well: the Government are dragging their heels. As we have said on multiple occasions, each day that passes means that another lady has been wronged. My constituents and others are missing out not simply on justice—that is reason enough—but on the quality of life that should have been theirs. Parties across the Chamber have come together to reiterate that, but the power for change—and the reason change is not coming forward—lies with the Government. That is the way I see it.

On the many occasions I have spoken about the WASPI ladies, I have given the example of a constituent of mine who was a school cleaner—everybody's constituencies had school cleaners like her. That lady cleaned the school toilets until she was 60, with arthritis and pain. She spent most of her time on her knees. It is always good to spend time on your knees, as long as it is in prayer, but that lady spent her time on her knees on a floor with cold tiles, and she ended up with arthritis and pains. That is the issue. She focused on the end date when she could stop putting herself in pain and start enjoying her retirement without having to worry about turning her heating on because she could rely on her pension. That lady never had a sick day in 30 years—boy, what a record! She turned up every day for 30 years to clean the toilets at the school. She deserves credit for that.

We know that lady's generation well. There is no shame in it, but she felt shame about taking benefits, and she worked hard for the entitlement to a well-earned pension, which she thought she was getting. That pension

was about nine months or a year ahead of her, when suddenly it turned out to be six years ahead of her. What—really? There needs to be action. That was done to her without so much as a by your leave or a financial plan. I hear people saying, “Well, they knew about the plan,” but many of my WASPI women did not know at all. I cannot remember which Member said that 60% of people did not know about their financial options. My constituent's option was to continue working on her knees, scrubbing, with tears in her eyes and in pain, which meant that she had to apply for sick pay.

This Government did that to her—and I say that with respect to the Minister. That is the reason why it happened. The ombudsman said that it was not right to do that to my constituent, and that we should compensate that honourable lady and the 5,000 other WASPI women in my constituency, as well as all those across this great United Kingdom. We are no further forward in giving her that entitlement. Meanwhile, those extra years of hard labour have taken their toll physically and emotionally. I genuinely have no words to say to that lady other than: “I am sorry. I continually ask for compensation for you and the others. I am sorry that the Government got it wrong. And I am sorry that it still is not rectified.”

I do not want to heap coals of fire upon the shoulders or the head of the Minister, but the responsibility for this lies with the Government. My words to the Government are clear and direct, and I have plenty of them, but they can all be summed up in a few words: do the right thing, and do it now. That is my request. The Government know their obligation, understand their duty, and accept the rationale behind that, so all we need now is the action to make this happen.

We have seen how quickly compensation can be sorted, so why are we in this position where we are no further forward and doing the right thing seems not to be a priority? It needs to be a priority—it needs to be a priority today, following this debate. It needs to be a priority before the summer recess, whenever that comes. That is the target date that I am asking the Minister to aim for, because we need to give hope to our constituents and those WASPI women who have resolutely, courageously, and in many cases physically, withstood the test of time.

I believe that compensation should be granted in the form of a lump sum to help pay off any outstanding loans or debts, and there should then be an enhanced payment for a clear and set period of time. We have heard stories today of people who made their plans on the grounds of the pension plan that they had, only to find out that they had been disempowered, and all the plans they had made had to be scrapped. They lost their houses, their jobs and their health. What are we doing to help those people?

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is making a sensitive and excellent speech. Does he agree that this is not only about the loss of a pension from the age of 60, the fact that people have not been able to plan and so forth? For many women, their occupational pension will have been tied to the date of their retirement or their state pension—it varies a lot, depending on what the pension scheme is. Some women have lost thousands upon thousands of pounds as a result of this decision.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. The occupational pension is another factor; it is incorporated in the plan that these people have made

[Jim Shannon]

for their future. It is wonderful how you make a plan for the future and then the Government scupper it on you! All of a sudden, these ladies have found themselves in difficult circumstances, so I believe it is necessary to have a compensation scheme in place to help all of those ladies.

I will conclude with one more comment, ever mindful of the time limit that we all indicated we would keep to. I understand the magnitude of such a scheme, but we were able to get support quickly to households across the UK for cost of living and energy payments—something that I commend the Government on. That can be done on many occasions; we just need the commitment to make it happen. I know that the Government have the ability and the capacity to roll out all these schemes, so along with almost every other colleague in this House today, I sincerely ask that we prioritise finding a compensation formula and rolling it out. These women, our constituents—brave, courageous women—deserve no less, and we must ensure that we give them no less.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesman.

4.12 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Like everybody else, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate, and for all the work she has done in speaking up for 3.8 million affected women for all these years. I also commend all the other Members who have spoken in today's debate; there have been powerful speeches, and powerful but harrowing stories of how various constituents have been affected by the increases in the state pension age for women.

There is a Back-Bench consensus today that the Government have dragged their heels, that a response is now long overdue, and that compensation is due. We have also disproved the nonsense that women should have known about the increases in their state pension age. Financial advisers and lawyers did not even know: as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, divorces were granted on the basis of women accessing their pensions at the age of 60.

Some Labour Back Benchers today have rightly criticised the Government for their lack of action and for their policies elsewhere, but then somehow bristled at SNP speakers calling out the silence of their own Front Benchers. We are willing to work cross-party, but we also need pressure for action. If we do not call out what we think is wrongdoing, we are not doing the right thing for the WASPI women who we are all here to represent today.

We would not be in this Chamber today, debating this issue as parliamentarians, if not for fantastic campaigners such as Ayrshire WASPI Group, Cunninghame WASPI Group, WASPI in my constituency, WASPI Scotland, and of course the wider WASPI organisation. I pay tribute to my constituent Ann Hammell, who brought the issue to my attention in my early period as an MP in 2015. Again, it was heartening to hear so many MPs commend their own local campaigners.

Turning to the ombudsman's report, there are a few key aspects: the findings and confirmation of maladministration in the DWP, compensation to be paid, and Government failures. I will explore each in turn. The ombudsman has not only confirmed that it believes that the DWP is guilty of maladministration, but has expressed outright anger at the belligerence of the Department and, by default, this Tory Government. I welcome the robust comments of the ombudsman's chief executive, Rebecca Hilsenrath, who has stated:

“The UK's national Ombudsman has made a finding of failings by DWP in this case and has ruled that the women affected are owed compensation. DWP has clearly indicated that it will refuse to comply. This is unacceptable.”

I agree with her.

It beggars belief that, in 2024, the Government are suddenly pretending that this ombudsman's report is a bolt out of the blue and very complex. It is three years since the ombudsman found that the DWP was guilty of maladministration because of its lack of communication about increasing the state pension age. It is scandalous that the ombudsman is actually having to ask Parliament to find a way to create a mechanism to provide compensation for those affected. If the ombudsman does not trust the UK Government to do the right thing, I do not trust them either.

Unfortunately, at the moment I also do not trust the official Opposition, who have been too quiet on the report findings to date. That is why I have brought forward my private Member's Bill, the State Pension Age (Compensation) Bill, which sets out a compensation framework. We need to remember that the Prime Minister was the Chancellor who boasted about setting up the furlough scheme in a couple of weeks for the covid lockdown. Clearly, if there is a Government will, there is a way, so why do the Government not have the will to get on with a compensation scheme for the WASPI women?

In the ombudsman's report, compensation is unfortunately set at just level 4, which feels wrong. For the majority of the 3.8 million women affected, it feels like a smack in the face. Compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 is an inadequate maximum payout. The WASPI APPG recommended level 6 for the worst affected, and my private Member's Bill takes a similar approach. I have suggested a framework that follows the clear logic that those affected by the biggest increase in state pension age, while in effect having the shortest notice period, should receive the most compensation.

As for the 2.5 million women who have had to wait five years or more to access their pension, it would be absurd to award them just level 4 compensation of less than £3,000. In my framework, they would be allocated compensation at PHSO level 6, which is about £10,000. Those who have not had to wait quite as long, but who were still badly affected in some cases, will get levels 4 and 5, with a minority on lower levels. I thank Members from across the House who have signed my private Member's Bill.

This subject has been debated in Parliament for nine years, and for over nine years these women and their families have been fighting for justice. It is tragic that, as has been repeated many times, the women are dying at a rate of 40,000 a year, or one WASPI woman every

13 minutes, and they are not getting the justice they deserve. This underlines that it is critical that Parliament takes action now.

However, there has not even been a suggestion on the way forward from the official Opposition. They should be putting proposals to the Government, and saying what they would do if they were in government. If their solution was accepted by the Government, they could then claim credit for getting compensation over the line. Instead, we have heard nothing from the Opposition—zip—apart from weasel words about listening. I hope the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), will change my mind and offer proposals during her summing up, but there was a bad example last week in the Scottish Parliament, when Labour MPs sat on their hands when it came to voting for compensation for the WASPI women. They had the temerity to get photographs taken with the campaigners, and to tell them that they backed them, but then they went into the Chamber in Holyrood, sat on their hands and actively abstained, which was disgraceful.

As I say, I hope the shadow Minister will bring forward proposals, but I would like her and the Minister responding to the debate to consider the constituents' stories we have heard today, and a few of mine as well. Lynn was exhausted after working for 34 years in the NHS and agreed to take early retirement at 55, but she found out on her last day of work that it would be 11 years before she got the state pension, not the five years she anticipated. Nancy was widowed at the age of 54, while she was working part time, which was clearly traumatic emotionally and financially. She has suffered umpteen chronic health conditions while caring for her parents, but was forced to take NHS bank work just to survive.

Lesley, who has sometimes worked three jobs to make ends meet, was a carer for her partner when he had cancer, a carer for her dad when he had cancer, and had a period of travelling to Southampton every weekend to visit her aunt—superwoman efforts that would exhaust anybody. It is little wonder that she took early retirement age 56, only to discover later that she had to wait six years longer than she thought to access her pension.

Do not dare tell those women and others like them that they need to wait longer for justice. These are women who did not have maternity rights back in the day. They were paid less than men, and were more likely to work part time, and their private pensions were smaller, if they had them. In reality, pension age equalisation has further disadvantaged those women, especially as they were told that to get a full pension, they had to pay extra NI contributions. It is time that the right thing was done, and that right thing is fair and fast compensation now.

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

4.20 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this important debate from the limited time that it has to allocate. I have listened carefully to every contribution. A number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), the hon. Members

for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), talked about the experience of women who have been part of this campaign, or who described to their MP what they had been through. Some Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), also mentioned the context of those experiences, and the systematic sexism that women have faced.

Other Members described the detail of the ombudsman's report, and the possibilities for redress, including the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), and my right hon. Friends the Members for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), and for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who chairs the Work and Pensions Committee.

We have had a thorough and extensive debate this afternoon. I recognise and pay tribute to the women who have joined us today, or who have watched the debate from afar. As I say, it has been a full discussion. The ombudsman's report is important and has serious lessons for the Government. It also relates the serious consequences for the women who experienced the events that it describes. The ombudsman has rightly said that it is for the Government to respond, and that Parliament should consider the report's findings. As we have heard, the Work and Pensions Committee has begun that process, and will hear from Ministers next week, I believe. I will follow those proceedings carefully.

In March, the Secretary of State said in this Chamber that he would proceed "without undue delay", and on Monday he said that he still required an appropriate amount of time to consider the ombudsman's conclusion. My first question is about time. For all the reasons that Members have set out, it would be helpful if the Minister set out a timescale, and told us, crucially, what advice has been provided to the Government, and what analysis is under way in the Department. It would be helpful to know what the process is.

In the absence of that further update from the Government, Labour's position remains the same as it was when the ombudsman's report was published. We are all waiting for the Government to respond, so I will not diverge from what my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said six weeks ago. Although I understand the political reasons why the SNP wants to put pressure on me, I am not the Minister, and I do not have access to the information and advice that the Government have. I therefore call on the Government to respond without delay.

Issues around changes to the state pension have spanned multiple Parliaments, but I remind everybody that the moment that sparked the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign was the Pensions Act 2011, in which the then Chancellor, George Osborne, decided to accelerate state pension age increases with very little notice—a time described accurately by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. George Osborne's comment that that

"probably saved more money than anything else we've done"

[Alison McGovern]

made me angry at the time, as I imagine it angered many other women. During that period, Labour tabled amendments that would have ensured that proper notice was given, so that women could plan for their retirement. That would have gone some way to dealing with the problem.

Have the Government, even now, done an analysis of why they pressed ahead with the changes, despite the clear consequences? In any case, the ombudsman began investigating how changes to the state pension age were communicated in 2019. That year, the High Court ruled that the ombudsman could not recommend changes to the state pension itself, or the reimbursement of lost pensions, because those issues had been decided on by Parliament, as many Members have mentioned.

The ombudsman's report states that internal research from DWP in 2004 found that about 40% of the women affected knew about the changes to the state pension age. Is that still the Government's assessment, now that the report has been published, or are they looking for other evidence? What is their assessment of the total number of women who would receive compensation under the different options put forward by the ombudsman? How many of them are the poorest pensioners, and how many of them are on pension credit? How many of those affected have already retired or sadly passed away? Given that the Government knew, as Members have described, that there were problems communicating the changes to the state pension age, I wonder about that moment in 2011, and precisely what advice was provided to Ministers at the time.

Let us think about the principle here. The Government are committed to providing 10 years' notice of future changes to the state pension age. In 2015, the Pensions Commission found that that should be 15 years' notice. It is important for the Government to state why there is that difference. We all want a result of this debate to be a guarantee that information about any future changes to the state pension age will be timely and helpful for the individuals affected. We have problems with the pensions dashboards. What is going on with pensions information? Crucially, will the response to the ombudsman's report, when it comes, contain a list of the lessons that the Department is learning, and measures that it is putting in place?

The ombudsman took the rare decision to ask Parliament to intervene on this issue because it had doubts, as many Members have described, about whether the Department would provide a remedy. In the light of those concerns, and to aid Parliament with its work, I ask again, as we did previously, for the Government to commit to laying out all relevant information, and placing it in the Library. I have some experience of dealing with historical injustices, and I must impress on the Minister that my experience from dealing with the Hillsborough disaster is that open access to the evidence is extremely important. I hope that, in the spirit of the Hillsborough law, the Government will come forward and put that information before us, so that we can see it.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I do not imagine that we will get a response today to the ombudsman's report, but will he at least set out the timetable for a response, because we cannot move on until we have that? I hope that the women affected by all

these changes—including those changes expedited in 2011—who were born just after the second world war can soon hear the Government's response. As many have mentioned, they were born long before a woman's place at work, and women's full rights to their own earnings and pensions, were secured.

This place has always been slow when it comes to women's rights. In 1951, more than 30 years after women could first come here, just 17 of 650 MPs were women, yet women of that generation built the platform that we all stand on. They fought to change things for women, and the least they deserve is a response from the Government to the ombudsman's report.

4.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time to host the debate. We have heard from Members on both sides of the House and from across the whole country, who have spoken both eloquently and passionately on behalf of their constituents. I know that many in the Public Gallery, as well as those listening remotely, who will be taking a close, scrutinising interest in this matter. I am always conscious that it is on behalf of those women that we are deliberating.

I pay tribute to those in my own constituency who have campaigned long and hard and met me down the years, even in recent weeks. I readily acknowledge the strength of feeling on both sides of the House. The Government are listening. What colleagues have had to say during the debate, which I have heard, will be taken fully into consideration.

In the oral statement made to the House on 25 March, the Secretary of State explained that the ombudsman's report is complex, with the events that it considers spanning about 30 years. He committed to provide an "update to the House once we have considered the report's findings."—[*Official Report*, 25 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 1281.]

I understand the wide interest in this matter across the Chamber. We are all united in wanting a resolution. The ombudsman's investigation has taken five years and produced a substantial report that requires careful and considered scrutiny. It is only right that we should give it that scrutiny. The Government are giving full and proper consideration to the ombudsman's report, and that work is ongoing. The issues to be decided are significant and complex and require detailed understanding and deliberation.

I would like to remind the House of the Government's strong track record of supporting pensioners. In 2024-25, we will spend more than £167 billion on benefits for pensioners. That is 6% of GDP and includes spending on the state pension, which is forecast to be about £138 billion in 2024-25. We are honouring the triple lock, having increased the basic and new state pensions by 8.5% in April. In 2024-25, the full yearly amount of the basic state pension will be £3,700 higher in cash terms than it was in 2010. We now have 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty after housing costs.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Minister for sharing those figures. I am aware that people are a bit sceptical about statistics—someone said in the Select Committee the other day that 83.6% of all statistics

were made up; I am not sure if that is true. Can I just advise the Minister of this? We have the poorest pensioners in Europe. Just 5.7% of our UK GDP is spent on state pensions and pensions benefits, compared with 16% in Italy, 13.9% in France, 11.9% in Spain, and an OECD average of 8.2%. His suggestion that our pensioners are generously provided for does not stand up to scrutiny.

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for that contribution. I heard the hon. Gentleman make those comments in his speech as well. I am trying to remember the precise figures, but I cannot, so I will write to him. More generally—this point is often made to me by pension experts—the international numbers are not directly comparable because each welfare system is entirely different, particularly in the public-private split in how pension systems are funded. To say that one percentage is generous while another percentage is not generous is not quite the point. I shall write to him none the less, because I think that he will find the fine print useful for his future contributions.

Sir George Howarth: The Minister said that the Government are to give the ombudsman's report serious consideration before they decide what to do. How long does he think that process will take?

Paul Maynard: If I may, I will answer that in a moment, because I will now turn back to the report. In laying the report before Parliament, the ombudsman brought matters to the House's attention, making it clear that Parliament has a role in responding to the report. The Government intend to engage fully and constructively with Parliament. I view this debate as a crucial part of that process.

I remind the House about what the ombudsman's report says—and indeed does not say. The ombudsman has looked not at the decision to equalise the state pension age but rather at how that decision was communicated by the DWP. That is important to understand, as the motion calls on the Government to “deliver prompt compensation to women born in the 1950s who had their State Pension age raised.”

Importantly, the ombudsman's report hinges on the Department's decisions over a narrow period between 2005 and 2007, and their effect on individual notifications. The ombudsman has not found that women have directly lost out financially as a result DWP actions. The report stated:

“We do not find that it”—
the DWP's communication—
“resulted in them suffering direct financial loss.”

The final report does not say that all women born in the 1950s will have been adversely impacted, as many women were aware that the state pension age had changed. The stage 1 report found that between 1995 and 2004, the DWP's communication of changes to the state pension age reflected the standards that the ombudsman would expect it to meet. That report also confirmed that accurate information about changes to the state pension age was publicly available in leaflets, through the DWP pension education campaigns and DWP agencies and on its website. However, when considering the Department's actions between August 2005 and December 2007, the ombudsman came to the view that they resulted

in 1950s-born women receiving individual notice later than they might have done had different decisions been made.

I welcome the wide-ranging contributions from Members on behalf of their constituents.

Alan Brown: The ombudsman clearly said that the DWP was guilty of maladministration during the period of 2005 to 2007. Does the Minister accept the finding that the DWP was guilty of maladministration, and should put its hands up to that?

Paul Maynard: I recognise that there will be an appetite from some Opposition Members for the Government to respond item by item to different parts of the ombudsman's report, but the Government wish to respond in full when they have reached a conclusion from their deliberations. I will not go down the path that the hon. Gentleman seeks to take me along.

Some of the detailed commentary from Members today illustrates the interlocking considerations at play, depending on how each Member of Parliament responds to the report. The fact that so many have spoken today demonstrates the importance of this issue. Many parliamentary activities are worth noting to understand how they fit in. The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), mentioned the evidence session held last week and the recommendation that he has made to the Department, which I read after he mentioned it, so I have only just seen it.

Late last month I was able to meet the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the chair and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group, to discuss our initial views of the report and what steps they intended to pursue to take further evidence. I am looking forward to seeing what they have to say. I have noted the evidence given last week to the Select Committee. I also took careful note of what occurred in the Scottish Parliament. The many views expressed so far provide valuable input to the ongoing deliberations.

Let me come to the question from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) about the written answer she received. I will take my glasses off to read this, because the print is very small and not clear: in November 2023, alongside other interested parties, the DWP received a copy of the PHSO's revised provisional views on injustice, which was stage two of the inquiry, and remedies, which were stage three, for comment. The DWP responded with its comments in January 2024. The Department was notified by the PHSO on 19 March that the final report would be received on 21 March 2024, at a meeting between the permanent secretary and the ombudsman. I note that the hon. Lady's written question was about the final report as opposed to the preliminary report.

Wendy Chamberlain: It was about the draft report, but I am grateful for that clarity.

Paul Maynard: Members raised questions about changes to the state pension age. As I said, the ombudsman's report is clear that it cannot consider the impact of changes in the law on state pension age. The changes are

[Paul Maynard]

set out in primary legislation and, as such, were agreed by Parliament. The announcement in 1993 of the equalisation of the state pension age addressed a long-standing inequality between men and women. The changes were also about maintaining the right balance between the sustainability of the state pension, fairness between generations and ensuring a dignified retirement.

Changes to the state pension age were made in a series of Acts by successive Governments from 1995 onwards, following public consultations and extensive debates in both Houses of Parliament. From the 1940s until April 2010, the state pension age was 60 for women and 65 for men. The decision to equalise the state pension age for men and women dates back to 1995. It was right to address a long-standing inequality between men's and women's state pension age. The report of the Pensions Commission in 2005 recommended that the state pension age should increase in a staged way to 68 in the three decades following the completion of equalisation in 2020. A broad consensus on that was achieved largely due to the commission's evidence base, which showed that state pension age should follow increases in life expectancy to help ensure the affordability and sustainability of the state pension.

Legislation passed in 2007 introduced a series of increases, starting with a state pension age of 66 between 2024 and 2026, and ending with an increase to 68 between 2044 and 2046. As has been observed, the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated the equalisation of women's state pension age by 18 months and brought forward the increase in men's and women's state pension age to 66 by five and a half years, relative to the previous timetables. The changes in the 2011 Act occurred following a public call for evidence and extensive debates in Parliament. During the passage of the Act, Parliament legislated for a concession worth £1.1 billion. The concession reduced the proposed increase in state pension age for more than 450,000 men and women, and meant that no woman saw their state pension age change by more than 18 months relative to the timetable set by the Pensions Act 1995.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: Sorry, I won't.

During the course of the ombudsman's investigation, state pension age changes were considered by the courts. In 2019 and 2020, the High Court and Court of Appeal respectively found no fault with the actions of DWP. The courts made clear that under successive Governments dating back to 1995, the action taken was entirely lawful and did not discriminate on any grounds. During those proceedings, the Court of Appeal held that the High Court was entitled to conclude as a fact that there had been

"adequate and reasonable notification given by the publicity campaigns implemented by the Department over a number of years".

We recognise the importance of providing information in good time about the state pension age to help individuals to plan for their retirement. Since 1995, the Government have used a range of methods to inform people about the increases in state pension age, including the provision

of detailed and personalised information. The methods have included leaflets explaining the legislative changes, pensions education campaigns, press advertising and direct mailing exercises to millions of people. People have been able to request personalised state pension information since the 1980s.

John McDonnell: We do not know the timing of the general election—possibly November, but maybe later—but it is likely that we will have only about 10 sitting weeks between now and a general election. Can I impress on the Minister to take back to his fellow Ministers that we need the proposals rapidly in those 10 weeks, and certainly before recess, if we are to get a viable scheme through Parliament?

Paul Maynard: I am happy to confirm that I will take that message back. I have heard it clearly today. I understand the points about the Work and Pensions Committee's findings, too. The right hon. Gentleman will have heard the Secretary of State—and me, in oral questions on Monday—say that we wish to have no undue delay. That remains the case. I recognise that people are frustrated by that phrase, but it is an accurate phrase. We do not wish undue delay. As I keep saying, it is a complex issue. It is not just a matter of ticking a box. It needs to be gotten right, and we understand all the ramifications and options that are open to us.

Between April 2000 and February 2021, the DWP provided more than 41.2 million personalised state pension statements, and it continues to do so. As well as issuing letters to the 6.9 million women and men born in the 1950s notifying them of the state pension age increase, the DWP sent around 17.8 million automatic state pension forecasts between 2003 and 2006, which included a leaflet explaining that the state pension age for women was increasing.

As I have outlined, the Government recognise the importance of this issue. The ombudsman report has been laid before Parliament, and we have been invited to take a view and engage with this issue. Today is one part of that. We will listen to the views of the House with great seriousness. The report is currently being given active and extensive consideration within the Department, by me and by the Secretary of State. We will seek to provide a further update without, as I say, undue delay, and I hope to give the issue the airing that it deserves as soon as that is practically possible.

4.45 pm

Patricia Gibson: Let me end the debate by making a few observations.

The motion garnered unanimous support from Back-Bench speakers, which expressed the will of the House, but unfortunately the contributions from the Labour and Government Front Benches did not reflect that cross-party consensus. Justice is too important to be denied for fear of the price tag. I remind the House that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman concluded that ignoring the findings of the report would create an unprecedented constitutional gap in the protection of the rights of citizens who had been failed by a public body in respect of ensuring access to justice. That constitutional gap presents a danger to our very democracy.

What we have seen today is an apparent refusal from the Government Front Bench to accept the report's findings, while, disappointingly, the Labour Front Bench continues to refuse to make any commitment to the WASPI women. That is why Labour Members of the Scottish Parliament were ordered to abstain on calls for compensation last week. I note that the tone of the response from the Labour Front Bench to this crisis—for it is a crisis—is entirely different from the tone of Labour Front Benchers when they speak of the infected blood scandal and the Horizon calamity. It is disappointing that the UK Government's response takes us no further forward, and it is disappointing that the same applies to the Labour Front Bench. We have heard about considering, engaging, reflecting; what we have not heard about is any action, or any timeframe for action. It seems that the cosy, "do nothing" consensus between the Front Benches continues, which means that the campaign for justice for WASPI women—despite being vindicated by the ombudsman—must also continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report on Women's State Pension age; and calls on the Government to deliver prompt compensation to women born in the 1950s who had their State Pension age raised.

PETITIONS

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

4.47 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of those in my constituency who have been affected by the contaminated blood scandal, including my constituent Neil Brown, who has sadly died while waiting for justice. I want to pay tribute

to all campaigners, including, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of the City of Chester,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited for too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002990]

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I also rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents, which calls for the implementation of the recommendations of the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry—in particular, the payment of interim compensation to those who have been infected and affected, whose families have suffered enough.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited for too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002982]

Mineworkers' Pension Scheme

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

4.49 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform UK): We have seen many injustices debated in this House. Just today, we have seen the injustice of the WASPI women. In recent weeks, we have spoken about the infected blood scandal and, more recently, the Post Office scandal. Tonight, we are going to debate another scandal: the mineworkers' pension scheme scandal.

Some 25% of the United Kingdom is on top of old coalmines, so I had hoped that 25% of this Chamber would be full tonight, but it is not. Maybe there are a few reasons for that. The issue has been debated a lot in this place, both before and since I came into Parliament, so maybe certain MPs are getting a bit fed up of saying the same old thing, but we will keep trying.

I started in the pits in the mid-1980s. I went to work at Sutton colliery, in north Nottinghamshire, with my dad Paul Anderson. He was a rope fitter, and I went to work with him underground. I had a good time working with my dad and my friends at Sutton colliery, which was a family pit. It was a small coalmine with small coal seams and difficult conditions. It was a family pit where brothers worked with their brothers, dads and grandads. It was a proper community, but like all coalmines, there was tragedy underground. At Sutton colliery in 1957, there was a methane explosion and, sadly, five men lost their lives. I knew some of the friends, families and descendants of the people who died.

I then went on to Cresswell colliery, in north Derbyshire, to do my coalface training. It was another family pit where, again, men worked with their sons, and brothers worked with their brothers, and it too was tinged with tragedy. In 1950, there was a fire at Cresswell colliery and, sadly, 83 men and boys lost their lives. The mine rescuers had to seal the pit off underground to save the colliery, so that it could produce coal again. They sealed off some of the old workings and left the men inbye, because there was no chance of saving them, but when they took the stops down just a few months later, the men were on the other side. Some of them had scratched their names into the wall. It was terrible, and this sort of thing is hard to explain to people who have not worked down a coalmine. It was a very tight-knit community, and people worked in difficult conditions.

I had just over 10 years of working in awful conditions, but my grandad Charlie had 45 years down the coalmine and finished up at New Hucknall colliery. It would have been 50 years, but he took a break between 1940 and 1945, and went to fight Hitler. Then he came back and went straight back down the pit the following week. When he finished in the pits in 1979, he got a tankard, a certificate, 500 quid and a meagre pension—imagine that.

As miners, we knew about the risks underground when we went down the pit every day. Since mining started in this country in the 1600s, over 160,000 men, women and children have died in the coalmines, so we knew the risks. We knew there was always a chance that something might happen, but these were the risks we took. The miners took these risks for simple reasons: to earn a wage, put food on the table and make sure their

kids were well dressed. In 1994, when I was still working in the pits, they were privatised. In my area, it was RJ Budge Mining that took over the pits.

At that time, a big bone of contention was what was going to happen with the MPS, or the mineworkers' pension scheme. It was probably one of the richest pension schemes in the world at that time, and was worth hundreds of millions, if not billions, in today's money. It was always accepted that there would be a 70:30 split in favour of the miners. When the then Government sat around the table with the trustees to make an offer to guarantee the mineworkers' pension scheme, we automatically surmised that there would be a 70:30 split, which would have been fair. But at the last minute, it ended up being—and depending on who you talk to, whether it is the trustees at the time or the mining organisations involved in campaigning, nobody can get to the bottom of it—a “take it or leave it” 50:50 deal.

The Government at the time never undertook a proper financial risk assessment or had actuarial advice on the split. We can never get to the bottom of that—it was a simple “take it or leave it.” When I was working at the pit with my friends, we never really had a say in this. I cannot remember any man I worked with underground being happy with the 50:50 split, because we knew how rich the pension fund was.

Thirty years on from 1994, successive Labour and Conservative Governments have not paid a single penny into the pension scheme, which is a cash cow. They have taken £4.8 billion out of the scheme. Some mining groups say the sum is nearer to £10 billion, but I will take the figure I have here. In just the last three years, the Government have taken more than £400 million out of the surplus, which is a lot of money. This is miners' money.

In effect, the Treasury's guarantee is an insurance scheme. It guarantees to make up the shortfall and pay the bonuses, and so on, if there is not a surplus, but I cannot think of any insurance scheme anywhere in this country, or the world, that has never had to pay out. In 30 years, not a penny has come from the Treasury or the taxpayer to top up the mineworkers' pension scheme. I think that is a bit of a scandal, and so does my mining community.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I think we all agree. We had a three-hour debate in this Chamber last Thursday, in which over 30 Members contributed, and I think there was unanimity on the unfairness and injustice of the surplus-sharing arrangement.

When the hon. Gentleman was deputy chairman of the Conservative party, the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, visited the coalfield in Mansfield and gave certain undertakings and assurances to reform the surplus-sharing arrangement so that the miners would get their money back. As a former deputy chairman of the Conservative party, is the hon. Gentleman aware of any discussions after the 2019 general election on implementing those promises?

Lee Anderson: When I was deputy chairman of the Conservative party, and even before that, I spoke to the current Prime Minister, who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and, to be fair, he looked into the scheme and the surplus arrangement. One discussion at

the time was that perhaps the whole pension scheme could be given back to the miners, with the Government not acting as a guarantor at all.

I would have hoped that we could come together a little in this debate and not try to score political points. I am here for my community of mineworkers, for my dad, for my brother-in-law and for the people of Ashfield who toiled underground. I will not get involved in silly, petty politics in this debate.

The 1980s and '90s were difficult times for the mining community. Pits were closing, people were losing their jobs and men were out of work, and we saw the injustice of this surplus arrangement with the Government of the day. There were other people trying to rip off the miners. These were the spivs, the financial advisers, who rocked up in their new Rovers. They were calling in at miners' welfare clubs and working men's clubs, knocking on doors and turning up. These men in shiny suits had never done a day's work in their life, and they were conning the miners—my dad was one of them—by telling them that the mineworkers' pension was no good and was not making money. The miners transferred their money to these private pension schemes, and they were ripped off. Fortunately, just a few years later, many of these miners, including my dad, were able to claim compensation against these sharks and put their money back in the MPS, which is probably one of the best pension schemes in the world.

We talk a lot in this place about levelling up and, back in 2019, I stood on a manifesto of levelling up. To be fair to the Government, Ashfield has had lots of money, about £200 million. We have had two new school rebuilds, nearly £100 million in future high streets funding and towns funding, and extra money for police and CCTV, for which I am incredibly grateful to the Government, but real levelling up puts more money into people's pockets and lets them decide how to spend it. I cannot think of a fairer way of levelling up than giving these miners, their widows and their families a little more money in their pocket.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I know what a great champion the hon. Gentleman has been for his community and the rest of Nottinghamshire, and indeed nationally, on this issue. I was in many of the meetings that he described earlier, such as with the Prime Minister when he was Chancellor and with other Ministers. The hon. Gentleman was a miner in Manton in my constituency; he has shown me his lamp many times and told me many stories.

5 pm

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

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

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I want to make a point about the split and the surplus. Does the hon. Gentleman share my frustration about that? At times we have believed that some real progress has been made, whether on the split or the surplus, and there has been a chance to renegotiate—to get some incremental progress to put some money back into the pockets of those widows and to make that change over time. We could have been in a better position now if not for those who really did not want to negotiate and who wanted all or nothing immediately.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Gentleman makes some reasonable points. To be fair, the guarantee scheme has worked in that the Government have been able to take more risks with the pension fund and it has created a higher yield. The problem that I have faced as a Member of Parliament dealing with certain groups is that I cannot get the groups to agree on the best solution or the best way forward. That is incredibly frustrating.

There is still a lot of bitterness, even 40 years on from the miners' strikes. I come from a family who were on strike—all my family were striking miners—but there is still a bitterness now when I get involved. When I met some of the mining groups, they said, "Keep your nose out. We don't want scabs getting involved in our business," because I come from Nottinghamshire. That is not the way forward. We have to have a sensible debate, like grown-ups.

Thousands of ex-miners are dying each year. The pension fund is probably worth £12 billion, £13 billion or £14 billion, so it is a massive pot of money. When the last miner dies—I am 57, so I am probably one of the last miners and one of the youngest ex-miners left—all the money left in the scheme will go to the Treasury. We could give the miners a much fairer deal and a fairer split, and we could carry out the recommendations of the 2021 Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee's report to give the miners that money, because it will not cost the Government anything. In 50 years, they will get a pension pot worth billions of pounds. As I said, the way to level up in deprived areas such as mine that have suffered job losses, have been deskilled and have gone through the mill over the past 30 or 40 years, is to give the miners and their families a bit more money.

I feel incredibly proud to stand here and represent the people of Ashfield and the mining community of Ashfield—the widows and ex-miners, some of whom are friends I used to work down the pit with. All we want from the Government is a bit of justice. We are not asking for much; we are asking for a bit more money for the miners and their families in this great country of ours before the last miner dies.

5.3 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am incredibly grateful to speak in the debate, which is the second on miners' pensions in a week—we had a good debate about miners and mining communities last week. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who spoke passionately about his and his family's experience. He will know from his first-hand experience, which is shared by many of my constituents, that mining was dirty and dangerous, but it was well respected. He was right to speak about how dangerous it was—we have several memorials across Barnsley to those men who went to work and did not come home.

In Barnsley, 30,000 men worked down the pit. Our community was built on coal and it powered a nation. It is 40 years since thousands of men were forced to go out on strike to defend their industry—a battle that sadly they lost. It is simply not right that, decades later, they are still fighting for their pension.

In 2021 I was pleased to campaign for, and secure, the BEIS Committee report into the mineworkers' pension scheme. It was a cross-party report and it very clearly concluded that the Government should not be in the

[Stephanie Peacock]

business of profiting from miners' pensions. Some £4.8 billion has been taken by the Government to date. That has risen by £400 million since that report. The average miner is on a pension of just £84 a week, and widows are on a lot less. I met a man in my constituency a few weeks ago on £1 a week.

I have raised this issue in this place dozens of times. I have met with Ministers and shadow Ministers. I went to the Treasury a few weeks ago to make the case again. I could not be clearer about my commitment to the issue. Indeed, I will continue to advocate not just on miners' pensions but on miners' health and support for our coalfield communities more broadly. My constituency of Barnsley East is yet to receive any levelling-up funding.

In 2006, 280,000 miners were in the scheme. The Government financial risk to the scheme is in permanent decline, yet it is costing the same as it did 25 years ago. That deal was done without any actuarial advice, as the Government admitted to me some years ago in answer to a written parliamentary question. I held the last Adjournment debate on this subject in 2019. In that debate, I spoke about how 160,000 men claimed a miners' pension. Today, that figure is sadly less than 125,000. We need justice for the miners before it is too late.

5.6 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), with whom I have worked closely over many years. It is clear that his personal experience and long track record put him in the best position to continue to fight the good fight, on behalf of not just his constituents but people who worked in this sector. I was struck by his willingness to engage across the political spectrum, finding time for the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) to contribute. She has an impressive track record of raising the issue, having secured a BEIS debate and other debates responded to by former Ministers.

While I am only freshly returned as a Minister, in the whirlwind of a mere three weeks I have been lobbied by many people on the subject, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) and for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), and the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) has been increasing my parliamentary question response rate. I recognise the importance of the scheme, and the strong feelings on the different options that have been and could be considered.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous, which is completely in character. I do not think any of us wants a pat on the back. What we want is the issue resolved. In common with the previous debate about the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, the issue is the age demographic. My poor mother is 88. Many miners and their widows are coming to the end. We need to resolve this in the interests of justice, and the BEIS Committee's report from 27 April 2021 gives us that opportunity.

Justin Tomlinson: As I said, I recognise the strength of feeling and I want to set out the Government's position on where there are opportunities to look further.

It is right that we acknowledge the hard work of coalminers over decades and their contribution to national prosperity, which is exactly what the hon. Member for Ashfield did so well. Since privatisation, the Government have recognised the need to support former coalfield areas through initiatives such as the Coalfield Regeneration Trust. Over the past 25 years, successive Governments have invested over £1 billion in former coalfield areas. The UK Government are committed to levelling up across the whole of the United Kingdom to ensure that no community is left behind and investing in places that need it most, including former coalfield communities. I again credit the hon. Member for Ashfield on how hard he worked to secure the significant levelling-up funds that have reached his constituency.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again—I do not mean to be a nuisance, I promise. It is all very well for Ashfield, which has had £200 million or £300 million. Easington has had nothing. My community of Horden, which bid for levelling-up funding, is in the top 1% most deprived communities in the country. I hope the Minister is not suggesting that £4.8 billion of the miners' money can legitimately be used by the Government for other purposes, such as regeneration in coalfield or other areas. That is their money. If the reserve investment fund alone was redistributed, it would give them almost £900 a month directly in their pockets.

Justin Tomlinson: I can confirm that the hon. Member is never a nuisance, but, again, I would reflect on the ability to lobby and secure levelling-up funds, and those who do well are directly benefiting their communities. Specifically, this involves a range of projects, including the £20 million to deliver two capital regeneration projects that will revitalise town centres, including in Ashfield.

The Coal Authority has been working with public and private sector partners for a number of years to develop the use of heat in water contained in the former coal mining infrastructure as a resource for heat networks and large space heating. Current schemes are heating multiple homes and businesses at discounts of at least 5% below prevailing market rates for heat.

The Coal Authority estimates that 25% of properties are located on former coal mining areas. Mine water heat can offer a homegrown and sustainable source of heat, boost local economies and also create more local green jobs.

The Government's commitment to mining communities is also demonstrated through the continued guarantee given to the mineworkers' pension scheme. The scheme remains a significant undertaking. It has more than 130,000 members, pays pensions at an annual cost of over £600 million and has assets in excess of £7 billion. The scheme is managed by the trustees; the Government's role is as guarantor. My officials meet the trustees to discuss the operation of the scheme regularly.

When the scheme was set up in 1952, members contributed no more than 20p per week, and benefits were relatively small. From 1975, contributions and benefits were linked to members' salaries and British Coal made up the difference. At privatisation, the Government took on the guarantor role previously played by British Coal. The scheme had a surplus in 1994, and 50% of this surplus was used to enhance members' pensions immediately—

Grahame Morris: That is an interesting chronology. Will the Minister inform the House when the Government stopped paying into the scheme? There was a substantial increase when superannuation came in in 1974, matched by British Coal. Is it not correct that, after 1984, the Government made no contribution to the contribution holiday?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Member is passionate to speed ahead. I urge him to be a little more patient. We are exploring all of these points, and I am getting to them—fear not.

The other 50% was payable to the guarantor. The Government of the day agreed to leave their share of surpluses in the scheme as the investment reserve. This acts as a buffer against a future deficit.

The arrangements for sharing scheme surpluses were agreed between the trustees and the Government in their role as guarantor to the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme in 1994. At that time, all parties believed the equal sharing of surplus to be a fair agreement. That predates all of us. The guarantee ensures that: a member's guaranteed pension, including inflation increases, will always be paid; and a member's total pension, including bonus pension, will not fall in cash terms.

The scheme has been a success and it is to the credit of the scheme's trustees that they have invested in such a way as to enable those returns, and we know as politicians that decisions on pensions and pension reserves are not always as successful as this. But it is the guarantee that makes higher returns possible. Without the guarantee, the trustees would have to invest far more cautiously so as to avoid losing money and risk being unable to meet scheme obligations. In a former role in the DWP, I have also been responding to debates where pension schemes have failed, and we cannot lose sight of that.

We have seen this scenario with many other pension schemes. Few equivalent schemes have been able to generate surpluses and fewer still are able to use those surpluses to improve member benefits. The presence of the guarantee allows the trustees to invest in a way that targets high returns and generates bonuses for members. The trustees acknowledge the importance of the guarantee and the ability to generate the bonuses that it creates.

The scheme website states that a typical member's pension today is around 33% higher in real terms than it would have been had they received only their actual earned pension up to privatisation. I welcome this success and believe that it would be unwise to tamper with such a fruitful arrangement.

I acknowledge the 2021 Select Committee report and its recommendations. However, like my predecessors, I cannot agree to implement them. This is a question of balance, and I recognise that there are strongly held different viewpoints, but like the trustees, the Government recognise the importance of the guarantee and are committed to it. All scheme members will continue to receive their full pension entitlement. That commitment is unwavering. Implementing the report's recommendations would shift the balance of risk to the taxpayer in a way that the Government consider would be disproportionate.

The Minister at the time of the report met the trustees, following publication of the report, to hear their views. She set out that any changes to the surplus sharing

arrangements would need the trustees' agreement to give up the guarantee, which the trustees declined. The Minister then invited the trustees to put forward any further proposals to changes to surplus sharing, emphasising that the guarantee would need to form part of any discussions. To date, none has been received. The Government have agreed some scheme changes, though, including additional protections for bonus pensions, and changes to mitigate potential unfair impacts of recent inflation changes. I stress that we are also open to further suggestions.

Stephanie Peacock: I was pleased to have worked with the trustees and the then Minister on the issue of bonuses. I appreciate the arguments that today's Minister is making, and no one underestimates how important the guarantee is, but does he acknowledge that members of the mineworkers' pension scheme have to date paid £4.8 billion for that guarantee?

Justin Tomlinson: Absolutely, but nobody knew how this would go when the deal was struck. At the time the deal was struck, it was deemed to be fair, but like many other pension schemes it could easily have gone the other way. If it had, we would not now be having a debate to say, "Well, we need to excuse the taxpayer." It was a fair deal at the time, and we seek to ensure that it continues to overdeliver.

Lee Anderson: The Minister said that it was a fair deal at the time. I was working down the pit at the time. I assure him that nobody I worked with thought that it was a fair deal; we thought that it was forced upon the trustees. It was, "Take it or leave it." It has proved not to have been a fair deal. As I said, when the last miner dies, billions of pounds will go to the Treasury. We have received a 50% surplus in return. Does the Minister think that is fair—yes or no?

Justin Tomlinson: That presumes the investments will continue to return at the rates they have; they could just as easily go the other way, which I suspect is why the trustees were reluctant to release the guarantee. However, to be clear, I remain open to exploring options for improvements to the scheme, and would welcome any suggestions that the trustees wish to make. The door is firmly open.

Future outcomes are not known. Any market volatility could impact future scheme valuations, and the guarantee will provide even greater value should market conditions make it harder to generate returns. If there is a deficit in the future, members will still see their guaranteed pensions increase by RPI, and will continue to receive bonus pensions to ensure that their total pension does not fall in cash terms. If the investment reserve that the Government leave in the scheme to act as a buffer is exhausted, funds from the Government will be found to ensure that payments continue to be made to scheme members. To be absolutely clear, that commitment from the Government is unwavering.

Question put and agreed to.

5.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 May 2024

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Inequalities in Dementia Services

12.30 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered inequalities in dementia services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate to discuss the huge inequalities in dementia diagnosis and other services across the country. I also thank the Alzheimer's Society for providing the secretariat to the all-party parliamentary group on dementia and for supporting our many inquiries, including the inquiry we conducted into dementia diagnosis last week, which was published in our "Raising the Barriers" report. My particular thanks go to Lewis and Connor for their briefings and for helping me to prepare for this debate.

It is a real honour to have recently been re-elected as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, a position that I have held since 2015. My other co-chair is Baroness Angela Browning, and like Angela I became involved in the APPG because I became a carer of a loved one who developed one of the brain diseases that cause dementia. In my case it was my mum, who was also called Angela. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2002, when she was just 64, and I cared for her along with my stepfather and brother. After she died in 2012, I became the first MP to train as a Dementia Friends champion and was subsequently elected as co-chair of the APPG on dementia in 2015.

This debate could not be more timely. As you know, Ms Rees, this week marks Dementia Action Week. Yesterday I had the pleasure of sponsoring the Alzheimer's Society's reception in Parliament for Dementia Action Week, where we welcomed many Members to hear about the importance of a dementia diagnosis and the transformative potential of new treatments for dementia. Back in January, I spoke in another Westminster Hall debate looking at the advent of new treatments, particularly lecanemab and donanemab. Those drugs have caused huge excitement, as they mark the first ever treatments for people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease and could change the way that we see dementia forever. However, even in that debate I highlighted the barriers to those drugs being delivered to patients and sounded a note of caution that they are neither a cure nor a quick fix. I was really reassured that the approval of lecanemab and donanemab is going through the regulatory cycle at the moment, and we hope to hear when they will be available in the next couple of months.

The fact of the matter is that dementia is a monumental pressure on our health and social care system, but it is all too often an afterthought in commissioning. It is not commonly known that dementia is the leading cause of death in the UK. Nearly 1 million people have dementia,

but of those one in three currently live without a diagnosis. Dementia costs the economy more than £40 billion each year, and more than 60% of that cost is borne by individuals and families. Those facts may come as a surprise to many, including many commissioners, but I will focus today on two important inequalities in dementia: the inequality in dementia diagnosis rates between different parts of the country and different groups of people, and the inequality between those who do and do not have access to post-diagnostic support.

First, I will share some information that hon. Members will hopefully find useful. When we talk about dementia, we are using a collective term covering the common symptoms associated with a range of brain diseases. Alzheimer's disease is the most common of those, but they also include vascular dementia, which my mother-in-law had, Lewy bodies, frontotemporal dementia and many others. Each of those brain diseases has different pathology and as a consequence will have different therapies.

Right now, more than 900,000 people live with dementia in the UK, as I mentioned. Due to our ageing population, that figure is set to rise to 1.6 million by 2040, but I need to stress that dementia is not an automatic part of ageing, although it is more prevalent in older populations. People with dementia account for more than 70% of the residential care home population over the age of 65 and 60% of people receiving home care. Meanwhile, as revealed by NHS performance data published earlier this year, it is estimated that a quarter of NHS beds are occupied by people with dementia. They remain in hospital on average twice as long as people who do not live with the condition. Unfortunately, that reflects the crisis in our social care system and not being able to safely discharge people back into the community or to residential care.

I reflect on where we are in relation to our social care system and the opportunities that we have had, for example through the Dilnot proposals back in 2015, and I really do hope that focused the minds of all of us in what we do. I certainly will be supporting, and have for many years been supportive of, a national care service.

Diagnosis is the key that unlocks vital care and support for people living with dementia, particularly those who are struggling to manage their symptoms alone. It helps people to understand their condition. It allows them and their loved ones to start planning for the future but, as I mentioned earlier, currently just one in three people estimated to have dementia receive a formal diagnosis. The benefits to receiving a diagnosis are massive—access to new treatments and to the care and support that is needed. Alzheimer's Society reported earlier this week that 91% of people with a dementia diagnosis saw real benefits to having received one. However, the dementia diagnosis rate in England dropped from 67.6% to 61% during the covid pandemic. Currently it is 64.8% in England—below the national target of two thirds.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I commend her, not only for securing this debate but for the powerful work she does in this area of policy. She raises the national target for two thirds of people with dementia to be diagnosed. That is not nearly ambitious enough. Is she also concerned that there are huge variances across the country? How can it be that a place like Stoke can get 90% diagnosis and a place like Swindon 50%?

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. This is the absolute crux of the issues we are facing. First of all the target is not ambitious enough, but as he rightly says there are these inequalities. I prefer calling a spade a spade, so these are inequalities and we need to call them what they are. Although the national picture is poor, if we dig further into the data we can see that there is a huge regional inequality in dementia diagnosis rates. In my Oldham constituency, for example, the rate is above 75% and in Devon it is just 40%. Where you live has a massive impact on whether you get a timely, accurate and high-quality dementia diagnosis. A postcode lottery on this scale for a condition that will affect one in three of us is not acceptable.

The APPG's dementia diagnosis inquiry revealed several issues. There are significant differences in the dementia diagnosis rates between integrated care system areas in England. The report referred to a recent Alzheimer's Society survey of clinicians, clinical commissioning groups—the predecessors of the ICSs—and dementia support workers. Poverty and health inequalities were identified as major barriers to getting a dementia diagnosis. This was also borne out by analysis by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. I have to say I do not particularly like the title of that organisation; I think it should be the "Office of Health Improvement and Inequalities".

Similarly, there were lower rates of diagnosis in ethnic minority populations. For example, the City of Wolverhampton has an overall diagnosis rate of 70%, but just 35% for people from an ethnic minority community.

Alzheimer's Research UK also undertook an analysis and published a report last October—"Towards Brain Health Equity: Tackling Inequalities in Dementia Risk"—and this highlighted research identifying vulnerable groups and the dementia risk that they face. That is also an inequality. It referred to research in England and Wales that showed that socioeconomic deprivation and ethnicity are linked to increased dementia mortality, younger age at death from dementia and poorer access to specialist diagnostics. A number of recommendations were made around that. We know that there are 12 modifiable risk factors associated with dementia, and the report focused on action around reducing air pollution, lowering smoking rates, healthy eating, tackling higher blood pressure and identifying and treating hearing loss.

Returning to our APPG inquiry, we received input from more than 2,300 people and I thank them sincerely. Those people have gone through—either themselves or with a loved one—a dementia diagnosis process. They shared their experiences in our survey and we found that every part of the country produced different experiences of the diagnosis system. In Somerset, for example, people were most likely to report that they were satisfied with the time it took for them to receive a diagnosis but were least likely to say that they received satisfactory post-diagnostic support. In London, respondents had the best access to brain scans but found it most difficult to access GP appointments. I know that £17 million was invested in dementia diagnosis by the Government in 2021-22 and that part of that money was to develop best practice advice.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for calling this debate and for her work through the APPG. I say to her, and to the Minister,

that today we are seeing more people being diagnosed with dementia and dying than is the case with other conditions, such as heart disease and cancer. Why does the hon. Lady think we are not investing more resources in research and support for people who suffer from this terrible condition?

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Member is absolutely right; there is less money going into research. On why there is not more done about it, the hon. Member really needs to direct that question to the Minister. I have set out all the evidence that says it should be a priority for the families and individuals affected and a priority for our society, and it should also reflect how we organise our care system, given that predominantly the people in the care system are those living with a diagnosis. The hon. Member will therefore have to direct that question to the Minister.

Going back to my point about the investment made in 2021-22, can the Minister update us on how that is going and the improvements that she may not see immediately but which she hopes to see? Clearly, that is something we need to see as part of the levelling-up agenda.

As I said before, 2,300 people filled out our online survey and shared their stories to inform our work. Sadly, just 5% of people's stories were positive. Five per cent: that is awful, is it not? After a constituent came to see me regarding concerns about the delay for her mother's diagnosis—it took her 15 weeks to get an appointment for her mother to attend for a dementia diagnosis, during which time she noticed a considerable decline in her cognitive health—I tabled some written questions on the proportion of people waiting more than 15 weeks for an initial dementia diagnosis and the average waiting time for an assessment. I was told in response on 22 January 2024 that those data were "not held centrally". I find that extraordinary. National strategies should not just reflect the evidence and data for a national profile around dementia, so we should agree that that needs to change.

Andrew Rosindell: My constituency is in the London borough of Havering, with the second highest number of older people in the whole of Greater London. At the moment, on average it takes over 16 weeks to get a diagnosis. Of course, the quicker the diagnosis the better, so it is important that we reduce the length of time that people have to wait to know the condition they are suffering from. Consequently, I fully support the hon. Lady in urging the Government to make earlier diagnosis a greater priority.

Debbie Abrahams: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for that intervention, and I absolutely agree.

All of that underlines the importance of improving the dementia diagnosis pathway and making it work better for people living with dementia and their loved ones. The APPG has developed a series of recommendations across the core themes of dementia diagnosis, data, workforce, and public health messaging. Collectively, these recommendations outline how dementia pathways can be strengthened to enable access and quality care across all settings, communities and regions in England. I would be grateful if the Minister could say what work the Department is undertaking in those areas to reduce inequalities in the experience of dementia between localities and population groups.

I turn now to the inequality between those who have post-diagnostic support for dementia and those who do not—or, perhaps more insidiously, the gap between what people with dementia are supposed to receive and what they actually receive. Guidance states that people living with dementia should be offered a review with a healthcare professional at least once a year. However, just 25% of people with dementia who were polled by the Alzheimer's Society said that they or their loved one had had an annual dementia review within the last 12 months, and only 16% said that they had received enough support from local services in the last 12 months. In addition, more than half said that, even if they had received an annual dementia review, it did not help them feel more able to manage their condition.

This trend continues outside primary care and in allied health professions. Over half of people with dementia who have been signposted to mental health services report having to wait up to a year for treatment. Evidence shows that mental health treatments can be effective in treating depression and anxiety symptoms associated with dementia, but just 0.002% of referrals to NHS talking therapies are for people with dementia—that is 2,000 people out of 1 million referrals.

A quarter of people with dementia wait for up to a year for occupational therapy after referral. Occupational therapy can help people to avoid dangerous falls and to live well in their own home for as long as possible. The average time spent in hospital for a hip fracture is seven days, but patients with dementia stay in hospital for up to four times longer a hip fracture. The additional cost—I know it should not be just about cost, but there is an associated cost—is almost £6,000 per patient, which is far more than the cost of an occupational therapy appointment. I have to say that I just do not get why we are prioritising things in this way.

I do not want to reduce health and social care decisions purely to finance, but the fact of the matter is that early intervention for people with dementia saves so much money. The Alzheimer's Society reported on Monday that the cost of dementia to the UK economy is £42 billion a year, and that figure will skyrocket to £90 billion by 2040 because of our ageing population. The cost of dementia rises significantly as the condition progresses. The average cost of care for someone in the early, or milder, stages of dementia is about £28,000 a year; in the later, severe stages of dementia, it rises to well over £80,000 a year. Caring well for people with mild dementia can prevent falls and infections, which cause unnecessary hospitalisations and deconditioning, which increase the speed of deterioration in people with dementia. Early identification and increased spend in the early stages of dementia pay dividends further down the pathway.

I would like to end by putting three questions to the Minister, and I would be grateful if she could address them in her response or in writing at a later date, if that is easier for her. First, what will the Department do to ensure that where someone lives, their socioeconomic status or their ethnicity do not negatively affect their likelihood of getting a dementia diagnosis? Secondly, what will the Department do to ensure that everyone with dementia has access to high-quality, post-diagnostic care, regardless of where they live? Thirdly, it was two years ago this week that the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid) announced a 10-year plan for dementia, which was then folded into the major

conditions strategy. However, we still do not know when that strategy will be published. Can the Minister update us on when we can expect publication of the strategy?

Dementia is a monumental health and social care challenge, and will be the defining test of our system in the decades to come—I have absolutely no doubt of that. We have spoken in this place about planning for the next generation of dementia care in the context of the new, potentially transformative drugs that are currently under appraisal, but almost 1 million people are living with dementia in this country today, and much more can be done to get them the care and support they need and deserve at the earliest possible moment.

I would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee and those who have joined us on a Thursday afternoon when a lot is going on in Parliament. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): May I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak?

12.50 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees, so thank you for being here this afternoon. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). In preparation for today's debate, I looked back in *Hansard* at previous contributions I had made in debates on dementia, and I was struck by the fact that every single one started the same way: by paying tribute to her. On every occasion I have spoken about dementia, it has been in a debate secured by her, and every time I have attended an event on dementia or Alzheimer's, it has been hosted by her. She trained me in a workshop back in 2016 to be a dementia friend, and she is the most incredible advocate on behalf of all those living with dementia, and their carers and families. I really do, with all sincerity, pay tribute to her for the incredible work she has done on this cause.

We are blessed across Calderdale with some truly brilliant people and volunteers who work tirelessly to improve the lives of those living with dementia, their carers and their loved ones, and I will pay tribute to them later in my remarks. At a recent event at Halifax town hall, I was asked to host a Q&A with Scott Mitchell, who was married to the wonderful Barbara Windsor for 20 years before she passed away—six years after receiving a dementia diagnosis. Scott is one of the most incredible advocates for those with dementia, and it has been a pleasure to get to know him better following that event.

There are not many things Boris Johnson really got right in his time in office, but credit to him for setting up the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission, which launched in August 2022. I was so pleased that Scott was officially appointed the people's champion for the dementia mission in March this year. Scott recently introduced both myself and the shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), to the co-chair of the mission, Hilary Evans of Alzheimer's Research UK. I am delighted to say that no one was left in any doubt that we 100% support the mission, and will very much do so if we have the opportunity and privilege to be in government in the not-too-distant future.

[Holly Lynch]

The work of the mission really matters. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth has outlined, the numbers on dementia are nothing short of terrifying. Nearly 1 million people are living with dementia in the UK; with an ageing population, that is set to increase to 1.7 million by 2040. That means that one in two of us will be affected by dementia in our lifetime, either because we will care for someone with the condition, develop it ourselves, or both. Sadly, dementia is the UK's biggest killer, accounting for more than one in 10 deaths. Nearly 75,000 people died from dementia in 2022, which is an increase of 5,000 from 2021. Shockingly, those numbers will be us: one in two of us in this room will be affected. It is enough to make you want to throw the whole kitchen—never mind the kitchen sink—at finding treatments and solutions as part of early and effective diagnosis and treatment pathways.

I am grateful to the Alzheimer's Society, which was in Parliament yesterday at an event hosted—again—by my hon. Friend. It told me that the diagnosis rate for those living with dementia in Halifax is 66.1%, so around a third of those living with dementia do so without a diagnosis, which could unlock care and support.

It is in everybody's interest to get this right. My hon. Friend talked about the fact that, while we do not want to reduce decisions about people's wellbeing and their health and social care to facts and figures on finances, it is clearly nonsensical not to get a grip on this issue, because that would both deliver economic benefits and potentially transform people's lives. Dementia has a huge impact on our economy and is costing the UK £25 billion every year—I think my hon. Friend actually had a higher estimate. However, Alzheimer's Research UK is keen to stress that investment in research also has economic benefits, and every £1 invested in dementia research generates £2.59 in the UK economy.

The Alzheimer's Society's recent report on post-diagnostic support for dementia, "Left to Cope Alone", engaged with over 2,000 people affected by dementia. Just 25% said they or their loved one had had an annual dementia review within the last 12 months. Only 16% said they had received enough support from local services in the last 12 months, which, I am sorry to say, reflects the experiences of too many families I have spoken to. It has to be said that investing in the NHS workforce, in diagnostics and in research and treatments will pay dividends. There is reason to be hopeful about the progress being made and the breakthroughs under way, as my hon. Friend touched on, but now is the time to redouble our efforts, not to take our foot off the gas.

At a local level, we have some brilliant people in Calderdale who have dedicated a great deal of time, going over and above, to provide care and support for those living with dementia and their families. I pay tribute to Chris and June Harvey, who run the wonderful Memory Lane Café for people with dementia and their carers. Chris and June have been instrumental not only in running pop-up cafés in churches and community centres in Sowerby Bridge and Halifax, but in setting up and delivering campaigns to make Sowerby Bridge and Halifax as dementia-friendly as possible. Alongside Shabir Hussain of Bluebird Care, they have hosted events bringing together organisations and local residents to achieve that aim, and have engaged directly with businesses

to urge them to consider all the ways in which those living with dementia, and their carers, can feel supported in shops in the town centre.

Andrew Rosindell: It is absolutely wonderful to hear about the work being done in Halifax. So much of that work in our own constituencies depends on voluntary support and voluntary organisations. I visited the Dementia Music and Social Club at the United Reformed Church opposite my office in Romford. Every Wednesday, that wonderful organisation brings together lots of people from all over Havering who are suffering with dementia; their friends and family go with them, and it is a very happy, fun afternoon. But the club gets no support, and they have to raise all their own funds—they get nothing from the local authority, the Government or any other funding streams. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to do more to support local voluntary efforts? People need support; they need family and friends around them. Bringing together people who have the same condition is a light in their lives and gives back purpose. It is so important that we do more to support local communities to support people who are suffering with dementia.

Holly Lynch: The hon. Member is absolutely right. We have got into the real substance of the inconsistencies and the variations in rates of diagnosis. That really does highlight the inequalities that exist, depending on where someone is in the country. Beyond that, there is a real mix: there are so many local volunteers and brilliant groups that do so much good work, but that is not replicated evenly across the country. The hon. Member is quite right that the difference that some of the groups he mentioned make is transformative and a lifeline, not only for those living with dementia but for their families and carers—especially if those pop-up cafés and services are anything like the Memory Lane Café in Sowerby Bridge. He speaks of what great places they are to visit and be a part of. There is not that sadness; there is a shared sense of supporting each other, with lots of activities and lots of fun being had as well. That makes a really big difference to people's lives, and the hon. Member is quite right that, with a little local authority and Government support, that could be replicated and enhanced and more people could be supported. The hon. Member makes a really important point.

In addition to the Memory Lane Café, we have a young-onset dementia and Alzheimer's group set up by Julie Hayden, which provides support for younger people with dementia and for their carers. I know that is very much valued, especially by those of working age who have been diagnosed with dementia or Alzheimer's really quite early in life. I also pay tribute to Inspector Neil Taylor of West Yorkshire police, who is the chair of Dementia Friendly Todmorden and a Dementia Friends ambassador. He has worked so hard to promote best practice within West Yorkshire police, establishing the Herbert protocol, whereby the police and other agencies encourage families and carers to complete a form with useful information that could be used in the event of a vulnerable person going missing. The protocol takes its name from George Herbert—a veteran of the Normandy landings who lived with dementia. I am grateful to those people and to the others who make such a big difference. As we have said, they are all volunteers—they are unpaid—and that speaks to the very point of the debate.

The provision of services is still uneven, and families and individuals who need to make use of services will find that that provision can vary significantly. They are local heroes and I am so grateful for all that they do. I look forward to the Minister's response and, once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth not only for securing this debate but for all that she does.

1.2 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I yet again commend my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this debate and for her ongoing advocacy on the issue. I also thank the other hon. Members here; we are a small but perfectly formed debate.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her important contribution. She is absolutely right to champion not only the important services being provided in her patch and across the country, but that desire to want better and to want more so that no person or family looking after somebody with dementia is left behind. That wraparound support is absolutely crucial. I also commend her and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth on thanking those national and local organisations and charities, and the wonderful army of volunteers who keep dementia on the public policy platform.

I thank the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) for his important interventions. It is absolutely right that we have to approach how we deal with dementia in the 21st century on a cross-party basis. I hope that we can reach some consensus on what needs to be done, because never has the need for a clear, concerted focus on dementia been more pressing. It is one of the biggest health and social care issues facing our society. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth pointed out, almost 1 million people in the United Kingdom live with dementia—a figure that is expected to rise to 1.4 million by 2040.

Behind those numbers lie individual people with their own distinct circumstances and challenges and their own unique stories of living with dementia. It is a cruel condition that strips people of their fondest memories and causes devastation for families.

Dementia can impact anyone at any time. It is indiscriminate in the impact it can have, but we know that certain groups are at increased risk. We know that women are more likely to develop dementia than men. They are also more likely to be caring for a loved one living with dementia. We know that those from poorer and disadvantaged backgrounds are more susceptible to key dementia risk factors, with often limited access to health services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth is absolutely right to refer to these conditions as health inequalities, because it is often those living in the poorest, most adverse circumstances who face the hardest challenges, not just with this condition, but with a whole number of conditions. If we want to live in a better, fairer, more equal society, we have a duty to bear down on those inequalities. I completely agree with my hon. Friend about referring to such conditions as health inequalities. People from ethnic minority backgrounds are also at higher risk, as are those with conditions such as Down's syndrome, but the population

living with dementia is expanding all the time; it is not restricted to any single group, and we must be ready to tackle the challenges that presents head on.

Nowhere is that challenge clearer than in adult social care. Around 60% of people drawing on home-based care and support services live with dementia, rising to 70% for those in residential care. We need long-term solutions that reshape social care into a service that is fit for the future and fit for the challenges of the future. That is why I am proud of Labour's commitment to a 10-year plan for fundamental reform of adult social care, culminating in the creation of a national care service.

The NCS will employ robust central frameworks and standards, but it will be underpinned by locally led delivery. Every community will have its own unique set of needs, face unique challenges and require unique solutions. One of our aims will be to gradually reduce the postcode lottery that operates within social care that causes people living with dementia and their families so much distress. However, a reformed and reshaped social care sector alone cannot and will not meet the needs of an ever-growing population of people living with dementia.

Andrew Rosindell: I am very interested in some of the hon. Member's comments. I am glad that he approaches the issue from a cross-party point of view. In my own borough of Havering, there are a vast number of older people. So many services for people who suffer with dementia depend on local authorities. In Havering, we do not get the additional funding we need to deal with the older population who need those services. If there were to be a change of Government, would he commit to helping boroughs like Havering by giving them more resources? Will that boroughs with large populations of older people who suffer with dementia get more support from the Government that the hon. Member may well serve in?

Andrew Gwynne: I would certainly hope and expect so. The way we are going to deal with the national care service is not to create a big, monolithic organisation to rival the NHS as some kind of super-organisation employing lots of people. The NCS will be about the centre setting out a clear national direction of how we deal with the challenges of social care: what the pay, terms and conditions of the workforce should be, and what the outcomes should be for people drawing on social care services. That strong centre sets out the "what". The "how" has to be determined locally, because what works in Oldham will not work in Romford. There will be best practice in Oldham, which will transfer over and can be upscaled to Halifax, Lewes or Romford. That is also a job of the centre—to promote that best practice and what works, encouraging other authorities to do that—but the funding challenges require an integrated approach, and I saw at first hand how that could work in my own local authority.

For a very small period of time, now unpicked by the latest round of structural changes, Thameside council was also the clinical commissioning group for Thameside and Glossop. By bringing the local authority and the CCG together under a single leadership with a single budget, some really smart decisions were made on dealing with adult social care. I know what integration looks like, I know it works, and I know how we can get better use of the public pound, by stripping out some of the duplication.

Andrew Rosindell: I am very pleased by what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but have just a small point of clarification. There should be common cause over this issue, but does he agree that the important thing is that the funding follows the individual? It should not matter which part of the country someone lives in or if they are on a certain side of the boundary of a borough. My borough is within Greater London, and we get very poor funding because all the money goes into the centre for all sorts of local services, and Essex County Council is just up the road, so we always get caught. Can the hon. Gentleman assure me that in any policies he may bring forward, the money will go directly to the needs of the individual, rather than one person on one side of a boundary getting the funding, while a mile down the road they do not get the support they need?

Andrew Gwynne: That is why we need to have a strong national framework with an expectation that these services are delivered to the required outcomes, with very strong targets across the whole of England. I get the nuance between local government finance and the interrelationship with adult social care and NHS budgets. We have to be smarter at working around all of this. As a former shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, I realise that this is not a debate on local government finance, but the two are interrelated. I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Romford.

In order to get this reformed, reshaped social care sector, and particularly within the scope of there being an ever-growing population of people living with dementia, we need to fix the crisis in our NHS, which is intrinsically linked with our social care system, to address the inequalities in dementia care. As we have already heard, that care starts with timely and accurate diagnosis. A third of those currently living with dementia in the UK do not have a diagnosis, and that prevents them from accessing the vital care, support and treatment they need.

This is also about allowing people to have some degree of certainty and to make different life choices based on that. If I found out that I had early-onset dementia, I could hopefully access some of these new drugs available. In doing so, I would very much hope that I could tick off a few more things on my bucket list. I might want to spend more time with my family and take them on a chance-of-a-lifetime holiday, making memories. People are deprived of making those choices. I do not think it is good enough to have a third of people left undiagnosed. That is the national target being met, and as we have heard, in large parts of the country it is not being met.

I want us to get to a much more rigorous national target. If Stoke can diagnose 90% of people with dementia, so can the rest of the country because Stoke is not a rich area or a well-sourced local authority. Its NHS is not awash with any more cash than other areas of the country; if they can get 90%, so can the rest of the country, with concerted effort. That is why having a strong central target, and an emphasis from the Minister to make that a priority, is going to be important. It will be the priority of the next Labour Government to increase that target and demand that local systems not only meet but exceed it, because this is people's lives that we are talking about.

As we know, earlier diagnosis means better care and outcomes—it could not be simpler. The national target of two thirds is not good enough. I am not content that a third of people, and even more in many areas failing

to meet the target, are living with dementia and going without vital care. With primary care under such immense strain, people simply cannot get through the front door. That is why the next Labour Government will be committed to making the future of general practice sustainable, and to taking pressure off those currently working in the system. We will bolster the workforce so that all patients, including those with dementia, can get timely care. That is why Labour will deliver on the NHS long-term workforce plan to train the staff the NHS needs, now and in the future.

Once a diagnosis has been made, continuity and ease of access to care is crucial to long-term outcomes. That is why one of the fundamental shifts that the next Labour Government will deliver in our health and care system is taking focus of care out of hospitals and into the community. Unlike the last time that was done, principally for people with dementia and learning disabilities, the money has to flow from hospital to community as well, which scandalously did not previously happen.

Labour will work with the NHS and social care providers to bring services together in local communities. It is by having those services embedded where people are that we will deliver another crucial shift to a health and care service relentlessly focused on prevention. Alzheimer's Society research shows us that mild dementia costs £29,000 per person per year, compared to £81,000 for severe dementia. That provides proof, if ever we needed it, that the case for focused prevention is clear for not just patient outcomes but the financial sustainability of services.

As well as looking at the here and now, we must also look at the challenges on the horizon. Our understanding of dementia is constantly evolving. That is why continued leadership in research and embracing the latest technological advances and developments are so vital to ensuring we stay ahead of the game. Labour is committed to putting Britain at the front of the queue for new treatments by boosting clinical trial activity in the NHS. We will speed up recruitment to trials, and give more people the chance to participate. We will link clinical trial registries to create a national standing registry and harness the power of the NHS app to invite eligible participants to take part in research studies.

I pay tribute to a group that is so vital but yet so often forgotten: unpaid carers. Hundreds of thousands of people care selflessly for their loved ones living with dementia. Make no mistake: without the work of unpaid carers the system would simply collapse. With 63% of the total cost of dementia being borne by those living with the condition and their families, we know just how raw a deal they are getting. They are a vital part of the fight against dementia, and they will be at the heart of Labour's plans in Government.

There will be a carers strategy under the next Labour Government, because we value the vital work our carers do. It will be a cross-Government strategy with the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and the future of work review all feeding into it along with the Department of Health and Social Care. There is a brighter future for those living with dementia and their families and carers. Labour will deliver it.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the

hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this debate and for her collaborative work on the issue, which brings everyone together. She is right to point out that dementia is not an automatic part of ageing—there is still a stereotype that does not recognise that—but early onset dementia is also an issue. Young people with dementia often struggle to get the help and support they need because it is seen as a disease of old age.

It was incredible to hear the hon. Lady describe her own experience of caring for her mother, Angela, which must have been so difficult. I think most of us have been affected by dementia in some way. My mother-in-law died from dementia last year. It is just terrible seeing people we know and love change in often such a dramatic way. Even with the best care and support available in the world, it is still difficult.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) talked about her good experience with local services and the importance of dementia-friendly communities. She is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) contributed with his own experience, and spoke about the changes he would like to see to improve the care and experience of those who suffer with dementia.

The all-party parliamentary group on dementia does fantastic work. In her role as chair, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth is doing groundbreaking work, particularly on reports and surveys to flag issues based on the experience of those who provide dementia services and look after loved ones. In Dementia Action Week, I thank everyone involved in supporting people with dementia, particularly unpaid carers, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), said.

I want to reassure hon. Members that this Government are passionate about improving care, and we have a clear mission to make our NHS and social care system much more responsive to people's needs. The hon. Member for Halifax pointed out the important work of the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in setting up the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission. The previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, instigated a lot of research in this space as well.

I say this with my Minister for Women hat on: the leading cause of death among women is dementia. We also know that one in three people will be diagnosed with dementia in their lifetime, and that by 2040 1.6 million of us will be living with the condition, so it has to be a priority for diagnosis, treatment and support. I welcome the research this week from the Alzheimer's Society, which highlights the economic impact of dementia and further outlines why it must be a priority.

The theme of today's debate is the inequalities that exist across the country, and the wide variety of people's experiences in getting a diagnosis and the support and care that they need. Yes, we can put more money and resources in, and I will outline some of the funding we are providing, but we also need a cultural shift. Although dementia is seen as a natural part of ageing, given diagnostic overshadowing other health conditions affecting people with dementia are often completely ignored because they are taken as part of the dementia diagnosis. When someone with dementia has a urinary tract infection, they will often be confused and agitated or even crying out in pain. It is seen as part of their dementia, when

actually they could improve considerably with some simple antibiotics to treat that UTI. Sometimes we need to look at the culture around dementia across the system.

I want to highlight some of the work and research that we are already doing to look at diagnosis and treatment. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth about the central database. Each ICB holds its own individual database, but I will go back to colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to see whether we can bring data together to look at disparities across the country.

Last year we announced our plan to publish a major conditions strategy. Dementia is one of the six conditions covered by the strategy, alongside cancer, cardiovascular disease and other major conditions. It is important that dementia is seen as a major condition and not just a part of ageing. Part of the work that we need to do is around the timely diagnosis of dementia, to ensure that anyone with dementia can access advice, information, care and support.

Our ambition is for two thirds of people living with dementia to receive a formal diagnosis. The shadow Minister probably knows what I am going to say. Absolutely—what he said sounds wonderful. However, Labour is in charge of healthcare in Wales and its ambition in the dementia action plan there is to increase diagnosis by 3% a year. We all want to see an increase in diagnosis rates, but we also need to be realistic and in some of the ambitions elsewhere that has not always been the case.

Andrew Gwynne: May I point out to the Minister that I seek to be the Social Care Minister for England, not Wales? As she is the current Social Care Minister for England, not Wales, can she please be a bit more ambitious for England?

Maria Caulfield: I think it is ambitious for two thirds of people living with dementia to receive a formal diagnosis, because we are not there yet. We are putting some building blocks in place to improve things.

We know that the pandemic had a significant effect, because we shut down routine care for just over two years. It was very difficult then for someone to see their GP with concerns about potential symptoms of dementia, so the treatment of conditions such as dementia suffered as a result of lockdown. However, we are recovering diagnosis rates and a lot of work is going into that. Nevertheless, I absolutely recognise that some parts of the country have made a better recovery than others. Addressing that must be a focus of our work going forward.

NHS England has committed to recover dementia diagnosis rates to that national ambition and is providing clear guidance to integrated care boards, particularly where performance is not where we want it to be, to make sure that that happens. As part of the spending review in 2021-22, £17 million was allocated to the NHS to address dementia waiting lists and increase the number of diagnoses, which, as I say, was adversely impacted by the pandemic.

NHS England is funding an evidence-based improvement project for two trusts in each region, with 14 sites in total, to pilot the diagnosing advanced dementia mandate tool in order to improve diagnosis rates and so that people know what they should be doing when they are trying to get a diagnosis. That includes people in care

[*Maria Caulfield*]

homes and those who may not have relatives or friends to advocate on their behalf and help them to get a diagnosis in the first place.

We touched a little on research. I pay tribute to charity partners working with the National Institute for Health and Care Research, or NIHR, to try and find diagnostic tools to provide better diagnoses at an earlier stage, including things such as the blood biomarker and the blood biomarker challenge, which seeks to produce the clinical and economic data to make the case for a blood biomarker test in healthcare across the UK—so including our friends in Wales—to improve dementia diagnosis. That is how we will really find out who is at most risk and get them diagnosed earlier.

We are committed to supporting that research and will double funding for dementia research to £160 million a year by the end of this current financial year. That will be around not just diagnosis but treatment and other research elements. The Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission is deeply embedded in that work and I thank it for its work in that regard.

I turn to the prevention of dementia. The NIHR is investing £9 million into the three schools dementia programme. There must be risk factors for dementia that we are unaware of at the moment and that vital research could be a game-changer in the future. The NIHR is also supporting the Promoting Independence in Dementia or PRIDE study, which aims to identify how social and lifestyle changes could reduce the risk of developing dementia at any stage of someone's life—I was going to say “later in life”, but dementia can affect any age group.

That takes me on to treatments. Drugs are currently being appraised by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to determine whether they should be made available on the NHS. I know that many, many people are waiting for those appraisals and hope that they will be positive. We expect NICE to publish guidance in July and September respectively, and we want to make sure that if the decision is positive, we are able to provide fair and equitable access to any licensed and approved medication. We will hopefully hear very soon about that.

I want to touch on post-diagnostic support, which is a key part of people's experience with dementia. Everyone should have access to meaningful care. I want to talk about the work of Admiral nurses, who do a tremendous job but are not available everywhere. It is down to individual ICBs to commission those services. The additional roles reimbursement scheme that is available to primary care networks and GP practices allows for enhanced nurses in dementia care to be employed. I encourage MPs to check with their ICBs, PCN and GPs to see whether that is something being used.

Admiral nurses do a fantastic job. It is not just about supporting people with dementia and their families. One critical area is continuing care applications. Very often people with dementia are turned down for continuing care, and Admiral nurses will often get those decisions overturned. I am not commenting on that, but they do have that experience. Sometimes dementia care may appear on the surface to be social care, but it actually is clinical nursing care, so that NHS/social care divide can be bridged.

Local authorities have a duty under the Care Act 2014 to provide or arrange services that meet the needs of the local population. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford talked about various conflicts between neighbouring local authorities. The reason we brought in integrated care boards was to bridge the gap between not only the NHS and social care but neighbouring local authorities. I encourage my hon. Friend to speak to his ICB to see whether they can do anything to better commission services for patients, so that it does not matter which edge of a borough someone lives in and to ensure that care is more joined up.

Andrew Rosindell: What if someone's local borough is on the edge of a region? Havering is on the edge of Greater London, and down the road is Essex. We would rather be Essex, to be honest, but we are stuck where we are. Are authorities able to work with local authorities beyond the boundary of their region?

Maria Caulfield: ICBs should be looking at care in their local population. If there is an issue between regions and across borders, they should have informal conversations, even with a neighbouring ICB, to try to join up the dots. That is why they are called integrated care boards. They are there to integrate health and social care as well as geography in terms of logistical local authority boundary issues. If there is a significant issue across the boroughs on the Essex border, I would happily meet local MPs to discuss it, because we want joined-up dots and better-connected care. Good local relationships can improve local services. We will be publishing ratings of how well local authorities are delivering adult social care, and we will support them to improve their performance, so I am particularly interested in any geographical boundaries preventing that work.

Coming to the social care workforce, the social care setting is integral to supporting families, particularly unpaid carers. Our workforce must be equipped with the skills it needs. We have commissioned and funded the dementia training standards framework, developed in partnership with the sector. The framework sets out the required essential skills that we expect to be applicable across the health and care spectrum, and we expect social care to train its staff according to the framework.

We have also launched the care workforce pathway, which is the first ever national career structure for the adult social care workforce. That is really important as it will cover the complexity of conditions that social care workers now care for and give them a career pathway, so that their option is not just to work for a bit in social care and then go and do something better-paid. We want social care to have career progression and pay progression and help people stay in the job that people love. We have created a new care certificate qualification to end the current practice of care workers having to retrain every time they work for a new employer. Work is being done in this space. To echo the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, about unpaid carers, we know that the vast majority of care is given by people who are looking after loved ones and friends, and they do an amazing job. Local authorities are required to undertake a carer's assessment for any unpaid carer.

Andrew Rosindell: I mentioned the Dementia Music and Social Club Romford. It meets at the United Reformed church and does a magnificent job. I hope the Minister

would commend its work. It struggles because it does not have any direct funding. Would the Government consider having some kind of community chest to support local groups that are organised by volunteers and families of those who are suffering with dementia, so that they can have some funding for special events, day trips or social activities? That is so important, and they make the lives of those who are suffering with dementia so much better. They bring families and local people together to ensure that they have the best possible life with the condition that they are living with.

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely recognise that. I will take away my hon. Friend's suggestion, but I would say that integrated care boards can commission those sorts of services because, despite not being medical services as such, they provide a valuable service to those patients. Local GPs can also fund such activities through social prescribing. If someone goes to those events weekly or on a regular basis, social prescribing is there to help with exactly that sort of activity, because they are health and wellbeing activities, which make such a difference. I am very happy to follow up on my hon. Friend's suggestion.

Andrew Rosindell: I invite the Minister to visit the club. She would be very welcome, and she could see how effective the local group is in providing community support.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. I am very happy to take my hon. Friend up on his offer. It is important to remind people of the funding avenues available, which are not always used. For example, social prescribing has funding attached to it, and it is important that we remember that. Funding pots must be sustainable. We often give one-off grants, as Government; they make a big difference, but they do not always lead to sustainable funding routes.

Andrew Rosindell: Would the Minister write to Members with details of the funding streams available, so that we can disseminate them to groups in our constituencies?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. I am very happy to take that away as an action point.

I thank everyone for taking part in this debate. We recognise how difficult it can be for people diagnosed with dementia and their friends and family. We know that we have work to do on improving diagnosis rates. We are seeing improvements, but there is a lot more work to do. It is research and development that will really transform the way we manage dementia, find out who is at risk, diagnose them early and get treatments in place. There will be game changers, I am sure, over the next few years that will make a difference, but in the meantime we have to support people with dementia and their families better. I hope that I have demonstrated that the Government are absolutely supportive, and that we see this as a top priority. Once again, I thank all Members across this Chamber for taking part in the debate.

1.38 pm

Debbie Abrahams: I will be very quick because I know that people have trains to catch, but I want to reiterate the Minister's thanks to everybody for taking part. This has been a particularly nice debate in its collaborative approach, and I thank her also for saying that she will follow up on the data and whether it could be retained centrally. I also hope that there is evidence that has been supplied here and elsewhere that will help to strengthen the dementia aspect of the major conditions strategy. We have not spoken about type-specific diagnoses, so I ask the Minister to ensure that that is included, because access to the therapies will not be available without that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered inequalities in dementia services.

1.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

Mental Health and Long-term Conditions

[SIR ROBERT SYMS *in the Chair*]

2 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered mental health and long-term conditions.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Robert. I thank all the organisations that wrote to me to provide information, statistics, views, observations and asks on this important matter of mental health and long-term conditions. I want to set out the list of organisations that wrote in, because the fact that so many did so is testimony to the importance and depth of this issue to so many of our constituents. They are: Parkinson's UK, which requested the debate in collaboration with others, Impact on Urban Health, the British Psychological Society, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Marie Curie, Versus Arthritis, Genetic Alliance UK, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation—a type 1 diabetes charity—Kidney Care UK, Kidney Research, the MS Society, Scope, Dementia UK, the Centre for Mental Health, the Royal College of Nursing, the King's Fund, the Local Government Association and, of course, the excellent House of Commons research team, who produced a paper for this debate.

I hope I have caught all the organisations that wrote to me. If I have not, I sincerely apologise to them. The information they provided was very wide-ranging, fascinating, informative, comprehensive and, of course, at times very worrying. Rather than hear from me, I want hon. Members to hear from those organisations. I will quote pretty extensively from what they told me, and I will have asks for the Minister in due course.

People with long-term physical health conditions are more likely than the general population to experience mental ill health. That combination leads to poorer quality health outcomes and a reduced quality of life. The key to improving mental health outcomes in people with long-term conditions is integration between physical and mental healthcare to provide holistic support. As the Minister knows, the Government's forthcoming major conditions plan contains a commitment to

“much closer alignment and integration between physical and mental health services”.

This debate is a timely opportunity for the Government to tell us more about what that looks like and how the NHS workforce plan will actually support that ambition.

We know that at any one time, up to 40% of people with Parkinson's will have depression, and up to 30% will experience anxiety—considerably higher than the 17% of the general population who will experience a common mental health problem. The majority of people living with the condition told Parkinson's UK that their mental health symptoms were the most distressing aspect of it.

Recent research commissioned by Parkinson's UK found that from an audit of unplanned admissions at University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, the length of stay for people with Parkinson's experiencing mental ill health was 29 days, compared with three days for those not experiencing mental ill health. More than two thirds of people affected by neurological conditions reported that their mental health wellbeing needs were not being fully met, and 67% of all respondents—children, young people and adults—to a

Neurological Alliance survey said that their mental wellbeing needs were being met to a small extent, or most often not at all.

Diabetes is one of the fastest-growing health crises in the UK. Diagnoses of type 2 have almost doubled in 15 years, and there are now more than 5 million people living with that condition. Evidence shows that people with diabetes are twice as likely to experience depression, and that they experience it more frequently and for longer than the general population. Research suggests that about half of all people with multiple sclerosis will experience depression at some point in their life, and almost half of people with arthritis say that the pain often or always makes them feel down or depressed.

A 2022 survey by Kidney Research UK showed that of the more than 1,000 people who responded, 67% had experienced symptoms of depression, 27% had considered self-harm, and so on. It is not only quality of life that is hugely affected; the economic impact of this issue is vast in reducing people's ability to work and in increasing health and social care costs.

That puts the issue in context. I want to quote a number of the organisations concerned. As I said at the beginning, I want hon. Members to listen to what people are telling us, rather than what I think they are telling us. That is important. It is the case that 153,000 people are living with Parkinson's disease in the UK. That is often thought of as predominantly a movement disorder. However, between 50% and 60% of sufferers experience psychosis and 40% have depression. That is according to Parkinson's UK. It says that those

“who experience anxiety and depression found communication barriers between”

health

“departments, difficulties accessing patient notes, and a shortage of mental health professionals with the knowledge and skills”

to meet their specific needs.

Impact on Urban Health talks about 15 million people in the UK having one long-term condition and about 3 million living with three or more. It says:

“Poor physical health is inextricably linked with poor mental health, and both can be exacerbated by social context, or in other words where and how we live.”

The British Psychological Society says:

“There is a growing evidence base demonstrating the benefits of developing the psychological workforce within physical health care service provision to support earlier intervention, interdisciplinary programmes of care, and a focus on health distress and psychological adjustment as part of rehabilitation and recovery.”

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust says that, in regard to out-patient care,

“the paediatric CF service specifications say ‘there should be access to psycho-social support’ and the adult CF service specifications say ‘there will be access to psycho-social support.’”

Its ask is this:

“Everyone with CF must have access to a CF social worker and clinical psychologist, as and when needed, and not just at their annual review, as NHS service specifications state.”

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust indicates that this is not something that just comes and goes; it is there all the time for many people.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists talks about how having a physical illness can also have a negative effect on how someone thinks and feels. There are impacts in relation to stress, the sense of self, relationships, and understanding of the world. It says:

“Research has shown a link between mental illnesses and certain physical illnesses”

such as cancer, diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and epilepsy.

Marie Curie says:

“While parity of esteem between mental and physical health is enshrined in law it is not yet being realised. There is limited access to mental health support, insufficient training for health and social care professionals and poor integration of palliative care and mental health care. The Government must centre integrated mental and physical health care within their plans for improving health care.”

The Versus Arthritis organisation says that depression is four times more common among those with chronic pain than those without pain—I do not think that is surprising—20% of people living with osteoarthritis experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, and 33% of people living with rheumatoid arthritis have mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. It says:

“Stress is also a significant factor for people living with arthritis.”

One of its service users, Richard, said:

“I didn’t appreciate just how big an impact my arthritis had on my mental health until I became pain-free. The pain took up so much of my headspace without me realising it. Living in constant pain is incredibly draining because it’s always there, which makes it difficult to enjoy everyday moments.”

Genetic Alliance UK, which colleagues have an interest in, talks about rare conditions that are

“individually rare but collectively common”,

with more than 3.5 million people in the UK living with a rare condition. It says:

“Rare conditions can be life-limiting and life-threatening. Due to their rarity, services are significantly underdeveloped to support people affected by them.”

It also says:

“Almost half of people living with rare conditions and their carers have never been asked about their mental health...and families report being denied access to mental health services due to the complexity of their needs associated with having a rare genetic condition.”

Its solution is:

“It is necessary to urgently improve awareness of rare conditions among healthcare professionals and social care services.”

The diabetes charity Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation talks about coping strategies:

“Seeking support from healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, diabetes educators, psychologists, and social workers, is crucial in developing effective coping mechanisms tailored to individual needs.”

Kidney Care states:

“Addressing the mental health and social needs of kidney patients requires a multi-layered approach combining clinical, community, and policy initiatives. Implementing our recommended strategies will lead to improvements in the overall wellbeing and quality of life for people living with kidney disease while reducing the burden on the NHS.”

I have often heard the word “burden”, but I do not think it is a question of being a burden; it is a question of people’s right to have care, as and when they need it—I never see that as a burden. Kidney Care went on:

“We cannot let the repeated absence of appropriate mental health and social support continue. Now is the time for us to act to ensure that people living with kidney disease get the help they need.”

Kidney Research UK states:

“Having a long-term condition dramatically increases a person’s risk of mental ill health...Having poor mental health as well as a long-term condition leads to worse outcomes for a person’s physical health.”

A thread runs through every single one of these narratives.

According to Dementia UK:

“70,800 people in the UK are estimated to have young onset dementia, when symptoms develop before the age of 65. Yet people affected by young onset dementia remain a hidden population with unmet health care needs.”

It recommends:

“The Government must mandate every”

integrated care system

“to develop a young onset dementia pathway—putting those of working age with dementia at its heart. This includes providing a timely and accurate diagnosis, immediate post-diagnostic support and a co-ordinated care plan”,

because the impact on people’s and families’ mental health also has to be taken into account.

Moving on, Scope wrote that

“we have been extremely concerned about the recent proposals from the DWP following the Prime Minister’s ‘sicknote culture’ which heavily focused on people with mental health conditions. These proposals look to make the benefit system even more hostile, with it becoming more difficult for disabled people to claim the amount they need”.

Basically, that puts more and more stress on people. Scope describes a benefits system that is “dehumanising, stressful and complex”, which impacts on people’s mental health.

Crohn’s and Colitis UK talks about people with inflammatory bowel disease, who are

“twice as likely to experience mental health problems.”

Mental health can be affected in different ways, but the organisation adds:

“Despite the clear impact, most people with Crohn’s or Colitis don’t have access to psychological support...as part of the IBD specialist team.”

Again, that theme runs right through.

The MS Society briefed on mental health and multiple sclerosis:

“People with MS are likely to experience mental ill-health. A survey of the MS community carried out in MS Awareness Week in April 2024 found that nearly half...of respondents experienced mental health difficulties as a symptom of their MS.”

It recommends that the Government

“develop and implement a neurological conditions Talking Therapies pathway”

and

“a training package for the neurological workforce on mental health awareness.”

Kidney Research UK says:

“There are an estimated 7.2 million people living with kidney disease”

in the United Kingdom. It wants the adoption of

“a tailored approach to mental health care through a stepped model that becomes more specialised as needs increase”.

It also wants increased Government funding

“for research into the relationship between kidney disease and mental health to enable the ongoing development of essential services.”

The Royal College of Nursing also wrote to me. It talked about parity of esteem:

“Our members have previously suggested that there is risk in over-emphasising the need for ‘more counselling and brief talking therapy’ without parallel and sufficient investment in services that can help ensure parity”.

[Peter Dowd]

I am coming to a conclusion. The King's Fund talked about a "360-degree review" that looks at prevalence, access, workforce, funding, costs, quality of patient experience, acute mental healthcare for adults, services for children and young people, inequalities, and data. I understand that the Local Government Association has already put its submission on the major conditions strategy in to the Government, but it is sure to talk about taking a whole-systems, assets-based approach.

I have done a Cook's tour of what organisations have said. There is much more, and I am more than happy to send the documents I have to the Minister so that she or her staff can read them to get a feel for what organisations are saying.

Finally, I thank the House of Commons Library for its briefing, which basically says that people with serious mental illness

"in England die on average 15 to 20 years earlier than the general population. Major causes of death in people with SMI include long-term physical health conditions including diabetes, hypertension, respiratory and cardiovascular disease."

The thread I talked about runs through every one of the submissions I have read out, and I am sure the Minister has listened to all that I have said. More importantly, I have repeated and put out to hon. Members what all those organisations have said—it is not what I say, but what they say—and I hope she will listen carefully to it.

2.17 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this incredibly important debate. Dealing with long-term health conditions can create a significant mental health burden both for the individuals with those conditions and for those who love and care for them. I see that regularly as a constituency MP, as well as in my work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, people with physical health problems are two to three times more likely to have depression than people with good physical health. Conversely, people with severe mental illness in England are almost five times more likely to experience poor health and to die prematurely, as we heard from my hon. Friend, than those who do not have severe mental illnesses, and that mortality gap is widening.

We face a really difficult cycle, but we could be doing things to make life easier for people. As we have heard, that applies to people with a whole range of conditions, all of whom have specific needs. To name a few examples, I think of people with diabetes and their experiences of diabetes distress, which can look like a major depressive disorder but are often closely linked to glycaemic management and self-care. I think of people with Parkinson's, who we have also heard about, nearly half of whom have experienced anxiety and depression, which are often triggered by the stress of receiving a diagnosis, as well as by the physical changes in the brain caused by the condition itself.

However, today I will focus on the difficulties endured by those with rare conditions, which can be acute. While such conditions are individually rare, they are collectively common, affecting over 3.5 million people in the UK, or one in 17 people—and my hon. Friend mentioned

one of the organisations involved, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust. Talking about rare diseases across the board, a significant proportion are particularly devastating, with more than three out of 10 children affected dying before their fifth birthday.

We should be doing everything we can to make the lives of people with rare diseases easier. Instead, research from Genetic Alliance UK found that many families describe their experience of accessing care and support as a "battle", "struggle" or "fight". Those experiences reflect a number of challenges, including a lack of clinician awareness, long delays in diagnosis, widespread lack of licensed medicinal products to treat conditions, and difficulties accessing services such as education, employment, housing and social care, as well as financial support.

For those without a diagnosis, the challenges are particularly profound. It means isolation from community support, difficulties filling in paperwork to access services, and often no prognosis, meaning that individuals and their families have little to no idea how their condition will progress or even whether it will be life-limiting. The situation families live with is complex, unique and often extreme in terms of the stress endured. As one parent put it,

"you end up fighting battles you didn't even know existed."

Dealing with all those challenges—let alone the condition itself—can lead to stress, exhaustion and even suicidal thoughts. Further research from Genetic Alliance UK found that 70% of adults affected by rare conditions and their care givers have described themselves as being "at breaking point", with more than 90% reporting anxiety, stress and low mood. Despite that, 75% of respondents to the 2023 Rareminds survey said they have never had a healthcare professional offer them support, or even signpost them to support, for their mental health. It is undeniable that, as things stand, we are letting families down.

We must urgently take steps to improve awareness of rare conditions among healthcare professionals and social care services. That includes providing the training and resources professionals need to support patients through their entire care journey, right from symptom presentation to diagnosis, treatment and management of the condition. We need those professionals to be familiar with the challenges of living with a rare disease and to handle discussions about mental health sensitively. Patients should be able to access assessment of mental health needs and mental health services on a routine and regular basis.

Turning to the UK rare diseases framework, England's rare diseases action plan 2023 looked at mental health after it was highlighted in feedback on the 2022 action plan. Actions in the plan to address the mental health issues this community faces include requiring all new and revised service specifications for patients with rare diseases to consider users' psychosocial needs and to ensure that there are co-ordinated pathways for access to mental health support. Research should also be commissioned to provide the evidence needed to operationalise better co-ordination of care, specifying that this should include approaches that address integrating mental health support into rare disease clinical care—when I talk to people with rare diseases and their families, one thing they talk about is that strain of pulling everything together and having to make sure that they have co-ordinated care, which in itself puts a stress on them.

Finally, there were provisions on the NHS workforce, training and education directorate looking at developing further educational contact.

However, there are still things that can be done. The Department of Health and Social Care hosted a workshop in 2023 to better understand the challenges faced by the families of children and young people with rare conditions when accessing mental health service. Now that we understand the needs of the community, we need to see those priorities materialise into tangible change. The current UK rare diseases framework runs out in January 2025, so it is time to plan ahead. We must look ahead and take steps to build on the progress that has been made so far.

Although I am making the case for rare diseases and rare conditions, we need to see the same co-ordination and planning right across the board, and a recognition of the impact of mental health on people with long-term conditions. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for people with long-term conditions; the most important thing is for them to have access to a clinician who understands their needs. Help should not have to wait for a person to be diagnosed with a mental health problem. It is easier to protect and maintain mental wellbeing than to restore it after it has been eroded.

With our mental health system so very stretched, it has been difficult for patients to access even the most basic support. Looking more widely, there are currently more child and adolescent mental health services referrals than there have ever been, with nearly half a million young people in the system. Despite this record level of demand, it remains the case that around two thirds of children considered to have a diagnosable mental health condition have no contact with the NHS.

We therefore need a firm commitment, a detailed action plan and workforce plans from the Government to tackle the mental health crisis, with an opportunity for proper parliamentary accountability so that we can assess progress. It is particularly vital that we provide better support within the community for all those with long-term conditions, and I am pleased that the Labour party has set out its plans to achieve that. I hope the Government can deliver on this issue and take firm action to support those with long-term conditions.

Getting our mental health services back on their feet will play a vital role in tackling the vicious cycle of poor mental health on the one hand and poor physical health on the other. With proper parity of esteem and a holistic person-centred approach to care across our health system, I believe that we can make the most challenging aspects of people's lives easier for them as they live with long-term conditions.

2.28 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a privilege to be under your guidance, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this debate on a very important issue.

I declare an interest: I suffered from kidney failure and was very fortunate to get a transplant. A very good friend of mine gave me his kidney as a live donor, which is extremely rare; most patients are not that lucky. The problem with the donor card system for organ donations is that it depends on the next of kin. If the next of kin does not abide by the deceased's decision, no organs can be taken. There is still a real issue to address there.

Transplants change your life. I went through dialysis for almost four and a half years, but I was then fortunate enough to get a transplant from a very good friend who used to be in this place and was then in the European Parliament. He is now living in north Wales, having a fantastic time, and is doing some consultancy as well. It was Siôn Simon, who is still a very good friend and a great person; I pay tribute to his courage. More people should do as he did, because unless we have other issues, a lot of us can survive on one kidney. He is certainly a great example of that.

Kidney failure is very sudden—you do not realise until it is upon you—but it can be avoided by some simple tests. A simple urine test at the GP or in hospital can give an analysis of someone's kidney function so that hopefully they can take preventive action to make sure that they do not lose a kidney. People can also go for blood tests. Those are very easy preventive measures that can save someone's physical health.

Just as important is mental health. Once someone is a kidney patient, they have to seek dialysis of some sort—peritoneal dialysis or haemodialysis. I had haemodialysis, which is done through a machine that circulates the blood. Peritoneal dialysis, which can be done at night, circulates the impurities out of the system using a fluid bag and an exit bag. One of the main problems when people get such a difficult health condition is that they think, "Why me? What have I done to deserve this?" My experience, unfortunately, is that people in the dialysis unit can find it very difficult to come to terms with from a mental health perspective and to justify why it is happening to them.

When someone goes on dialysis, they have four-hour sessions at least three times a week. It reduces their blood pressure significantly. Having fluids in their system is one of the last things they should do: they should drink as little water as they possibly can, because it will be extracted through the process. When their blood pressure drops, it causes a huge physical issue. Their heart rate increases and they can pass out: I did so a couple of times and was very grateful to the people at the unit who acted very swiftly to support me. I pay great tribute to all the medical staff—the doctors, the consultants, and particularly the nurses—in the renal units, who do a fantastic job to support us all.

During that period, I saw a number of people going through real mental health struggles in coming to terms with turning up to a unit every week and knowing that they would be there for four hours. Getting there, getting ready, coming off and being picked up or taking their own transport can take at least six hours of their day. It is a huge amount of time, and they are stuck in that cycle.

One thing people can do, and which I resorted to in the end, is home dialysis: I was able to dialyse myself, with support, at home. That made it slightly easier, but it is a hugely debilitating condition. A number of people have really difficult mental health problems in coming to terms with this debilitating disease. There are lots of questions. A friend's son who was there with me, and was a lot younger than me, unfortunately passed, and I have seen other people who passed because of this. Part of that is to do with staying strong mentally. When there is no support for that, it becomes increasingly difficult.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle raised the important issue of how diabetes and other long-term illnesses can put someone's mental health quite severely

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

at risk. The longer it goes on, the more it becomes a huge risk. I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and giving me the opportunity to say this.

In 2022, a Kidney Research UK survey found that 67% of patients with kidney disease had experienced symptoms of depression, 27% had considered self-harm or suicide, 36% could not fully look after their physical health because of their mental health problems, and 68% had not been offered any mental health support despite their precarious position. That is how difficult it is for people to make their way through. It is very important that mental health issues be addressed.

In 2023, Kidney Research UK and the Centre for Mental Health published a joint report, “Addressing the mental health challenges of life with kidney disease: the case for change”. They made a number of recommendations, including the adoption of a tailored approach to mental health that becomes more specialised as the need increases. The need increases because patients’ physical health deteriorates, and it becomes extremely difficult to do some of those things that are normal for all of us.

The report also recommended the recruitment of renal psychologists for every renal centre in the UK. We do not have that facility, so even if it is picked up in a renal unit that a patient is having these issues, they have nowhere to go. All that can be done is for the patient to be signposted to the main central mental health facilities, which are very difficult to engage with. As it all increases, the patient’s own health position gets worse. That is why it is very important to have psychologists in every renal health centre in the UK.

Another recommendation was:

“Investment into all renal services to ensure that staff are trained and supported to assess and refer patients for further mental health help.”

Once they can do that, they can put patients on a pathway to resolving most of these issues. A further recommendation was:

“Increased government funding for research into the relationship between kidney disease and mental health to enable the ongoing development of essential services.”

When someone has a medical condition and, on top of that, mental health issues brought about by the severity of their condition, it causes a huge amount of problems.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle again for making his case and giving me the opportunity to speak. This is a really important issue for those who cannot have a transplant and are still suffering from kidney disease: they are having to choose dialysis and then deal with it for most of their life. It is very difficult for them.

2.38 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this important debate. I know that this is a topic very close to his heart, particularly as he is an officer of the all-party parliamentary health group. He recently gave a keynote speech about mental health and wellbeing for the NHS and social care for Westminster Insight. Today he has highlighted a number of important issues and concerns regarding mental health and long-term conditions. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Opposition.

My hon. Friend raised many of his points in the words of organisations that have done a lot of work and research into how long-term conditions impact individuals. I was particularly touched by how he talked about the impact of limited access to mental health support and poor palliative healthcare. He said that he did a Cook’s tour of what all the organisations have said, and I hope the Minister takes the words of those organisations on board.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) for their contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, talked about how different conditions have impacted people. If improvements could be made in conditions like diabetes and Parkinson’s, people’s mental health could improve. She focused on the difficulties facing those with rare conditions and highlighted the powerful statistic that 3.5 million people—one in 17—are impacted. She talked about a parent who said that you end up fighting battles that you did not really know existed.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr for sharing his personal experience. He talked about issues relating to transplants and about how his transplant has changed his life, as well as the impact on the mental health of patients who go through dialysis. He also talked about how 67% of kidney patients experience depression and 68% are not offered any mental health support.

It is fitting that we are addressing this crucial topic in Mental Health Awareness Week. I pay tribute to all the fantastic mental health charities that are fighting the fight and leading the way across the UK. They include the Mental Health Foundation, Mind, Centre for Mental Health, Rethink Mental Illness, the Samaritans, YoungMinds and many more. Alongside those brilliant charities, this week we have observed schools, universities, businesses, community groups and many other organisations coming together, including here in Parliament, to raise awareness of the importance of our mental health and combatting the lingering stigma that remains in our society. I put on the record my thanks to the House of Commons Library for its research in the area.

In recent years, talking about mental health has finally stepped out of the shadows, and we are better off as a result. However, while we celebrate the progress that has been made, we cannot overlook the scale of the challenges that we face. Sadly, I have to say that after 14 years in office, this Government have failed to deliver the mental health services that our country desperately needs and deserves. It has never been as bad as it is today: I hear that time and again from the patients, families and NHS frontline staff who I have been fortunate to meet since I was appointed to this role.

The statistics on the crisis are clear. More than 1.9 million people are waiting for mental health treatment. Almost 1 million children and young people in England were referred to mental health services last year, and more than 33,000 children and young people are still waiting, after two years, for a first contact from community mental health services. A recent report by Centre for Mental Health estimated that the crisis is costing us £300 billion a year, which is twice as big as NHS England’s annual budget.

Suicide is the biggest killer in this country. The rates are the same as they were 20 years ago, and they are rising. When it comes to those with long-term physical and mental health conditions, we must be particularly

concerned. Far too many people are leaving the labour market, and many are no longer able to work. Work is good for mental health and can bring pride, fulfilment and purpose, yet the number of people out of work because of long-term sickness is at a staggering all-time high of 2.8 million. The reality is that this crisis has occurred under successive Tory Governments. Britain has become unwell, with millions languishing on waiting lists and far too many living in conditions of poverty, poor housing and financial insecurity that worsen their mental health.

We cannot stand by as the crisis continues, which is why we need to address the challenges together. As has been mentioned, we need to work across Departments in Whitehall and oh so directly at the heart of our communities. A Labour Government will do that by injecting resources and reforming NHS mental health services. We cannot just turn around at the shocking figures that my colleagues have produced in this debate; we have to completely overhaul the way that our country approaches mental health. For example, we need a prevention-based approach, where people can access mental health support in the community when they first need it, rather than wait until they reach crisis point. Prevention is not only socially just but economically efficient, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle mentioned. It saves lives and it saves money.

Labour will give the NHS the staff it needs by recruiting 8,500 more mental health specialists to cut waiting lists and waiting times. We will also provide mental health support in every school and an open-access mental health hub for children and young people in every community. Those plans will be fully paid for by abolishing tax loopholes for private equity managers and ending tax breaks for private schools.

We cannot discuss the topic of mental health without talking about the long-awaited reform of the Mental Health Act 1983. Labour has committed to include reform of the Act in our first King's Speech. The Tories promised those reforms in their 2017 and 2019 manifestos, but have failed time and time again to deliver. The treatment of people with autism and learning disabilities under this outdated legislation disgraces our society, and the way in which black people are disproportionately impacted is indefensible. This law is not fit for purpose and needs to change. If elected, Labour will change it.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle for bringing forward the debate. I also want to make it clear how inspiring it has been to witness the widespread and positive contribution of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week, this week. There is a clear yearning from the public, especially our young people, to end the stigma and treat mental health with the same urgency as physical health. We must transform that pressure into action.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this debate about mental health for those with long-term conditions, especially during Mental Health Awareness Week.

I thank everyone who contributed, including the hon. Member for Blyth (Liz Twist) who does great work on mental health with her all-party parliamentary group

on suicide and self-harm prevention. If other hon. Members do not mind me saying so, the standout speech was from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who talked about his own experience of going through a long-term condition and needing dialysis for renal disease. He highlighted not only the physical impact but the effect on his mental health, and the uncertainty that organ donation and transplant can bring.

I know that this is a debate on mental health for those with long-term conditions, but I will touch on what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr said about the opt-out system for organ donations in England, which we brought in in May 2020. I recognise that even when someone has consented themselves, there are still issues with families refusing organ donation. In February 2023, we committed to implement the recommendations of the Organ Utilisation Group, which highlighted issues relating to opt-out and to the use of donated organs—we must ensure they go forward for donation—so I absolutely recognise the hon. Gentleman's comments.

I want to reassure hon. Members about our commitment to improving mental health and wellbeing, particularly for those with longer-term conditions. Over the past 14 years, the stigma surrounding mental health problems and mental illness has been removed. People are much more willing to talk about their mental health and discuss issues that they face; we are breaking down those barriers.

We have also made progress on parity of esteem between physical and mental health, and the funding that we have made available to mental health in the past few years is the most significant ever in England. That is not to say that it has met all the challenges we face, but through funding, infrastructure and staff recruitment we are getting mental and physical health on the same level.

When I spoke at the Mental Health Foundation event in Parliament yesterday, I said that our challenge now was to ensure that we do not just silo people into having a mental health problem or a physical health problem. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr expressed that so well. We cannot just treat people in isolation; we know that people who suffer with mental illness have significantly poorer health outcomes for major conditions including cancer and heart disease, and likewise people with long-term conditions struggle with their mental health. That is why we put mental health in our major conditions strategy. We got some criticism when we announced that we would not have a stand-alone mental health strategy, but it was because people's conditions cannot be treated in isolation: their physical and mental health must be treated together. That is why, in the major conditions strategy, mental health is one of the major conditions that we will focus on.

That is also why, through the NHS long-term plan, we have provided record levels of funding to increase our mental health workforce across England. Our target is 27,000 mental health workers and we are on track to meet it. Our NHS forecast shows that since 2019 our spending on mental health services has increased by £4.7 billion in cash terms, compared with our original target of £3.4 billion. We invest almost £16 billion in mental health, enabling 3.6 million people to access mental health services.

Significant investment and resources are going in, but I recognise that there has been a tsunami of demand and we are struggling even to tread water. We have had a 46% increase in the number of referrals across the United Kingdom, not just in England. In Wales they have

[*Maria Caulfield*]

had a similar experience: child mental health waits were up 14% in July 2023, compared with December 2022. Overall, in Wales there are 30,000 people on the waiting list who have been waiting for more than two years. The challenges that we face in England are exactly the same as those in Wales, and I think it would be more appropriate to take the politics out of this and deal with the causes.

I am really pleased that the types of mental health services we are investing in are not just for people with a mental illness. It is really important that we not only provide bespoke services for people with specific mental illnesses, but improve the mental health of the country overall. One of our biggest successes is the flagship NHS talking therapies programme, which is for adults everywhere across the country. It is accessible on our NHS website. People can access the Every Mind Matters website, and can self-refer. Anyone can access those services, including people with diabetes, Parkinson's, cancer, MS or renal conditions. So far, more than 1.2 million people have done so in the past year—an 11% increase since the start of the long-term plan in 2019.

We are expanding those services further to help people with mental ill health and long-term conditions. Colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions are working with people who are struggling to find work because of a long-term condition and the mental health effects that that has had.

We do recognise that two thirds of people with common mental health problems also have a long-term physical health problem. One of the key issues we do need to overcome—which was not mentioned in this debate—is that if someone has a mental illness they may also have cancer, diabetes or renal problems, and sometimes there is diagnostic overshadowing that assumes that it is someone's mental health problems when they are complaining about pain or describing other symptoms. They are not taken as seriously as someone who does not have a mental illness. That diagnostic overshadowing is sometimes responsible for the poorer clinical outcomes. There is a piece of work to do, across the board, that is not just about providing services. It is about changing that culture so that people with mental illness and long-term conditions get the help that they need.

On the talking therapies point, all integrated care boards are expected to expand their services locally by commissioning NHS talking therapies into physical healthcare pathways. I know the hon. Member for Bootle talked specifically about some of the work on renal disease. NHS England has published a series of service specifications covering renal services, developed by specialist clinicians and commissioners and patients with experience, to set out expected standards for specialised renal care. That does include clinical psychologists, although I recognise that is not happening everywhere. There are regular review meetings between regional commissioners; I am very happy to follow those up with the hon. Gentleman, to update him on where there may perhaps be gaps in service provision. However there is a service specification that should include those services for renal conditions as well.

I will move on to talk about suicide prevention. We released our strategy fairly recently and we have put in it that people with a physical illness or a long-term condition are more at risk of suicide. That is why physical illness is

now included as a key national risk factor for action in our five-year suicide prevention strategy. I am very happy to update Members about the progress we are making. There are 130 actions that we believe will address some of those common risk factors and make swift progress.

In terms of the support we are giving to people with long-term conditions and the ability to live better with a long-term condition, we are providing support across the board here as well. It is important that teams that are looking after people, whether with cancer or diabetes, are aware of the emotional and psychological support needed. It has historically been the case that these patients are often referred to the mental health team. That is not always what is needed. Some basic support can do a huge amount to improve the psychological wellbeing of patients.

Children were raised in the debate and I want to update the House on that because children have long-term conditions too. We are putting in significant support. Only a few weeks ago, we put forward funding for 24 early support hubs—support hubs for children who want to get mental health support. No referral is required. They are local, with services provided to suit the needs of the local community, and £8 million has gone towards the funding of those 24 projects. We are evaluating them to see whether they are making the difference we need them to make. We are also rolling out mental health support teams in schools to over 4 million children via 400 mental health support teams which are providing support to just under 50% of our schools. I think that is making a significant difference. If a child has a long-term condition in school, they will have within their school a team able to provide emotional and psychological support to them as appropriate.

I hope I have given a bit of a whistle-stop tour—although perhaps not a Cook's tour, as the hon. Member for Bootle did. I absolutely share some of the concerns that hon. Members have raised in this Chamber, and I hope that I have highlighted that there is some exciting, groundbreaking work happening in this space.

In Mental Health Awareness Week, it is really important that we talk about mental health problems for people with long-term conditions and recognise how being unwell over a long period—whatever the cause—affects a person and their family. That is why it is so important that we have whole-person treatment and support to improve both the physical and mental wellbeing of individuals.

3 pm

Peter Dowd: First, thank you for your excellent stewardship of today's event, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and salute her commitment to the rare diseases field, which I know she works very hard on. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) for his compelling articulation of his personal experience. I think that we would all like to thank him for that. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for her response. And, of course, I thank the Minister for listening and responding. Finally, a big thanks to all of the organisations that I mentioned earlier.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered mental health and long-term conditions.

3 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 May 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Smarter Regulation Programme

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): A year ago, the Government established the smarter regulation programme to focus on improving regulation across the UK economy to reduce burdens, push down the cost of living and drive economic growth.

Today, I am pleased to be able to update the House on our progress with the publication of two papers. First, “Smarter regulation: one year on—May 2024” which details our progress so far outlining important reforms and a road map for further reform. Secondly, our White Paper “Smarter regulation: delivering a regulatory environment for innovation, investment and growth” sets out an ambitious plan to improve the UK’s regulatory landscape and encourage innovation, investment and economic growth.

The UK’s regulatory landscape is recognised internationally as a model of best practice in many respects. There is, however, strong evidence which suggests that our regulatory culture hinders our ability to stimulate economic activity, foster innovation and attract investment.

Over decades, successive Governments have automatically defaulted to regulation as a preferred option, rather than a last resort. This has led to myriad complex and burdensome regulations which cost the economy an estimated £70 billion. Nearly half of all businesses tell us that regulation is an obstacle to growth.

My Department set up the smarter regulation programme to re-energise regulatory reform, capitalise on the benefits of Brexit, and promote growth in every corner of the economy.

Smarter regulation: one year on—May 2024

So far, it is estimated that our reforms will reduce the burden on business by up to £1 billion or 50 million hours per year by cutting unnecessary bureaucracy and form filling. The overall benefits to society are estimated at £6.3 billion.

Our reforms include making changes to the EU’s working time directive reporting requirements, and improvements to price transparency and product information for consumers.

“Smarter regulation—one year on” includes 25 new policy announcements across almost every sector of the economy to reduce burdens on business. This includes in those announced today:

a consultation containing proposals to deregulate the Commercial Agents Regulations, freeing businesses to negotiate contracts with one another without reference to outdated regulations that create legal ambiguity and confusion;

a consultation on proposals to abolish the legal framework for European Works Councils—mandatory committees multinationals had to consult if they employed people in the EU. The reforms could save business in the region of £5 million per year;

a consultation on new proposals on an alternative model for UK REACH, reducing the need for industry to access EU hazard data, improving data on “use and exposure” and improving regulator powers, while ensuring high levels of protection of human health and the environment;

proposals to modernise the outdated and overly restrictive rules on gaming machines in a boost for bingo halls, casinos and arcades;

a consultation that builds on current covid easements to simplify how the sale of alcohol is licensed for consumption in pavement areas next to pubs and bars. This will support alfresco hospitality, including an option for providing takeaway and delivery sales by default; and,

an international vehicle standards vision which will set out the Government’s strategy for opening our markets to new vehicles, such as autonomous vehicles, to drive change and support innovation.

We will also consult on raising the corporate reporting threshold for medium-sized companies from 250 to 500 employees, which will reclassify 2,000 companies from large to medium-sized, and on exempting 41,000 to 43,000 medium-sized companies from producing a strategic report. This could save these companies around £150 million per year, offering a more proportionate set of requirements for SMEs, by cutting red tape and lowering their costs so that they can focus on delivering for their customers. Meanwhile, we are consulting on reforms to the complex Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations, which protect employees’ employment rights when the business or undertaking for which they work transfers to a new employer. These will save businesses time and money, while continuing to protect workers’ rights.

Smarter regulation: delivering a regulatory environment for innovation, investment and growth—White Paper

Today, I am also pleased to publish a White Paper which aims to deliver a paradigm shift in the UK regulatory landscape: our goal is to instil a culture of “world-class service” in how regulators and Government operate to deliver the best outcomes for businesses, consumers and society. We are clear this is not about reducing regulatory safeguards: we are rightly proud of the standards and protections our regulatory regime offers.

The reform package in the White Paper includes:

defining for the first time what constitutes a business regulator, and introducing a set of guiding principles of smarter regulation that we expect these regulators to apply in their day-to-day decision making;

a new “register of regulators”, as part of our ambition for a “one-stop-shop” of regulatory information so that anyone can find out which regulators and regulations apply to their business;

launching a new Regulators Council to improve the strategic dialogue between regulators and Government, and monitor the effectiveness of policy and strategic guidance issued;

a new share once support register which will mean vulnerable customers only need to register with energy, telecoms and water companies once, making sure they don’t drop off the register and are safe in the knowledge that their access to utilities is protected; and,

a new growth duty performance framework to enhance transparency and accountability, by asking regulators to provide evidence on how they are supporting economic growth.

This is about establishing a high bar for regulation and avoiding unnecessary costs for UK businesses but it is fully consistent with acting where that bar is met and where we need to protect consumers, businesses and the environment—for example the Government’s steps to increase regulatory scrutiny in the water sector.

Our focus is to ensure that we are the best regulated economy in the world with a well-functioning landscape of regulators. The reforms we outline today will give entrepreneurial businesses more opportunity to innovate, experiment, and capitalise on the UK's global leadership in areas like clean energy technologies, life sciences, and digital services. They will help regulators to provide companies with the service support they need to innovate and attract investment, minimising burdens and supporting economic growth.

The White Paper has been laid in Parliament and a copy of the "Smarter regulation: one year on—May 2024" paper has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS468]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Gambling Measures Consultation: Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I wish to inform the House that His Majesty's Government will today publish their response to the consultation on measures relating to the land-based gambling sector. This will introduce a range of liberalising measures for venues like casinos, bingo halls and arcades, alongside other provisions to protect young people and children, as well as increasing the fees licensing authorities can charge for gambling premises licences.

Many of the current restrictions on venues like casinos and bingo halls derive from the assumption that restrictions on the supply of gambling, such as the number of gaming machines available in a venue, were an important protection. The legislation had not envisaged the rise of online gambling and the ability to gamble at any time, regardless of location. In light of this, restrictions on availability are now less important for protecting customers than factors such as the characteristics of the product and the quality of monitoring a customer's play in a venue. As set out in the Gambling Act Review White Paper, the measures we consulted on are therefore necessary to modernise the outdated and overly restrictive regulations that apply to the land-based gambling sector.

The consultation ran from 26 July to 4 October 2023 and invited views on the details of a range of proposals relating to casinos, arcades and bingo halls. Following consultation, the Government will introduce the following measures:

Casinos

We will make a number of adjustments to relax the existing rules that apply to casinos. There are currently two types of casino licence—those originating from the Gaming Act 1968 and those created by the Gambling Act 2005. 1968 Act casinos are generally allowed only 20 gaming machines regardless of their size, compared to up to 80 for small and 150 for large 2005 Act casinos. Following consultation, we will bring the regimes closer together so that 1968 Act casinos can offer more machines to meet customer demand where it is proportionate to their size and non-gambling space. We are also extending the ability to offer betting as a product in casinos, which will bring Britain's casino product offering more in line with international jurisdictions.

Machine allowance in arcades and bingo halls

We will adjust machine allowances for arcades and bingo halls to allow greater flexibility over their gaming machine offer. Currently, no more than 20% of gaming machines in adult gaming centres and bingo premises can be category B machines (with a £2 maximum stake), with the others required to be lower stake (category C or D machines). The Gambling Act Review concluded that this rule is no longer required to offer customer protections, unnecessarily restricts operators and can lead to a number of machines being placed in venues that are not used by customers. Therefore, we will introduce a 2:1 ratio of category B to category C and D gaming machines. This measure will apply on a device type basis, meaning that the ratio applies to the three different types of device on which gaming machines content is currently offered in arcades and bingo halls, namely large cabinets (such as traditional fruit machines), smaller cabinets placed in between larger machines (in-fills) and tablets.

Cashless payments on gaming machines

We will remove the prohibition on direct debit card payments on gaming machines, alongside the introduction of appropriate player protections. The prohibition on the direct use of debit cards on gaming machines was intended to protect players. However, the use of non-cash payments has increased greatly across society since these rules were put in place and some sectors, particularly machines in pubs, are seeing business disappear because customers do not carry cash. We will help future-proof the industry by removing this prohibition subject to appropriate player protections being put in place. The Gambling Commission will also consult on a number of player protection measures that may be included in their gaming machine technical standards to ensure that appropriate frictions are in place when direct debit card payments are used. These protection measures may include minimum transaction times, cardholder verification, transaction limits, breaks in play and staff alerts when mandatory and voluntary limits are reached. This measure will only come into force when we are confident that the right player protections are in place. Existing limits on stakes and prizes for all categories of gaming machine will remain unchanged.

Age limits for certain gaming machines

We will introduce an age limit for certain category D gaming machines. Category D machines are low-stake games that can be played by anyone regardless of age. The Gambling Act Review concluded machines which mirror adult slot machines and pay out cash should be made unavailable to children. These are also known as "cash-out" slot-style category D machines. Therefore, we will make it a criminal offence to invite, cause, or permit anyone under the age of 18 to play these particular types of machines. This builds on the existing voluntary commitment implemented in 2021 by Bacta, the amusement and gaming machine industry trade body, banning under-18s from playing this type of machine in their members' venues.

Licensing authority fees

We will increase the maximum cap on the premises fees that can be charged by a licensing authority. Licensing authorities (local authorities in England and Wales, licensing boards in Scotland) play an important role in regulating gambling through licensing premises and enforcing licence conditions. The cap for their licensing fees has not been updated since 2007, while the costs associated with licensing have increased. We will therefore

increase the maximum cap that licensing authorities can charge by 15%. The gambling fees payable in Scotland will continue to be set by Scottish Ministers.

Together we believe these measures will support the land-based gambling sector and modernise the current outdated restrictions, as well as helping to protect young people and supporting licensing authorities. These measures also complement the other changes that we are progressing relating to gambling regulation, including the introduction of a stake limit for online slots and a statutory levy to fund research, prevention and treatment. As outlined in the gambling White Paper, we are making sure that we have the right balance between consumer freedoms and choice on the one hand, and protection from harm on the other.

Gambling policy is devolved in Northern Ireland but substantially reserved as regards Scotland and Wales. In some cases, the power to deregulate (e.g. to increase the number of gaming machines a casino may make available) is reserved, but the power to put appropriate protections in place to support that deregulation is devolved in Scotland. Where this is the case, our deregulation will extend only to England and Wales unless and until appropriate protections are in place in Scotland. It will be for Scottish Ministers to decide how to exercise the powers conferred on them by the Gambling Act 2005.

We will lay the necessary legislation to implement these measures in due course.

I will deposit a copy of the response to the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS471]

EDUCATION

Post-16 Qualifications Reforms

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Luke Hall): Today we are publishing the list of new alternative academic qualifications (AAQs) and new technical qualifications (TQs) that will be publicly funded at level 3 from 1 August 2025. This follows the first cycle of our post-16 qualifications reform at level 3. We have approved 74 new qualifications for public funding in construction and the built environment, digital, education and early years, engineering and manufacturing and health and science. In assessing these qualifications, we looked at evidence from employers, higher education institutions and colleges about the value these qualifications would bring to young people, adults and our economy. Technical qualifications have also been approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) against the level 3 occupational standards.

The aim of the post-16 qualifications reform at level 3 and below is to streamline the qualifications landscape, simplify choices for students, and only fund qualifications that are high quality and lead to good progression outcomes. By ensuring that approved qualifications meet new, more rigorous criteria for public funding, young people can be confident that they will be able to progress to university and higher technical education, and directly into apprenticeships and skilled employment. In future, students will be able to study technical qualifications based on occupational standards that have been codesigned with employers, enabling young people to develop skills needed for the future. New alternative academic qualifications

must demonstrate clear progression to related higher education and will be approved in a range of subjects in areas where there are not A-levels.

Our reforms place world-class A-levels and T-levels at the heart of level 3 study programmes for 16 to 19-year-olds, paving the way for the introduction of the advanced British standard. We know that students who take A-levels have better outcomes overall in terms of progressing into, and staying in, higher education (HE) than those who study applied general qualifications (AGQs). A 2022 Nuffield Foundation report found that students who enter higher education with BTECs are almost twice as likely to drop out before their second year when compared to A-level students, even after controlling for differences in background characteristics.

T-levels will also ensure that young people can feel confident that they are studying technical qualifications which will prepare them for jobs in their chosen field. T-levels equip students with a thorough understanding of their chosen sector and the skills needed to work in specific occupations, with the 45-day industry placement providing valuable workplace experience.

Last summer's T-level results show students are succeeding in these new, high-quality qualifications. Over 90% of T-level students passed their T-level in summer 2023, with over two thirds of the cohort achieving a merit or above. Students have gone on from T-levels to outstanding destinations, including moving directly into employment, undertaking higher apprenticeships, or progressing into higher education. Almost a third of the first cohort of T-level students who completed their course and progressed into employment and apprenticeships, were employed by their industry placement organisation —proving the worth of T-levels to both students and employers. Over 30,000 students have started a T-level since 2020, including over 16,000 students who started a T-level course in September 2023 - almost as many students as in the first three cohorts combined, and an increase of almost 60% from September 2022.

We are pleased to see this growth and remain confident that numbers will continue to grow as more providers deliver T-levels. There are now 18 subjects available at over 250 providers across England, with a further three being rolled out this September. The latest T-level action plan sets out how we will continue to improve access to T-levels, ensure quality delivery, and support providers and employers as we move into the fourth year of delivery.

Alongside approving new qualifications for public funding at level 3, we have also published a list of 318 qualifications which will have public funding removed on 31 July 2025 due to being in the cycle 1 routes listed above and which have not been reformed. Where awarding organisations told my Department that existing qualifications would be replaced with newly reformed alternative academic or technical qualifications, these qualifications do not appear on this list. They will also have a public funding end date of 31 July 2025. This will be reflected in DfE's database of qualifications approved for public funding on gov.uk.

The qualification reforms also include reforming level 2 qualifications to ensure they are high quality, have a clear purpose, and lead to better outcomes. Reformed level 2 qualifications will either support progression to reformed L3 study, for example via the T-level foundation year, or enable students to move directly into skilled employment in occupations at level 2, or via apprenticeships. The Government are also investing around an additional

£300 million over two years to support those who need to retake their English and Maths. I will update the House on the outcomes of cycle 1 of the qualification reforms at level 2 in July, following a similar approvals and review exercise at that level for technical qualifications in construction and the built environment, education and early years, engineering and manufacturing and health and science routes.

This latest update builds on the work we have already done to streamline the qualifications landscape, including removing funding from 5,500 qualifications with low and no enrolments and the removal of funding from technical qualifications that overlap with T-levels from 31 July 2024 in construction and the built environment, digital, education and childcare, and health and science. It will ensure that learners studying level 3 qualifications can be confident that their studies are equipping them to progress into higher education and employment in the future.

The range of qualifications that will be available at level 3 for public funding from 2025 will shortly be updated on the DfE database of qualifications approved for public funding on gov.uk, to reflect these changes. It will be updated again in July, following the opportunity for awarding organisations to request a procedural review.

Copies of the associated documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS470]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Mallard Pass Solar Farm Ltd for the construction and operation of a solar farm energy generating development on land in Lincolnshire, South Kesteven and Rutland.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Mallard Pass Solar Farm application is 16 May 2024.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 13 June 2024 for deciding this application. This is to ensure there is sufficient time for the Department to consider the application.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS469]

Managing Radioactive Substances and Nuclear Decommissioning

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): Nuclear power, which uses radioactive nuclear fuel, continues to provide low-carbon electricity to homes and businesses in the UK.

The UK also uses radioactive substances in many different products and processes—to treat and diagnose serious illnesses, to deliver research and development and in industrial processes. Most uses of radioactive material create radioactive waste, which needs to be managed, and the facilities that use this type of material, including nuclear power stations, will eventually need to be deconstructed safely and efficiently after they stop operating.

The UK Government and devolved Administrations are today publishing an updated policy framework for nuclear decommissioning and managing radioactive substances following a consultation conducted during spring 2023.

The policy document published today replaces, "Review of Radioactive Waste Management Policy: Final Conclusions" (Cm 2919) which was published in 1995. It updates, clarifies and consolidates a number of policies into a UK-wide policy framework. It sets out clearly those policies that are pursued jointly by the UK Government and devolved Administrations and any separate policies that apply in different parts of the United Kingdom.

Nuclear power will continue to be an important source of low-carbon electricity in England and Wales as we work towards reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Although the Scottish Government do not support building new nuclear plants under current technologies, they place great importance on the need to address Scotland's radioactive waste legacy and are committed to the safe, secure and responsible management of waste with care for people and the environment. The UK Government and devolved Administrations agree that it is vital that we have a policy framework for decommissioning and managing radioactive waste that is fit to deal with our legacy waste and fit for the future.

The waste can occur as gases, liquids or solids. The radioactive substances policy covers the management and use of radioactive materials and how any subsequent wastes are then managed to ensure people and the environment are protected.

Key updates to the UK-wide policy include enabling additional disposal capability in England and Wales to deliver faster, more cost-effective and sustainable decommissioning and placing greater emphasis on including decommissioning by design into nuclear projects.

Overall, the revised policy framework creates clearer and more consistent policy objectives across the UK, which should unlock more innovative and sustainable ways of working, realising significant savings for industry and the taxpayer, while maintaining high standards of safety, security and environmental protection.

The UK Government and devolved Administrations are publishing alongside the final policy framework a summary of the responses to the consultation.

I will deposit a copy of the updated policy framework for nuclear decommissioning and managing radioactive substances in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS475]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Specialist, Associate Specialist and Specialty Doctors: Revised Pay Offer

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): I am pleased to inform the House that, earlier this week, I made a revised, reforming offer

to the British Medical Association specialist, associate specialist and specialty doctors committee. The committee have agreed to put this deal to their members for a vote with a recommendation that they accept.

SAS doctors are a vital part of the NHS. They focus predominantly on providing direct patient care by providing clinical expertise in their specialist area and taking responsibility for a full range of patients within their area of practice, making them essential to our efforts to cut waiting lists and deliver the highest quality service to patients.

During the course of the multi-year agreement for SAS doctors, pay for the pre-2021 contracts has been increasing at a faster rate than for the 2021 contracts. Therefore, the revised offer continues to address the unintended imbalance between the pre-2021 and the 2021 contracts to ensure consistency and fairness across the workforce, help speed up the delivery of elements of the new contracts introduced in 2021 and encourage more existing doctors to take up the new contract. This offer, if accepted, would mean that pay scales for those on the pre-2021 contracts would receive an uplift of £1,400. New pay scales would take effect from 1 April 2024. The offer also includes steps to support career progression opportunities for SAS doctors.

As in the original offer, the revised offer includes a joint piece of work to consider how locally employed doctors—doctors who are employed on local terms and conditions as opposed to national ones—can be better supported to progress in their careers.

This offer is independent of the headline pay uplift SAS doctors received in 2023-24 and that they will receive in 2024-25 through the established pay review body process. The Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration will still recommend a pay uplift for SAS doctors in 2024-25 and the Government will consider it in the usual way.

If this offer is accepted, the BMA will withdraw the rate card for SAS doctors in England with immediate effect and the dispute will come to an end, meaning no industrial action would be taken by BMA SAS doctors in England under their current mandate.

The BMA will recommend this offer to their members in a vote in the coming weeks.

I also want to inform the House that we have agreed with the BMA junior doctors committee to explore a process of mediation, which I hope will move us towards a resolution. Both parties have mutually agreed a preferred mediator, and the BMA and my Department will now begin the process of engaging with the selected mediator.

[HCWS477]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Alcohol Licensing Consultation

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

The Government are today launching a consultation on measures that would make it easier for licensed premises to sell alcohol for consumption in an adjacent licensed pavement area. This consultation aligns with the Government's commitment to support businesses and our broader work on smarter regulation.

The Licensing Act 2003 allows premises licence holders to sell alcohol for consumption on site ("on-sales"), off site ("off-sales") or both. The holder of an on-sales only licence can subsequently apply to their licensing authority for a variation if they wish to add off-sales to their licence.

To provide vital support to businesses during the covid-19 pandemic, temporary provisions in the Business and Planning Act 2020 enabled on-sales-only premises licence holders to automatically also do off-sales without any need to amend their licence, thus saving these businesses time and money.

The 2020 Act also introduced changes to the process for obtaining pavement licences, which are licences granted by the local authority that allow the licence holder to place removable furniture over certain highways adjacent to the premises. The 2020 Act streamlined the process to allow businesses to secure pavement licences quickly.

The measures in the 2020 Act were designed to support businesses and the specific provisions referenced above, when taken together, meant that pubs and restaurants were able to serve alcohol outside in the area covered by any pavement licence that they held.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 has made permanent the provisions set out in the 2020 Act relating to pavement licensing, but the future of the off-sales element has not yet been decided and the provision is due to lapse in March 2025.

The Government remain committed to supporting the hospitality sector whilst it faces ongoing financial challenges. In September 2023, we made it clear that the Government's ultimate goal is to create a unified consent regime that includes licensing consent for the consumption and sale of alcohol in the outside pavement area before the provision lapses next year. As such, we have identified three options to consult on that would enable premises to continue to sell alcohol for consumption in a licensed pavement area with ease, whilst ensuring that licensing authorities and local residents continue to have a say about what happens in their area.

Alongside new options that would make it easier for business to do off-sales, we have also included the option of making the 2020 Act off-sales easement permanent. All three options would require an amendment to legislation. As these would represent deregulatory measures, we believe that a Legislative Reform Order—made under the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Act 2006—would be a suitable vehicle for making such an amendment.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and the Government will publish our response afterwards. A copy of the consultation and related impact assessment will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS472]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Report of the Independent Reviewer for National Security Arrangements 2023

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The role of the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland is to monitor compliance with annex E of the St. Andrews agreement 2006, reviewing the relationship between MI5 and PSNI in handling national security matters.

Professor Marie Breen Smyth, the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland, has sent me her report for 2023. What follows is a summary of the main findings of the report covering the period from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. Professor Breen Smyth states:

“My contact with MI5 and the PSNI was again largely conducted in person. Policy directions remain consistent with those made in the review period in 2022.

For the first time since records began in 1969, there were no security related deaths in 2023. However, there was an increase in bombing and shooting incidents compared with the previous 12 months. Groups that are not assessed to be a National Security threat, such as loyalist paramilitary groupings, conducted some of these.

A review of the numbers of actual and attempted attacks from 2008 until 2023 shows that the highest number of attacks were conducted in 2010 when the security risk was SEVERE falling consistently through to 2022. The downward trend is apparent in all categories, with the exception of shooting and bombing incidents where there was a rise in the current period. There is a slight increase in the number of people arrested and a moderate decline in the number of people charged.

The year began with the Northern Ireland Related Terrorism (NIRT) threat at SUBSTANTIAL—an attack is likely—having been reduced to this level on 22 March 2022. Attacks by dissident republicans (DRs) have significantly declined since 2009. Nevertheless, dissident republican activity increased in early 2023, including the attempted murder of DCI John Caldwell in Omagh in February.

On 28 March 2023, the NIRT Threat Level was raised to SEVERE—an attack is highly likely. The threat level had been lowered from SEVERE to SUBSTANTIAL in March 2022. Before this, it had remained at SEVERE for over a decade.

The primary target for DR groups remains PSNI and prison officers. Thus, there is a risk of an attack as long as the level of DR activity remains significant. Such attacks are within the capability of DRs and constitute a risk not only to the intended targets such as PSNI officers, but because of their actions they unintentionally place members of the public at risk.

The perceived and possibly the actual risk to PSNI officers was exacerbated by a data breach which took place on 8 August 2023 when the PSNI responded to a Freedom of Information request and inadvertently published officer details online.

The national security threat emanating from DR groups forms only part of the wider security picture. Paramilitary-style attacks, threats and intimidation directed at the wider community emanate from DRs and other republican and loyalist groups as well as serious and organised crime groups.

There has been no significant change within loyalist groupings in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol/Windsor Framework. Concerns remain in relation to wider constitutional issues perceived to be affecting Northern Ireland. Armed loyalist organisations show no signs of resurgence on this or other issues.

In terms of prospects for the security of the immediate future, violent dissident republicans remain intent on conducting attacks against security targets and the security forces continue to work to disrupt those threats. Despite successful interdictions by them and an almost complete lack of community support for their activities, DRs remain committed to violence as a strategy. As a result, attacks and attempted attacks remain highly likely.

The implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol/Windsor Framework and perceived consequences for the constitutional position of Northern Ireland remains a significant issues for the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) community. Discontent within this community has previously been linked with localised disorder as seen in 2021.

As IRNSA I believe that a formal process of paramilitary transition is needed to dismantle the remaining organisations, ending recruitment and taking weapons out of circulation. Whilst compiling the report I discussed recent initiatives in relation to paramilitary transition and how this can benefit the security picture. There will remain a significant organised crime problem, but Northern Ireland has this in common with the rest of the UK and beyond. Ending paramilitarism would clear the path to a focused law enforcement approach, devoid of any political overtones.

Although dissident republicans continue to pose the most significant threat to national security in Northern Ireland, efforts by security partners has meant that the vast majority of the population are able to go about their daily lives secure from the threat of terrorism. Despite this, risks to serving police officers and prison officers persist and constant vigilance remains necessary”.

SUMMARY

Annex E to the St Andrews Agreement

Further to reinforce this comprehensive set of safeguards, the Government confirm that they accept and will ensure that effect is given to the five key principles which the Chief Constable has identified as crucial to the effective operation of the new arrangement.

a: All security service intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI.	I am satisfied that the PSNI continue to have sight of all security service intelligence relating to NIRT. There is compliance.
b: PSNI will be informed of all security service counter-terrorist activities relating to Northern Ireland.	A number of processes ensure that PSNI are fully informed. There is compliance.
c: Security service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures.	This continues to be organisational practice. There is compliance.
d: The great majority of national security covert human intelligence sources in Northern Ireland will continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing handling protocol.	The PSNI and security service continue to work jointly on cases. Arrangements for this continue to be jointly negotiated and agreed. There is compliance.
e: There will be no diminution the PSNI's responsibility to comply with the Human Rights Act or the Policing Board's ability to monitor HRA compliance.	PSNI continues to operate within the national security arena in strict compliance with ECHR. There is compliance.

[HCWS474]

TRANSPORT

Vehicle Regulations

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I am pleased to inform the House that today I am publishing a strategy setting out our approach to the future regulation of road vehicles.

Following our departure from the EU, we have the freedom to rethink the “type approval” rules which apply to all cars, vans, motorcycles and other vehicles sold in the UK.

While maintaining our high standards of safety and environmental protection, wherever possible we will reduce the administrative burden of demonstrating compliance with regulations.

We will build a framework based on three key principles:

Use international standards wherever possible—making regulation cheaper to follow for importers and exporters.

Deregulate low-risk areas and accept alternative national standards where international standards do not exist or are not suitable. If we don't need to regulate, we won't. If products can be proved safe in a comparable jurisdiction, we won't impose the cost of unnecessary retesting.

Introduce UK-specific rules only where necessary, for example to introduce new technology more quickly, to simplify administrative requirements for industry or where we need to act for safety reasons.

In the short term, we will implement these principles with a three-year programme of reform to retained EU regulations. This will include options for future emission regulation and plans to introduce new safety technologies, such as automated lane keeping, and regulation to strengthen cyber security.

I will place a copy of “A Vision for GB Type Approval” in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS473]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Fraud and Error in the Benefit System

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): The annual statistics for fraud and error in the benefit system for the financial year ending 2024 were published earlier today.

Fraud and error is an ongoing challenge across Government and beyond. In 2023, fraud was responsible for 37% of all crime against households and there has been a rising trend in fraud against organisations. With welfare benefits paid to around 22.7 million people, the welfare system is a deliberate target for both organised crime groups and opportunistic individuals.

Today's figures confirm the overall rate of overpayments is now 3.7% (£9.7 billion) for 2023-24, compared to 3.6% (£8.3 billion) in 2022-23. Overpayments due to fraud were 2.8% compared to 2.7% last year while claimant error and official error remained at 0.6% and 0.3% respectively. The rate of overpayments in universal credit was 12.4% in 2023-24 compared to 12.7% in 2022-23.

It is vital that the Government continue to robustly tackle fraud to ensure support goes to those who need it most. We are taking further steps to minimise errors,

ensuring the right people are paid the right amount at the right time. The total rate of benefit expenditure underpaid in 2023-24 was 0.4% (£1.1 billion), compared with 0.5% (£1.2 billion) in 2022-23.

This week the Government have published an update to the Department of Work and Pensions' fraud plan, “Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System: Going Further”, highlighting measures we are taking to prevent and stop fraud.

In 2023-24, we exceeded the £1.3 billion savings target we set and expect our plan to deliver £9 billion in total by 2027-28.

Since 2022 we have delivered on commitments to invest in our front line, hiring over 4,400 people across our counter-fraud and targeted case review programmes combined. We will continue to expand our targeted case review team to almost 6,000 by March 2025.

We are delivering new powers to improve our access to vital third-party data so we are better able to identify fraud and take action. The third-party data gathering measure is a strong, yet proportionate step to prevent exploitation of the benefit system and will save up to £600 million over the next 5 years.

We are preparing a new fraud bill for the next Parliament which will align the Department with HM Revenue and Customs, provide new powers to make arrests and conduct search and seizures by warrant, and enable penalties to be applied to a wider set of fraudsters through a new civil penalty.

This is an ambitious package which we will deliver to protect the taxpayer and help uphold the principles of fairness that sits at the heart of the welfare system.

Today's publications also include changes to claimant error underpayments. These have been reclassified and reported as unfulfilled eligibility in the benefit system publication. This follows a planned review of the fraud and error statistics that determined that the estimates previously published as claimant error underpayments do not fit the legal definition of underpayments. The total unfulfilled eligibility rate in 2023-24 was 1.2% (£3.1 billion) compared with 1.0% (£2.3 billion) in 2022-23.

We will report more on both overpayments and underpayments by way of our annual report and accounts, which are due to be published in July 2024.

[HCWS476]

Petitions

Thursday 16 May 2024

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

The petition of residents of the constituency of Edinburgh West,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited for too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Christine Jardine, Official Report, 15 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 394.]

[P002985]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) [P002987], the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) [P002986], the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) [P002988], and the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) [P002989].

Observation from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen):

The Government are grateful to the hon. Members for Edinburgh West, for Edinburgh North and Leith, for Aberavon, and for Bradford South, and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer, for submitting petitions on behalf of their constituents concerning the Government's response to the infected blood inquiry, and particularly the issue of final compensation recommendations made by Sir Brian Langstaff.

The Government acknowledge that victims of infected blood have been waiting far too long to see justice, and we are progressing this work with urgency. The Government have accepted the moral case for compensation and, starting in October 2022, made interim payments of £100,000 available to chronic infected beneficiaries and bereaved partners registered with existing support schemes. These payments continue to be made to eligible beneficiaries upon their being accepted on to the schemes.

However, we recognise there is more still to be done. On 30 April, Government amendments were added to the Victims and Prisoners Bill. The Government amendments impose a duty on the Government to establish an infected blood compensation scheme. It also establishes a new arm's length body, named the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, to deliver the compensation scheme. The authority will operate on a UK-wide basis to ensure parity and consistency. The Government also agreed to deliver the regulations establishing an infected blood compensation scheme within three months of Royal Assent. This demonstrates our absolute commitment to paying compensation to those infected and affected by infected blood.

Additionally, in order to progress this work as swiftly as possible, a shadow body will be established by 20 May, led by an interim chief executive. This will be critical to getting the practical work in place to ensure the Infected Blood Compensation Authority can be fully operational as soon as possible. The shadow body will be able to begin work, such as implementing IT systems and appointing staff who are needed for assessing and delivering compensation payments, as quickly as possible.

The Government amendment includes a statutory duty to make interim payments of £100,000 to estates of deceased infected people who were registered with existing or former support schemes, where previous interim payments have not already been made to infected individuals or their bereaved partners. This is an important step forward to get substantial compensation into the hands of families of victims of infected blood.

The Government will make a substantive update to Parliament, responding to the infected blood inquiry's recommendations on compensation, as soon as possible following 20 May. It is important that the Government await the findings of the inquiry's final report, but Ministers are clear that the inquiry's recommendations should form the basis of any response.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Sentencing and illegal knife possession

The petition of residents of the constituency of West Suffolk,

Declares that the rising incidence of illegal knife carrying in public poses a significant threat to public safety and calls for urgent intervention; further declares that such incidents contribute to an atmosphere of fear and insecurity in our communities; further that preventative measures are necessary to address this issue effectively; further that the petitioners are of the opinion that a mandatory prison sentence for those caught carrying a knife illegally in public, coupled with a mandatory 6-month knife awareness course for rehabilitation, will act as a deterrent to contribute to the reduction of knife-related crimes; and further that the rehabilitation program should aim to address the root causes of such behaviour and facilitate the offender's reintegration into society as law-abiding citizens.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider introducing measures which contribute to public safety and help address the root causes of illegal knife carrying, including introducing mandatory prison sentences for individuals caught carrying a knife illegally in public and implementing a mandatory 6-month knife awareness course for rehabilitation as part of the sentencing process.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Matt Hancock, Official Report, 22 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 769.]

[P002947]

Observations from the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

Tackling knife crime is a priority for this Government. We are clear about the inherent seriousness of offences involving knives and are determined to do all we can to protect communities and see that knife crime offenders are brought to justice.

The Government are determined to tackle the underlying causes of serious violence, and we are redoubling our efforts with a twin-track approach, combining tough enforcement to get dangerous weapons off the streets with programmes that steer young people away from crime.

It is important that those who commit violent crimes receive appropriate, proportionate and robust sentences. Those caught carrying a knife are more likely to be sent to jail, and for longer, than they were in the year ending September 2013. In the year ending September 2023, 33% of knife-carrying offences resulted in an immediate custodial sentence, compared to 30% in the year ending September 2013, and the average immediate custodial sentence length has increased from 6.4 months in the year ending September 2013 to 7.5 months in the same period in 2023.

The maximum penalty for carrying a knife is 4 years of imprisonment. In recognition of the seriousness of offences related to knives, the law already provides for minimum custodial sentences for repeat knife possession and offences that involve threatening with a weapon. Adults face a minimum of 6 months of imprisonment, while young people aged 16 or 17 face a four-month detention and training order. Where someone is actually harmed by a knife or offensive weapon, there are a range of offences that they may be charged with, such as causing grievous bodily harm. These can result in lengthy sentences, up to life imprisonment.

Measures in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which came into force on 28 June 2022, strengthened the existing provisions on minimum sentences by ensuring that the courts pass at least the minimum sentence for certain offences, including threat and repeat possession of a knife or offensive weapon, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

HM Prison and Probation Service takes a strategic approach to rehabilitation, informed by the best available evidence and current levels of investment. It focuses on the right rehabilitation approach for the right person at the right time. Services or interventions based on the notion that people will avoid committing crimes if they understand the negative consequences of offending have been shown, repeatedly, to fail to reduce recidivism.

Addressing the root causes of offending behaviour is critical. This has been shown to be effective when we target appropriately, offer proportionate levels of input and deliver it well. We do this through our provision of accredited programmes for people in prison and on probation. These programmes address offending behaviour by improving decision-making and problem-solving skills, teach individuals how to self-manage and regulate emotions, and are designed in line with the latest international evidence on what works to tackle reoffending. We run a range of programmes which may be suitable for people convicted in relation to illegal knife carrying, including Identity Matters and the thinking skills programme.

The Government are taking robust action to tackle knife crime, and other measures include a ban on zombie-style knives and machetes, which will come into force on 24 September 2024. We have also introduced the Criminal Justice Bill 2023, which will: provide more powers for police to seize knives held in private that they believe will be used for unlawful violence; increase the maximum penalty for the offences of selling prohibited weapons and selling knives to under 18s; and create a new offence of possessing an article with blade or point, or an offensive weapon, with intent to commit unlawful violence. The Online Safety Act 2023 also sets out a series of priority offences, which includes the sale of illegal knives.

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