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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 9 January 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Transport Authorities and Mayors: Financial Support

1. **Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): What financial support she is providing to local transport authorities and mayors. [902003]

Mr Speaker: Welcome, Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): May I start by saying it is very good to be here? I wish you, Mr Speaker, and the House staff a happy new year, and I wish the Aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), a happy birthday.

Mr Speaker: He will not want to be reminded of his age. [*Laughter.*]

Heidi Alexander: In the Budget, the Government confirmed more than £1 billion of funding to support bus services, an additional £200 million for the city region sustainable transport settlements for eligible mayors, more than £650 million for local transport outside the city regions, a £500 million increase in local highways maintenance, and £485 million in capital funding for Transport for London.

Michael Wheeler: I begin by welcoming the Secretary of State to the Dispatch Box for her first question time. She brings great experience of working to bring transport authorities together. My constituency of Worsley and Eccles suffers from regular serious rush-hour congestion. How can she support transport authorities in urban areas to work with neighbouring authorities to ensure a strategic approach is taken across commuter belts to alleviate congestion?

Heidi Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, and I assure him that the Government are committed to improving local transport across individual local authority boundaries. We have provided more than £1 billion in funding to the Greater Manchester combined authority in his area, which takes a strategic approach

to managing transport across its region. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has also set out ambitious measures in the recent “English Devolution” White Paper to support more joined-up running of local transport networks, which people rely upon every day.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to the Dispatch Box, and say happy birthday to the Aviation Minister. Buses in my constituency are not adequate and the situation has been made worse since the £2 fare cap was lifted. Local authorities in Bath want to improve the situation. They want to franchise bus services themselves, but their hands are tied by the Labour West of England combined authority Mayor, who refuses to do so. What should local authorities such as Bath do?

Heidi Alexander: The Government stepped in to ensure that bus fares would not explode at the beginning of this year, when the £2 fare cap that the previous Government legislated for ran out. In the worst-case scenario, costs on some services could have increased by 650%, and it was important that we took that action to ensure such fare rises were avoidable. I advise her local authority to work through any issues with the regional mayor. It is vital that we see transport authorities of all types collaborating to ensure that we have good, high-frequency, high-quality bus services for local people to go about their daily lives.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): May I also welcome the Secretary of State to her place? It is a delight to see her there. I wonder if she might help me. In circumstances where a mayor does not want to embrace the opportunities of the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill and fully re-regulate, as in the Tees Valley, will she give some consideration to providing a power in forthcoming legislation for the public to overreach that? Will she consider that option?

Heidi Alexander: A number of options are outlined in the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, which had its Second Reading in the other place yesterday, including franchising options, enhanced local bus partnerships and municipal ownership of bus companies. While my hon. Friend's suggestion is not currently in the Bill, I gently point out to him that there would have to be an authority to let contracts, including with private providers. While I am happy to explore options, we need to think through the practicalities of suggestions such as his.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Cullompton and Wellington railway stations were two of the most advanced of all the programmes in the restoring your railway fund. The existing local transport authorities have already invested in getting us to the stage of a full business case, with a high benefit-cost ratio of 3.67. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this programme is in no way disadvantaged compared with those transport authorities in urban areas that have mayors?

Heidi Alexander: We consider business cases for rail enhancements fairly, and no undue advantage would be given to the areas that the hon. Gentleman suggested. I was fortunate in my first couple of weeks in this job to

visit the opening of the Northumberland line, which provides services up to Ashington. I know what an invaluable difference the improved connectivity on the rail network can provide. I would be happy to talk to him about his schemes.

European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service

2. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): If she will review the UK's participation in the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service programme. [902005]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): The Department for Transport is working with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to consider options for the UK's access to a navigation system of this type, which lapsed following Brexit. This work is ongoing, and no decision has been made at this time.

Graham Leadbitter: I also welcome the Secretary of State to her new role, and I look forward to working across party boundaries where possible. EGNOS is a satellite enhancement system for GPS. Prior to Brexit, Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd, which is headquartered in my constituency, had been working with National Air Traffic Services on developing the use of the system, and invested a lot of time and effort. It would increase mapping accuracy and, vitally, enable planes flying lifeline air services to land in a broader range of circumstances, improving service and reliability. As the Minister said, that work has stalled since Brexit, but the Government can re-engage with the programme should they choose, as it is open to non-EU members. Will the Minister commit to doing that?

Mike Kane: I am grateful to the hon. Member for putting this on my radar. [Interruption.] Too early? [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Don't give up the day job.

Mike Kane: It is an important issue. We are considering the costs and benefits of all options, and it is very good particularly for regional airports. We are working with the EU to identify areas where we can strengthen co-operation for mutual benefit, but it is still too early to discuss that specific area in detail. I hope to come back to the House at a later time with a more considered view.

Road Safety: Vulnerable Road Users

3. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What steps she is taking to help improve road safety for vulnerable road users. [902006]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I assure the hon. Member that this Government treat road safety with the utmost seriousness. We are committed to reducing the number of those killed and seriously injured on our roads. My Department is developing our road safety strategy, and will set out further details in due course.

Olly Glover: I join others in welcoming the Secretary of State to her place. Bikeability is the world's largest road safety programme. Recent data from the Bikeability Trust showed that in areas with higher levels of training for children, the number of people killed or seriously injured on the roads decreased. Does the Minister agree that Bikeability training is an essential life skill that everyone should have access to, and will she commit to joining me on a visit to a local Oxfordshire school to see the scheme in action?

Lilian Greenwood: A total of 1.6 million people have participated in Active Travel England's training programmes, including a record half a million children receiving cycle training last year. I am a keen cyclist and, having been knocked off my bike in the last couple of years, I understand how important it is to feel confident about cycling safely. I would be happy to join the hon. Member to see some of that work in action.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her place. A couple of years ago, some children in my constituency started a campaign about a really dangerous stretch of road where cars speed and there is no pedestrian crossing. Tragically, a few months ago, one of those children lost her grandmother to a car crash on that very stretch of road. This is devastating for families and communities. What steps are the Government taking to make our roads safer?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that case. Every single death on our roads is tragic, which is precisely why we will bring forward further measures with the new road safety strategy—the first in more than a decade—which will consider how to prevent such appalling tragedies, including in her constituency.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): As police and crime commissioner for Lancashire, I invested significant amounts of money in increasing the resources available to target drink and drug drivers, which is a key plank in improving road safety. It has become easier for police to target drug drivers over recent years, in particular through the advancement of technology, but while arrest rates have improved, charge rates are still lagging behind; it takes months for drug drivers, compared with weeks for drink drivers. D.tec International is a Fylde company that provides all 43 police forces with DrugWipe kits. It would like to use technology that is used in other European countries to improve charge rates through the use of roadside saliva testing. Will the Minister meet me and D.tec International to look at how this technology could improve the speed with which we can get drug drivers banned and off our roads?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise concerns about the impact of drug driving. Those affected by an impairment drug were involved in 13% of fatalities last year. Just before Christmas, I went out with Jo Shiner, one of the leading police officers responsible for roads policing, and saw the work that is happening and heard about prosecutions, which the hon. Gentleman has raised. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): St Helens Road in my constituency has regrettably become the site of numerous serious car crashes, and local residents have raised their grave concerns with me about both speeding and dangerous driving. How is the Minister working with local leaders in particular to drive improvements to road safety?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is right to raise the concerns of his constituents. Local authorities have a vital role to play; they are responsible for introducing road safety measures appropriate to their areas. Of course, the Department is responsible for legislation and the guidance to help them to do so. I continue to engage with local authorities to ensure we are providing them with the support they need to make our roads safer.

Road Maintenance

4. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help maintain roads. [902007]

7. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [902010]

13. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [902018]

15. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [902020]

17. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [902022]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): The Government are determined to help local authorities in England to tackle the highways maintenance backlog that is the result of a decade of under-investment by the previous Government. We are making an immediate start by providing an extra £500 million next year—an increase of nearly 50% compared with the current financial year.

John Lamont: The A1 is a vital road link for the Scottish Borders and Scotland to the rest of the United Kingdom, and Labour's decision to scrap much-needed improvements will harm the local economy and stop businesses investing in jobs. The local Labour MP, the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), has said he was "disappointed and frustrated" by the decision of his Labour colleagues. What do the Labour Government have against car drivers and truck users on roads in rural Scotland?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have nothing against car drivers and truck users. We appreciate the long-standing local desire for dualling the A1 from Morpeth to Ellingham, but I am sorry to say that in the assessment we carried out post the general election, it represented poor value for money. There have been several delays to the development

consent order decision and the contractors were decommissioned more than two years ago. In that time, scheme costs have risen significantly, making the scheme even less affordable and further worsening the value for money. Having said that, I recognise that there are safety issues on the existing route, which we will need to look at carefully, as we would with any other part of the network. However, that alone does not warrant the dualling scheme.

Luke Murphy: I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her place. Potholes represent a serious issue in Basingstoke, with many constituents telling me of damaged vehicles and even physical injuries. The AA, which is based in Basingstoke, highlights inconsistent standards across the country, with some potholes left unaddressed for longer than others. The Pothole Partnership urges UK-wide standards and permanent repairs over temporary fixes. I welcome the Government's additional investment to tackle this issue, but will the Secretary of State consider ensuring that councils adopt common standards so that communities such as Basingstoke no longer face dangerous, crumbling roads?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the damage that potholes can cause for all road users. We have committed record money to fixing this issue and to enabling councils to get on with this work. All local authorities should have their own standards of road maintenance service and inspection in line with local needs and priorities. However, I do want to update the Department's guidance to local authorities on how best to look after their highways networks and ensure best practice is followed, and so that there are common minimum standards so that all road users know what they can expect.

Warinder Juss: I also welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her place. Many of my constituents in Wolverhampton West complain not only about the number of potholes in our roads but about the standard of repairs, with some potholes reappearing shortly after they have been repaired. While the £1.6 billion of funding for councils is very welcome, will she please confirm what other steps the Government are taking to ensure that our roads are always well maintained to avoid the risks of injury to people and damage to vehicles?

Heidi Alexander: We agree that local authorities should not just patch potholes, but focus on long-term preventive programmes for repairing and maintaining all parts of the highway network, including footpaths, pavements and bridges. We will require local authorities to follow best practice to get the full funding uplift, and we will update the guidance document "Well-managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice" to support local authorities in that and to emphasise the importance of proactive preventive measures.

Jen Craft: Potholes plague the streets of Thurrock and are a daily reminder of 14 years of Conservative neglect. Stifford Clays, where my own tentative attempts to learn to drive took place, is particularly bad, but the effects are felt throughout my constituency. I am pleased that the Secretary of State is tackling this issue, with

£4 million committed for Thurrock specifically. Will she tell me how much motorists in Thurrock could save under Labour's plans?

Heidi Alexander: Our broken roads have long been a national embarrassment, and a proper fund to fix our roads has long been overdue. In answer to my hon. Friend's specific question, RAC data shows that the average cost of pothole-related damage to vehicles is about £500, with severe repairs often costing much more. The Government's extra funding for local highways maintenance next year could therefore save individual motorists in Thurrock hundreds of pounds, if not more.

Emma Foody: Local residents tell me of their frustration at the epidemic level of potholes across my constituency after 14 years of failure to grasp the problem. Motorists are all too often the ones who will pay the price. Does the Secretary of State agree that local councils like Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle in my constituency will benefit from proper long-term funding to allow them to plan works and carry out repairs?

Heidi Alexander: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We need to get the basics right as a country, and fixing our roads is the first step to getting our economy firing on all cylinders. We did see a decade of decline and under-investment under the previous Conservative Government. The additional £500 million that we have allocated, if it were all used to fill potholes, would fill another 7 million potholes every year, smashing our manifesto commitment to provide funding for an extra 1 million.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Whether on Silverdale Road, Rodmill Drive, Quebec Close or Ceylon Place, potholes litter our roads in Eastbourne after years of neglect by the Conservative county council. Indeed, the Mirzas at my local garage have replaced my tyre a number of times, and I thank them for it. We also have a ridiculous situation where potholes right next to each other are not sorted out at the same time. Will the Secretary of State urge East Sussex county council to stop that wasteful practice and ensure that Eastbourne benefits from its fair share of the nearly £300 million granted to the south-east to tackle potholes?

Heidi Alexander: I have been clear that local transport authorities should use the money in a way that provides excellent value for money for the taxpayer, and the situation that the hon. Member described does concern me. We have waited a long time for this level of investment to come forward, and I am keen to see local authorities such as his cracking on with the job and making sure that motorists—all road users, for that matter—have safe, smooth roads that they can travel on.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The roads in Wokingham, like everywhere else in the country, have deteriorated in the last few years. We need to stop potholes, not just fix them, and that means regularly resurfacing roads. The unfunded backlog of resurfacing left by the Conservatives in Wokingham is about £16 million and getting bigger; nationally, it is £14 billion. When will the Minister's Department deliver proper funding for Wokingham's roads?

Heidi Alexander: I disagree slightly with the hon. Gentleman, because I think a £500 million uplift is proper funding—it represents, on average, a 40% increase, and it takes the overall amount of funding up to £1.8 billion. However, I do agree with his substantive point. Some of this money should be used for proactive preventative road resurfacing, because in some cases that will provide the best value for money for the taxpayer.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Hundreds of local authority roads across the country include half-joint bridges built in the 1960s and 1970s that are now dangerously unsafe. They include the Brigsteer Road and Underbarrow Road bridges leading out of Kendal, which have been closed for the last six months, causing great inconvenience to the local community. They were built with Government funding 50 or 60 years ago, but local councils are unable to replace them with the funds available to them now. Will the Secretary of State meet representatives of Westmorland and Furness council as a matter of urgency, so that the bridges can be reopened and our communities can be reconnected quickly?

Heidi Alexander: I will ask my colleague the Minister for the Future of Roads to have that meeting with the council. However, the additional money that we have provided, and the individual allocations that were announced before Christmas, can be used not just for road maintenance, but for bridges and pavements.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her post, and look forward to helping her to do an excellent job.

As we can see following the last few days of flooding, changing weather patterns are damaging our roads and increasing potholes. The last Government allocated an additional £8 billion for road improvements, paid for by the cancellation of the northern leg of HS2, yet all we have seen from Labour is a commitment of £1.8 billion for this financial year. Will the Secretary of State commit to matching the additional £8 billion for road maintenance?

Heidi Alexander: We are more than matching the commitments made by the previous Government. Let me say gently to the hon. Gentleman that his commitment in respect of resurfacing roads falls into exactly the same category as the promise to provide 40 new hospitals, and a range of other commitments that proved not to be worth the paper they were written on. They were fantasy figures, unlike the Labour party's promise to deliver change. An additional £500 million is coming into our highways maintenance budgets, so that people across the country can see that change delivered to their local areas.

Jerome Mayhew: I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but I am not sure whether that was a commitment to match the £8 billion, or whether the Secretary of State considered it to be a fantasy commitment. However, it is not just the £8 billion investment that seems to have gone missing. As soon as they were in power, the Labour Government cancelled the A27 bypass, the Stonehenge tunnel, improvements to the A47 in Great Yarmouth, the A1 from Morpeth to Ellingham, junction 8 of the

M27 at Southampton, and other projects. That is £3.3 billion axed from works to help motorists. What have they done with the money? Has Labour prioritised pay rises for unions over improving roads and helping motorists?

Heidi Alexander: The truth of the matter is that when this Government came to office, we inherited a raft of half-baked, unfunded schemes that we are having to work through to provide a sensible pipeline of infrastructure improvements for our country. I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman about investment in our national infrastructure.

Roadworks: Preventing Road Closures

5. **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): What steps she is taking to help prevent road closures when roadworks are not taking place. [902008]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I am delighted to confirm that, as part of the £1.6 billion investment in highways maintenance that the Government announced before Christmas, we will clamp down on disruptive works by doubling fixed penalty notices for utility companies that fail to comply with rules and extending charges for works that overrun into weekends.

Lewis Cocking: I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Drivers in my constituency are sick to death of the endless road closures and temporary traffic lights when no works are taking place. Will the Minister demand that utility companies do everything in their power to get roads open as quickly as possible, particularly when they have dug them up under the emergency procedure?

Lilian Greenwood: Absolutely. There can be legitimate reasons why works are sometimes left unoccupied—for example, when they are waiting for materials to cure or gas to vent—but I take the hon. Member's point, particularly where utilities are using emergency procedures unnecessarily. We have examined Street Manager data and spoken to industry representatives and found no evidence of misuse. None the less, given the number of urgent works—which are, of course, not unrelated to the appalling state of our roads left by the previous Government—we will see what more can be done to ensure that these works are managed and communicated to road users properly.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Roadworks plague my constituency. A significant issue is that utility companies dig up the roads without requiring council permission, and they often leave these sites incomplete while different teams carry out their work, causing chaos and congestion in the process. We frequently face the absurd situation where there are roadworks on diversion routes for roadworks. Does the Minister agree that we need to require utility companies to co-ordinate with councils to properly plan this maintenance work and complete their projects in a timely manner, in order to avoid congestion?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is proving a great champion for road users in his constituency. The simple answer to his question is yes. Local authorities already

have a legal duty to co-ordinate all works on their network, and utility companies have a duty to co-operate, and we will ensure that they do so.

Public Transport Accessibility

6. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve the accessibility of public transport. [902009]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): We are working with industry to deliver a transport network that puts passengers and their needs at its heart. The new aviation accessibility task and finish group, for example, brings together industry and consumer advocates with first-hand experience to improve accessibility in air travel. The Government will take advantage of the benefits of a unified rail network to deliver a more reliable and consistent customer experience for everyone with accessibility needs, and our buses Bill will make bus travel more accessible and inclusive, including by extending the requirements for relevant bus staff to undertake disability training.

Sarah Owen: I thank the Minister for his response. Legrave station in Luton was one of a number granted Access for All funding by the previous Government for long-overdue lifts. However, Network Rail now says that this money was never allocated and that it only qualifies for a business case, despite a feasibility study already being agreed and completed. Those who can make the nearly 2 million journeys from Legrave station, including myself, are left with a crumbling footbridge that is not accessible for many. Will the Minister offer assurances that Access for All funding to Legrave station will be honoured, and will he meet me and the Bedfordshire Rail Access Network to establish the quickest path to having lifts at Legrave station?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is a formidable advocate for this, having raised it numerous times. The Rail Minister is carefully considering the decisions made by the previous Government in relation to the Access for All programme. My hon. Friend will be aware that Legrave was one of 50 stations across Britain selected by the previous Government for further consideration of whether they could be made step-free between the entrance and all platforms. We will shortly update the House on our approach to Access for All, but let me assure her that we are committed to improving the accessibility of the rail network, recognising the social and economic benefits that that brings.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Like the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), I have stations in my constituency—in Hedge End and Swanwick—that were allocated money by the previous Government for accessibility lifts. Unlike her rail company, mine did accept that that money was allocated. Within the first week of this Government taking over, that was scrapped, and the Rail Minister wrote to me without any clear plan for when this Government will make an announcement on what will happen with the Access for All scheme. The Minister has just said that it will happen shortly. Can he be more clear for my constituents, who have been waiting for a very long time, so that disabled people and people with wheelchairs and pushchairs in

my constituency can make the journeys they need to make? When will this Government make an announcement on Access for All?

Simon Lightwood: I can assure the hon. Member that as soon as I am in a position to do so, I will give him more information on the Access for All programme.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Two of my friends, Ruth and Janet, are wheelchair users—one of them as a result of an accident just outside this place 25 years ago. They cannot travel together on our buses, as there is only ever one wheelchair space. They often book assistance at train stations, only for it not to turn up, leaving them stranded. Their handling on planes has led to not only bruising and pain, but loss of dignity and sometimes missed flights when assistance does not come in time. They are now reluctant to go on holiday if it means flying. Will the Secretary of State meet them and set up consultations with disabled passengers up and down the country, so that our public transport can meet their needs in every region? Will she require local authorities taking over bus services to consult disabled passengers and set minimum standards for delivery?

Simon Lightwood: We want a transport system for everyone, in which accessibility is designed as standard across the network so that we can make it easier for people to get on and off services, and build a safe and more secure network, particularly for women and girls. It is the Government's ambition for disabled people to have equal access to transport, recognising the needs of people with visible and less visible conditions, and I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Leuchars train station in my constituency serves St Andrews and is well used by residents, students and tourists, but its wheelchair access is completely unacceptable. It feels as though we fall through the gaps between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on Access for All. Can the Minister confirm whether the Access for All review is looking at ensuring that those in the devolved nations do not miss out?

Simon Lightwood: I can assure the hon. Lady that I will raise this issue with the Rail Minister. I am quite confident that he has had these discussions with the devolved Governments.

Sustainable Aviation Fuels

8. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the use and production of sustainable aviation fuels. [902011]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): The SAF mandate, which is one of the first pioneering policies of its kind, came into force on 1 January 2025 to build domestic demand for SAF. We are also growing UK supply through the advanced fuels fund, and we are committed to introducing a revenue certainty mechanism in the King's Speech to encourage investment in UK SAF production.

Gregor Poynton: I thank the Minister for his response. This UK Government are indeed working at pace to position the UK as a global leader in the rapidly growing SAF industry, which is vital for decarbonising aviation and our aviation industries, and for growing our economy. Will he commit in the forthcoming sustainable aviation fuel Bill to bringing forward the timeline for the revenue certainty mechanism to the end of this year or perhaps early 2026? Accelerating that measure, which has wide support, will give investors the confidence they need to back the 10 potential SAF facilities across the UK, including in Grangemouth, which is near my constituency.

Mike Kane: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a huge campaigner for Grangemouth. We have committed to bringing forward the revenue certainty mechanism. We have already legislated for a 2% fuel mix in the SAF mandate, which came into force on 1 January this year, and we look forward to the Bill coming before the House when parliamentary time allows.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that he has a deep interest in Northern Ireland, so may I ask a similar question? Northern Ireland wants to provide the necessary aviation fuels and has the ability to do so. What progress has he made in his discussions with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that we can be part of the future of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which is always better together?

Mike Kane: The hon. Member is a doughty champion of air travel and SAF in Northern Ireland. Through the advanced fuels fund, we have 13 projects and we are currently investing well over £100 million across the UK to see what comes forward in the market, and I hope that Northern Ireland will be integral to that process.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): May I, too, wish the Minister a very happy birthday?

Estimates suggest that the SAF mandate provisions and the revenue certainty mechanism will still leave a shortfall, with a family of four facing over £300 extra to fly on holiday by 2040. That is a clear concern for consumers, as well as the airline industry. Net zero should not come at an additional cost to consumers or undermine freedoms—in this case, the freedom to fly. The test must surely be how to defossilise, decarbonise and allow people to do the same at the same cost. What steps is the Minister taking in conjunction with the Treasury to close the financial gap between incentives in the mandate and the actual increased cost of switching to SAF for the end consumer?

Mike Kane: I think the good will ended with “happy birthday.”

I remind the shadow Minister that a little over 12 months ago, in one of his better videos, the then Prime Minister came out into Downing Street, looked at the sky and lauded the policy he wanted when we saw Virgin Atlantic's 100% SAF trip across the Atlantic. This was the previous Government's policy but, because of the sclerotic nature of that Government, we are only now getting on with implementing both the SAF mandate and the revenue

support mechanism. As the shadow Minister knows, a regular review point is baked into the legislation so that we can revisit targets, if required.

Greg Smith: Of course, there is always another way. Much of the debate so far on SAF has been about fuels made from feedstocks and waste products. Unlike fuels that require feedstock, whose input costs will only ever go up, the industrial process that creates power-to-liquid synthetic aviation fuel will actually see its production costs reduce, with some predicting cost parity between the production of these synthetic fuels and the extraction and production of fossil fuels within a decade. Does the Minister agree that synthetics offer a much better long-term solution, and will he reprioritise the Government's approach to SAF away from transitional solutions and towards synthetics?

Mike Kane: The hon. Gentleman runs his car on synthetic fuel, so I know his passion. There are many ways to get to SAF. The SAF mandate is supported by industry, and there is a real opportunity to establish a plethora of production. We can create thousands of new well-paid jobs while protecting the pound in the holidaymaker's pocket.

Rail Passenger Compensation

9. **Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of compensation for rail passengers in Cheltenham due to the impact of the Old Oak Common station development. [902012]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Department continues to work closely with the rail industry to minimise the disruption to passengers on the great western main line during the new station's construction and operation. Our priority is to mitigate the impact on passengers, as far as possible, by investing £30 million for service continuity during periods of disruption.

Max Wilkinson: The Secretary of State's constituents will also be affected. Compensation comes in many forms. It may be in the form of better wi-fi on trains to improve the service for business users. It may be in the form of more rolling stock to end the bizarre practice of running half-length trains out of Paddington at peak times. And it may be in the form of an investigation into how we can reduce the ridiculous turnaround times at Gloucester station that delay Cheltenham passengers so much. I hope the Minister will confirm that all these things are being looked into for passengers in my constituency and the Secretary of State's constituency.

Simon Lightwood: The Rail Minister has met MPs from both sides of the House to discuss this issue and has attended an industry programme board to ensure that passenger interests are considered and that disruption is minimised for passengers, both during and after construction.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): 2025 is an exciting year for Derby, partly because of the progress on Great British Railways, which will be headquartered in Derby, and rightly so. Can we also make this the year

that the British public fall in love again with rail travel, by giving GBR a strict timetable to simplify complicated ticketing and fares and to implement digital pay-as-you-go, as well as automatic compensation?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure that fits the original question. We have probably strayed too far.

Railway Capacity

10. **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase railway capacity. [902014]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Transport is central to this Government's plans for rebuilding Britain and growing our economy. We are committed to investing in the rail capacity needed to support that growth. This means improving performance and timetables to make the best use of the capacity we have, but it also means investing in new and improved infrastructure, such as High Speed 2, the trans-Pennine route upgrade and East West Rail.

Charlotte Cane: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer and welcome her to her place. Ely Junction is a major bottleneck in our rail network and the Ely area capacity enhancement scheme is designed to improve that. If the scheme goes ahead, it could deliver over a quarter of a million extra rail passenger journeys and take 98,000 lorry journeys off the road every year. It will also help the midlands and the north grow their economies, because it will improve freight transport to and from ports, the midlands and the north. To add to all those benefits, the business case stacks up: every pound invested will deliver nearly £5 of benefits. Will the Minister—

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is far too long—I think the hon. Lady needs to secure an Adjournment debate on the subject. The Secretary of State can grasp the sense of the question.

Heidi Alexander: I understand how passionately the hon. Lady feels about the scheme, and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood) responded to her written parliamentary question on the subject at the end of November. Projects like this one, in areas like hers, have the potential to contribute to the Government's plans to deliver economic growth. She will know that the spending review is coming up, so a decision on the scheme and any potential timetable will be subject to the outcome of that review.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and I look forward to working with her.

The original vision for HS2 was to link London with the midlands and the north, and to address the growing capacity challenge on the west coast main line with a whole new rail line. The last Government panicked and mothballed much of the project because of cost overruns on phase 1, thus incurring yet further costs. I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to get a grip on the

phase 1 cost overruns, but do the Government plan to deliver a rail solution linking phase 1, north of Birmingham, to the rest of the country, thus delivering the Government's vision to drive growth for the whole country?

Heidi Alexander: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her election as Chair of the Transport Committee. She will be formidable and I look forward to working with her.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend raises the question of the mess we inherited from the Conservative Government on HS2 and rail connectivity in the north. When we entered Government in July, we found a rag-bag collection of half-baked, unfunded spending commitments for rail schemes up and down the country. The previous Government drew up their Network North plans on the back of a napkin. As part of the spending review, we have started the hard work of identifying a realistic pipeline of schemes that is affordable and will deliver better connectivity in partnership with local leaders.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrat party.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new position. My party knows her well from her hard work on London's transport network. We look forward to continuing the constructive relationship we had with her then and with her predecessor in this House.

May I take this opportunity to express my sadness at the passing of my Liberal Democrat transport colleague, Baroness Jenny Randerson? Jenny was a force of nature, intelligent, kind, hard-working and principled, with a mischievous wit and love of life. I learned a huge amount from her in the few months we worked together, and will miss her deeply.

Improving transport links to Wales was an issue close to Baroness Randerson's heart, and one she regularly pressed in the other House. Will the Secretary of State review the Tories' decision to class HS2 as an England and Wales project, thus depriving Wales of billions of pounds of Barnett formula funding, and will she commit to a high-speed rail link from Birmingham to Crewe to ensure that mid and north Wales can at least share the benefits of HS2?

Heidi Alexander: May I extend my condolences and those of the Government to the family of Baroness Randerson? I know she was a deeply loved and highly respected colleague to many.

On the hon. Gentleman's substantive question, I have already met Ken Skates, the Welsh Minister for Transport, and I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Wales to ensure that we bring public transport improvements to Wales, which I hope will be Baroness Randerson's lasting legacy.

Pokesdown Station

11. **Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to improve accessibility at Pokesdown railway station. [902015]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): South Western Railway has been working closely with Network Rail and the local authority

to provide a viable scheme that will result in the installation of new lifts at the station. To establish the likely cost of the scheme and assess affordability, detailed design works are under way and are expected to be finalised in 2025.

Tom Hayes: I thank the Minister for that very helpful answer. The people of Pokesdown are certainly very keen for their lift, which they have been waiting a long time for. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, train services between Bournemouth and London Waterloo took the historically fastest time of 90 minutes. Will the Minister meet me and South Western Railway to discuss whether we can restore that fast time, as well as to discuss Pokesdown?

Simon Lightwood: There are no current plans to introduce an express service between Bournemouth and London, but I will keep my hon. Friend updated on the future plans regarding South Western Railway, which will become the first operator to be taken back into public ownership in May.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The residents of Wareham, just along the way from Bournemouth, have been waiting more than 20 years for electronic gates—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a very niche question.

Vikki Slade: It is a very niche question, and I want to ask about the next railway line along from Bournemouth.

Mr Speaker: In which case, it does not count. Thank you for that clarification. Let us go to topical questions.

Topical Questions

T1. [902028] **Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Transport is at the heart of this Government's plan for change. Since I joined the Department more than a month ago, we have introduced the Bus Services Bill, which will give transport authorities across the country the tools to take back control of local services. We are bringing clarity and confidence to our automotive industry, with a consultation on how we will restore the 2030 phase-out date for new petrol and diesel cars. We have also confirmed the first three train operators that will be brought under public control later this year.

We have delivered record funding to protect vital bus routes and keep fairs capped, and we smashed our manifesto target with a £1.6 billion investment to repair 7 million more potholes on Britain's broken roads. I am determined that our transport system delivers reliable, accessible journeys for all; enables the construction of millions of new homes; supports the jobs and industries of the future; and enables rising living standards for everyone in every part of Britain.

Ben Obese-Jecty: On those new bus routes, within the last hour, Stagecoach East has issued a statement about the delayed new tiger bus routes, citing the decision by

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough combined authority to retender the routes, inconsistencies in the award letter, concerns over the legality of the operation and the increased cost due to the Government's national insurance increase as reasons for the delay until at least May. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that bus services in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are not being managed effectively by the Labour mayor?

Heidi Alexander: I am happy to speak further with the hon. Gentleman about his concerns regarding local bus services. I know how critical bus services are for young people wanting to get to school, people wanting to get to work and older people wanting to access vital lifeline services. I am happy to meet him to talk in more detail about his local concerns.

T3. [902031] **Michelle Scrogam** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): In Barrow and Furness, we often joke that we live at the end of the longest cul-de-sac in the UK. The A590 and the A595 are lifelines for people in my constituency. Our future growth, the nuclear deterrent and the emergency services depend on the roads working well, but we are often cut off. Will the Minister therefore confirm the Government's commitment to investing in the improved reliability of such critical pieces of infrastructure?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of those roads to her constituents. I am working closely with National Highways and holding it to account for those parts of the road network, as well as working with local authorities to ensure that roads are reliable, well maintained and available.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I was appalled to discover this morning that I have known the Secretary of State for the thick end of two decades. We have had various exchanges in various other fora, but this is our first exchange across the Dispatch Box in this House. I therefore warmly congratulate her on her appointment and welcome her to her place.

The Government promised to deliver more reliable rail services, but over Christmas, what did we see? Chaos, cancellation and delays. The train drivers, having accepted the Government's no-strings pay deal, chose to turn down overtime shifts, leaving passengers stranded and left in the cold. The Government's no-strings agreement was supposed to bring stability to the railways, but it did the exact opposite, causing major disruption. Will the Secretary of State admit that the pay deal that they thought would improve reliability in fact only made services worse?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I remember those days on the London Councils transport and environment committee. I hope he does not mind my saying that both he and I have a little bit more grey hair since then, which is not necessarily helped by this new job.

On the substance of the hon. Gentleman's question, I must vehemently disagree with him. The reality is that this Government acted when the previous one refused

to do so, to put an end to the industrial action that was blighting our railways. We had a two-year national rail strike that ground down everyone who travelled or worked on the railways, at a cost of £850 million in lost revenue. He might take a lesson from the former Conservative Rail Minister, the former Member for Bexhill and Battle—

Mr Speaker: We are on topicals.

Heidi Alexander: The former Minister took to social media and apologised—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the Secretary of State gently that I had wanted to welcome her today, but I have to get through a lot of Members. We are on topicals, which are short and punchy. I call the shadow Secretary of State to give us a good example.

Gareth Bacon: I note the Secretary of State's answer, but, in the real world, we know that the Government's union paymasters will keep pushing for more. Labour's plans to scrap the minimum service levels will give the unions more power to hold the railways hostage. Does the Secretary of State accept that the Christmas chaos will not be a one-off, and will in fact be the start of an ongoing decline in reliability?

Heidi Alexander: We have had decades of chaos on the railways, and railways that simply did not work for people. What is needed is a fundamental reset with the trade unions to deliver improvements for passenger services.

T4. [902032] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): From 7 November to 7 December, Northern Rail cancelled 460 services across the Tyne, Tees and Wear region. An average of 20 services a day were either cancelled or short-formed during this period.

Mr Speaker: This is topicals.

Grahame Morris: I know. Will the Secretary of State facilitate a meeting with the Rail Minister to put in place an urgent action plan and address the issues of staff shortages?

Mr Speaker: I know you could go on, but I am sure the Minister can answer that.

Heidi Alexander: I, along with the Rail Minister, will be meeting the management of Northern Rail before the end of this month.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Last week, the Government ramped up bus fares by 50%. The previous Government commissioned a full impact assessment, which was completed last year, on the abolition of the £2 bus fare cap. In November, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood) promised the House that he would release the report, but nothing has appeared. I ask the Secretary of State, what is her Minister hiding and when will the report be released?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I can assure him that the report will be released in due course.

T6. [902035] **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): On the subject of buses, can the Secretary of State set out the steps her Department is taking to allow local communities to take back control through their elected representatives, so that NHS trusts, local authorities and private providers increase the frequency and improve the practicality of bus services to and between local hospitals? Does she agree that this will help elderly and vulnerable people and those without cars to better access the NHS, minimising stress and financial difficulties?

Simon Lightwood: We know how important local bus services are to communities. Our reforms of the bus sector, combined with £1 billion of investment, will ensure that local leaders have the necessary tools to ensure that bus services truly reflect the needs of passengers.

T2. [902030] **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): Over the past few weeks, I have seen at first hand how businesses on WhatsApp groups are using bots to buy up driving tests and then sell them at £250 or more. That is even after the Government's changes that came into force on Monday this week. What further steps can the Secretary of State take to stop that practice?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Member is right to raise concerns about these appalling practices that are being used to rip off learner drivers. To help with this, we announced a call for evidence on the current rules and processes, and we will be working hard to eliminate the bots and make sure that learner drivers get a proper deal.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Under the previous Government, bus services in rural areas were decimated. The number of bus journeys in the Derbyshire Dales declined by 55% between 2010 and 2023. What steps is the Minister taking to stop further cuts to bus services in rural areas like the Derbyshire Dales.

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. A total of £1 billion was announced in the Budget for bus services, which will be available to his local transport authority to invest in areas, including rural areas, to ensure that bus services are accessible, regular and affordable.

T5. [902034] **Freddie van Mierlo** (Henley and Thame) (LD): A Thame to Haddenham cycleway would transform how residents of Thame get to the local railway station. However, active travel funding from central Government is essential to get such schemes off the ground. Will the Secretary of State commit to increasing the active travel budget beyond what has been announced to truly revolutionise rural cycling?

Simon Lightwood: The hon. Member will be aware that close to £100 million was announced in the recent Budget. We will work closely with Active Travel England to ensure that that money is put to good effect across the country.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): The nationalisation of ScotRail has been another SNP transport fiasco. The Scottish Government's flagship £25 million scheme to boost the amount of freight transported by rail failed to achieve growth. Their mismanagement of ScotRail and their own budget has led to a double-whammy price hike for passengers, with the return of peak fares at the same time as price rises. Does the Secretary of State agree that, at a time when we need better trains to boost growth and reduce emissions, the SNP has instead consigned Scotland to a spiral of decline and let my constituents down?

Heidi Alexander: I agree. We will not make the same mistakes when we take train operating companies into public ownership. We will do it properly. It is a massive undertaking, but we will make our railways a system for the whole country to be proud of.

T7. [902036] **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Since Brexit and the reinstatement of duty-free shopping, UK travellers have spent nearly 50% more on their duty-free shopping, all in the EU. Not a penny has supported jobs or investment in Scottish airports, or those in the wider UK. Does the Minister agree that a way to repatriate those sales and support the travel sector to invest in jobs at international gateways would be introducing arrival duty free, and will he work with the Treasury and the travel sector to achieve that?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): Changes made during the pandemic crippled airport duty-free shopping. I will get the hon. Member a more detailed letter on the matter.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York's advanced digital and advanced rail cluster can really boost our economy with the innovations that it is bringing, as well as providing 5,500 jobs in York. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can bring it into her strategy for developing the rail industry?

Heidi Alexander: I will. I know that my hon. Friend represents the proud railway city of York, as I represent the proud railway town of Swindon. I look forward to having that meeting with her.

T8. [902037] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership campaign group has long been advocating, as have I, for a new rail link between Skipton and Colne, because it will bring huge benefits to the likes of Keighley, for both freight and passengers. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss this long ongoing campaign that I have been advocating for?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): In South Shields, not only is our public transport expensive, we have to suffer constant metro delays, tunnel closures and replacement bus breakdowns. This Christmas, our roads were completely cut off. Will my right hon. Friend please meet me to discuss these long-standing ongoing issues?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I have already met a number of Members of Parliament in the Gateshead area about some of the recent problems with the flyover, and met the Mayor for the region.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): When HS2 was cancelled, the last Government set aside £1 billion for Teesside to protect our iconic transporter bridge, deliver a new train station for Teesside Park, upgrade the train station at Thornaby, and much more. We are six months in now. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether we will get the money, or is the Labour party pulling the plug on investment in Teesside?

Heidi Alexander: We are six months in. The Conservative party had 14 years. Those promises are worth nothing without a plan to deliver.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): In Hastings, Rye and the villages, we have some of the worst potholes in the country, so I welcome the record £21 million awarded to east Sussex to fill potholes. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on Conservative-run East Sussex county council to fill the potholes, and ensure that Hastings and Rye gets its fair share of that funding?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for her local area, and I fully endorse her efforts to get money to fix the broken roads in her constituency.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): In Hale and Badshot Lea, in the northernmost parts of my constituency, many residents can only get into Farnham town centre using the bus service. There is concern, given the increased amount of building, and future building under the new Government's plans, that bus services will not be adequate. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the plans for north Farnham, and Badshot Lea and Hale?

Simon Lightwood: Buses are of course the most commonly used mode of public transport in Britain, and the lifeblood of our communities. I will be more than happy to meet the hon. Member.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): While welcoming rail renationalisation, may I ask what can be done to expedite investment in crucial rail infrastructure developments, such as the Haughley junction in my constituency, taking traffic off the A14 and possibly facilitating Bury St Edmunds to London trains? Was the previous Prime Minister's promise to redeploy funds from the cancelled HS2 realistic?

Heidi Alexander: We spend about £2 billion a year on rail enhancement projects. We will be looking carefully through the spending review at all proposals that get freight off the roads and increase the availability of passenger services.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I am delighted to see that you are proudly wearing the newly formed Royal Army Medical Service tie, Mr Speaker.

In Solihull West and Shirley, the new year has been welcomed by increases in bus fares and reductions in services. In places such as Cheswick Green, people are faced with choosing between either more expensive and difficult journeys or not being able to get to work, the shops or college. Given the Government's stated ambitions, what assessment has the Minister made of the economic impact of the policy?

Simon Lightwood: Conservative Members had no plans or funding put aside to continue with the bus fare cap beyond 2024. We have secured £151 million to ensure that buses remain affordable for many. In some areas, without that intervention fares could have risen by as much as 80%.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. In my first public meeting after my election, residents in Knebworth called for more fast train services. We got some, but there has been poor reliability. Will she meet me to discuss those issues?

Heidi Alexander: Yes, I think I will have a busy diary coming up.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): We have an anomalous situation in Spelthorne whereby someone can get six London red buses on an Oyster card, but they cannot get the train out to the stations at the end of the line. Major employers, such as BP and Shepperton Studios, are sending buses up the line to bring down those people who cannot use an Oyster card. As the Secretary of State will own South Western Railway and is brilliant with Transport for London, could she please get Spelthorne into the Oyster zone?

Heidi Alexander: We are exploring how we can extend pay-as-you-go to other stations in the south-east. I must admit that my mental map is not good enough to identify every station yet, but we share that ambition to make it easier for people to use the railways across the south-east region.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): This weekend, grassroots campaigners in Newquay will meet to oppose the privatisation of car park charge enforcement in Newquay and Cornwall more widely. Will the Secretary of State and colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government meet me to discuss how councils can retain more of that profit locally, instead of sending it up-country to often unscrupulous and usurious operators?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the concern, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss the issues further.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The residents of Wareham, just along from Bournemouth, have been trying to get electronic gates for 20 years. Network Rail's latest excuse is that it is for the Office of Rail and Road, and the Office of Rail and Road says that it is for Network Rail. Will the Secretary of State meet me so that we can bang heads together and get this resolved once and for all?

Heidi Alexander: I will certainly ask the Rail Minister to take that meeting.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Pavement parking is a massive issue in many of our towns and cities, particularly for people faced with sight loss and for parents trying to push buggies. All of us here benefit from the pavement parking ban in London, but given that it is over four years since the consultation closed, is it time to give towns and cities across England the power to enforce a pavement parking ban if they so wish?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this problem. We will publish a formal response to the consultation, which the previous Government shamefully failed to act on. We will announce next steps for pavement parking policy in England in due course.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Upgrading Ely junction would deliver more passenger services to King's Lynn in my constituency, boost freight and

unlock benefits of £5 for every £1 invested. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether that is a priority in the Department's bid for the spending review?

Heidi Alexander: We are working on a whole range of schemes in respect of the spending review, and I will provide the hon. Gentleman with more information as soon as I have it.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Last year, Derbyshire was judged to be the worst county in the country for potholes, so one would think that the county council would welcome the record £76 million investment into our roads. Can the Minister assure me that that money will make a real difference to our roads and pave the way for a better Britain?

Heidi Alexander: Undoubtedly.

Public Finances: Borrowing Costs

10.40 am

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if she will make a statement on the growing pressure of borrowing costs on the public finances.

Hon. Members: Where is she?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): I am always grateful to see Conservative Members welcome me to the House.

Financial markets are always evolving, as the shadow Chancellor knows, so there is a long-standing convention that the Government do not comment on specific financial market movements, and I will not break that convention today. Financial market movements, including changes in Government bond or gilt yields, which represent the Government's borrowing costs, are determined by a wide range of international and domestic factors. It is normal for the price and yields of gilts to vary when there are wider movements in global financial markets, including in response to economic data.

In recent months, moves in financial markets have been largely driven by data and global geopolitical events, which is to be expected as markets adjust to new information. UK gilt markets continue to function in an orderly way. Underlying demand for the UK's debt remains strong, with a generally well-diversified investor base. The Debt Management Office's gilt sales operations continue to see strong demand. The latest auction, held yesterday, received three times as many bids as the amount on offer.

The Chancellor has commissioned from the Office for Budget Responsibility an updated economic and fiscal forecast for 26 March incorporating the latest data. Only the OBR's forecast can accurately predict the effect on the public finances of any changes in financial markets or the economy, and I will not pre-empt that forecast. There should be no doubt of the Government's commitment to economic stability and sound public finances. That is why meeting the fiscal rules is non-negotiable.

May I end by saying that I am pleased that the shadow Chancellor is holding this Government to account on our stewardship of the economy? It is important that he does so. He will remember when his party crashed the economy with unfunded tax cuts, unrealistic public spending plans and a clear disregard for the consequences on family finances. Families across the country are still paying the price for the Conservatives' disastrous performance on the economy through higher mortgages and bills. If there was one clear reason why the Conservative party suffered such a historic defeat at the last general election, it was their performance on the economy. That is presumably why the shadow Chancellor himself admitted in December that the lack of trust in the Conservative party's management of the economy has left a "deep and painful scar" in the pockets of every person across Britain.

Let me tell the House what has changed. In our first six months, this Labour Government have exposed the £22 billion black hole in the public finances. Not only have we exposed it, but we have dealt with it: the

Chancellor's autumn Budget protects working people, wipes the slate clean of the mess the Conservative party left the country in, and invests in our NHS and schools. We have given the independent Office for Budget Responsibility enhanced powers of oversight, in law, so that we never again get into the situation where that lot left the country: a £22 billion black hole in the public finances. We have set tough new fiscal rules that are non-negotiable, with a budget settlement for public services that they must all live within. We have kick-started growth in this country—this Government's No. 1 mission—by unlocking investment and bringing forward reforms, such as those to planning and in the Mansion House speech.

May I say to the shadow Chancellor that that work stands in stark contrast to the negligent and shameful horror of a circus performance that the Conservative party in government unleashed on this country only a few years ago? Until he can come to the House with an apology for the British people, I will not take any lectures from the Conservative party about how to run the economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mel Stride: The performance we have just seen was a slightly anxious and breathless one, which leads me to the question: where is the Chancellor? It is a bitter regret that at this difficult time and given these serious issues, she herself is nowhere to be seen.

In the last 48 hours, borrowing costs have reached a 27-year high, and it is the Chancellor's decisions that have led us here. Before the election, the right hon. Lady promised that Labour would get debt falling, would not fiddle the figures, would not raise taxes and would grow the economy, but the economy is now flatlining. Survey after survey is showing that business confidence has simply evaporated, and at the Budget, the Chancellor hiked up taxes, increased borrowing by an average of £32 billion a year across the forecast, and conveniently adjusted her fiscal rules to allow her to do so.

Higher debt and lower growth are understandably now causing real concerns among the public, among businesses and in the markets, and despite what the Chief Secretary has said about international factors, the premium on our borrowing costs compared with German bonds recently hit its highest level since 1990. With those rising costs, regrettably, the Government may now be on course to breach their fiscal rules. The Chancellor has committed to no further tax rises, so does the right hon. Gentleman stand by her commitment not to increase taxes even further? If so, does that mean that the public should expect cuts to public service spending if the OBR judges that her fiscal headroom has evaporated?

There are media reports that the Chancellor will make an emergency intervention to soothe markets, but with no confirmation that such a statement will occur in this House. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that any such statement will be made first to Members in this House? Rates on Government bonds ultimately feed through to the broader credit market, so what estimates has the Treasury made of how recent market movements will impact mortgage costs and lending across the economy?

[Mel Stride]

I will make one final point, Mr Speaker. Every pound that we spend on debt interest is money that we cannot spend on the public's priorities. The Government's decision to let rip on borrowing means that their own tax rises will end up being swallowed up by higher borrowing costs, at no benefit to the British people. Far from this Government laying the foundations for a stronger economy, the Chancellor is squandering the endeavours of millions of hard-working people up and down our country, who are now having to pay the price for yet another socialist Government taxing and spending their way into trouble. Does the right hon. Gentleman not now accept that it is time to change course?

Darren Jones: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman enjoyed my performance—I have not even had my first cup of coffee yet this morning. Let me answer some of his questions. [Interruption.] Conservative Members might like to listen, if the questions are so important to them.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the fiscal rules. As I said in my statement, those rules are non-negotiable. As the Chancellor set out at the Budget, we have two fiscal rules: first, that day-to-day spending should be met by tax receipts, and secondly, that debt should be falling as a share of the economy.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the debt burden that this country has. Maybe we should reflect a little on why we have so much debt—[Interruption.] From pre-pandemic, Mr Speaker. Let us look at the burden of debt inherited by this Government from the Conservatives. From 2010 onwards, why did the last Government have to borrow so much money every single month, not just to invest but to pay the day-to-day bills? Because of an absolute failure to get growth into the economy. They could not make the numbers add up. They stacked up the country's credit card and left it to the Labour party to deal with, and we are going to deal with it. That is why those fiscal rules are non-negotiable, and it is why public spending will be within the numbers set out at the Budget.

We are starting the spending review now, and it will conclude in June. Public services will have to live within their means—the Chancellor has been very clear about that. That is why with this Government, you get economic stability and absolute clarity on public spending. That is why the British people trust this party and booted that lot out of office.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We all know that fiscal rules and certainty are vital for the markets and the good stewardship of the public finances, so will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury explain what process he will be going through as he conducts the spending review, and what notice he will give to Departments about extra cuts that they may have to make in order to meet the fiscal rules? In addition, when the Chancellor comes in front of the House for the OBR forecast in March, will she be making a fiscal statement at that point?

Darren Jones: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her question. As the House knows, we have started the second phase of the spending review, to set public

sector budgets from 2026-27 onwards. The Chancellor confirmed in a written ministerial statement before the House rose for Christmas that there will be a forecast from the OBR and a statement on 26 March. As I said in my response, that will be the next time the OBR will give a view about the UK economy and the levels of funding for public services. Between the OBR forecast in March and the conclusion of the spending review in June, the House will be updated in the normal way.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I recognise that the Chancellor has a very difficult job. She inherited an economy on its knees, following the Conservatives' mismanagement of the economy, from their terrible trade deal—[Interruption.] That extends from their terrible trade deal with Europe, which is holding back businesses in Wokingham, to soaring inflation, stagnant growth and the Liz Truss mini-Budget, which hit so many mortgage holders across the country.

However, the Government seem to be repeating some of the same mistakes. Last night, the Treasury issued a statement saying that “meeting the fiscal rules is non-negotiable”.

Will the Chief Secretary reassure this House that protecting the NHS and care is also non-negotiable, and will he rule out any cuts to those services as the Government try to balance the books? Will he work to repair our ties with Europe and cut trade-related red tape, especially in the face of Donald Trump and his oligarch allies such as Elon Musk?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. He will note from the Prime Minister's plan for change that the NHS is the subject of one of this Government's key commitments, with commitments to get the elective waiting list down and to invest in the national health service so that we can do so. He will have heard that from the Chancellor at the Budget in the autumn, and he will see that it is a continued commitment from this Government. We can do that because of our commitment to the fiscal rules and because of our investment to grow the economy, which is the only route to long-term, sustainable public financing.

The hon. Member was very rudely groaned at by Conservative Members, but when it comes to their performance on the economy, it is not they who should be groaning, but the British people who should be groaning at them for what they did to their family finances.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): US bond rates are rising as well as those in the UK, with higher than expected inflation and interest rates. I note that Conservative Members have not mentioned that; perhaps they have not looked. The best way to make our debt sustainable is to invest to get growth growing, and to get expected inflation down by investing in clean energy. Does the Minister agree that our plans to invest in growth and in lower-price, cleaner energy is exactly the way to make our debt sustainable?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend knows very well that this Government's approach has been about stability, investment and reform: the stability we have brought following the chaos of the years under the Conservative

party, as has been recognised by the British people and by the markets; the investment we have been unlocking, from our global investment summit all the way through to the work we have been doing in the Budget and since; and the reforms we are bringing forward—for example, planning reform—to make sure we can deliver infrastructure better in this country and unlock the investment that private capital has wanted to put forward in the UK for many years, but could not because of the chaos from the Conservatives when they were last in government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On 6 November, the Chancellor said:

“We have now set the envelope for spending for this Parliament, and we are not going to be coming back with more tax increases or, indeed, with more borrowing.”

I am sure, because the Chancellor is an honourable lady, that she will not be opening that envelope, putting her sticky fingers inside and coming out with more borrowing or tax increases. Will the Minister give an absolute assurance of no more tax increases or borrowing?

Darren Jones: I can absolutely assure the Father of the House that we are working through this spending review on the basis of the envelope set at the Budget. Public services will have to operate within the means that we are providing to them. The OBR forecast will come in March, which will give us the latest set of information, and we will work to that with Departments. This is why we have set up organisations such as the Office for Value for Money, why we have set tough productivity and efficiency targets for Departments and why we are investing in, for example, technology to improve the productivity of the public services we provide. Public services must live within their means, as set out in the Budget, and that is an absolute guarantee from this Government.

Torsten Bell (Swansea West) (Lab): I thank the Chief Secretary for his response. I have just sat through Transport questions, or some of them, during which I repeatedly heard calls for more spending from Conservative Members, but they oppose every single tax rise to pay for that spending. Does the Chief Secretary agree that one of the lessons from global developments in recent days is that we must pay for day-to-day public spending through tax rises, however tough that is?

Darren Jones: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. We have to pay day-to-day bills with the income we generate day to day. The lesson that we learned from the Opposition was about what they were happy to do, but this Government are not. They were happy to announce plans and programmes to make promises to the British people, even though they knew they did not have the money to pay for it. That will never happen under this Labour Government.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): When the Chancellor set the envelope for spending for this Parliament, and said to the Treasury Committee on 6 November that she would not come back for more tax increases or more borrowing, that was based on her assumptions about the cost of borrowing. Those are manifestly in significant doubt, to look at it in the most charitable way. I have sat

in the Chief Secretary’s position, and I know he will want to equivocate and push decisions to the next OBR assessment and the next fiscal event, but the truth is surely this: this Government have to cut spending, increase taxes or borrow more. If the cost of borrowing is increasing, that moment will come sooner. Which of those choices is he inclined to make, and when will he tell the British people honestly what this Government have done?

Darren Jones: I have been clear to the House, as has the Chancellor, that the fiscal rules are non-negotiable. Public services will have to live within their means. We set the Budget in the autumn last year, and we have the OBR forecasts coming in March. Those are the numbers that Departments are working to in the spending review, and those are the numbers that we will hold public services to when we conclude the spending review in June.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): We thought we knew the dire economic situation when the general election was called, but on entering government, we found the real consequences of the previous Tory Government’s addiction to unfunded spending announcements. The people of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West are paying the consequences for the Truss-Kwarteng economic crash. With the imminent entry into the White House of a President also committed to significant unfunded tax cuts, the economic stability of the UK becomes even more important. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this Government are absolutely committed to fiscal responsibility and rising living standards, and that the plan for growth will deliver both?

Darren Jones: I thank the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee for her question. She will know that our first commitment in the Labour party manifesto at the last election was to fiscal responsibility. It is the bedrock of this Government and the bedrock of every decision we take. As the Prime Minister set out in his plan for change, the reason people will know the difference that a Labour Government make is that they will have more money in their pockets by the end of this Parliament than when it started.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): In yesterday’s extraordinary emergency statement from the Treasury to try to calm the markets, it paid tribute to the fact that the Government inherited the second-lowest debt in the G7. Is the reason the Government Front Bench is so empty today and the Chancellor has fled to China that she has realised that her Budget means she now is the arsonist?

Darren Jones: I must say I am rather surprised by the inflammatory language of the former Chair of the Treasury Committee, which is clearly no reflection of reality. The Chancellor is going on her trip to China. It has been well documented for many weeks, and it is an important visit for trade and investment in the UK economy. May I say that there was no emergency statement or emergency intervention? Those are make-believe words being propagated by Opposition Members. The Treasury responded to requests from journalists about headroom, as we might do in the normal way. There is no need for any emergency intervention, and there has not been one.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): One would think, from listening to Opposition Members, that they had not crashed our economy and presided over high taxes, high debts and falling living standards, which affect my constituents and, I expect, some of theirs, too. *[Interruption.]* That is the Tory cycle. Will the Minister confirm that the route out of that is growth, and that remains our No. 1 mission?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is right. May I offer some probably unwelcome advice to Opposition Members? The sooner they stop groaning and stop laughing about their performance when they were last in government, and the sooner they apologise for it, the sooner the British people might start listening to them again.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Public services are at breaking point after the previous Government's mishandling of the economy and budgets locally. However, does the Minister recognise that scaling back investment in vital public services risks even more devastating consequences for our local communities?

Darren Jones: At the autumn Budget, the Chancellor invested in frontline public services, because we recognise that people rely on them, but also because functioning public services are an important route to growth in the economy. If people are sick and cannot get to work, they need to be able to see a doctor in a timely fashion, so that they can get back to work. That is the priority of this Government, as well as investing in modernising our public services, so that they are fit for the future.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My constituents suffered real hardship as a result of the disastrous mini-Budget pursued by the Conservative party. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that in order to improve living standards for my constituents, we must stick to our fiscal rules, maintain fiscal discipline and invest in our public services?

Darren Jones: I very much agree. That is why fiscal stability and economic responsibility are at the heart of this Labour Government and the Chancellor's agenda. Members on the Opposition Benches may want to pay attention to that.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): There is no point beating around the bush: the Chancellor has just lost over £9.9 billion of headroom, and stands on the cusp of breaking her own fiscal rules. She said last year that she would not come back for more tax rises. Will the Chief Secretary be honest and admit, just as the former Bank of England rate setter Martin Weale said today, that this leaves only the option of more austerity? Will he level with people about when and where the next round of cuts will fall?

Darren Jones: As I said, the fiscal rules are non-negotiable. The only reliable sources on future financing will be the OBR forecast on 26 March, the conclusion of the spending review in June, and the Budget, which the Chancellor will present in the autumn. The hon. Gentleman mentioned austerity, but I remind him that this Labour Government have given the Scottish Parliament the largest real-terms increase in funding since devolution. He should be grateful for that.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): This Labour Government have been in power for six months, and we are having to deal with 14 years of Conservative chaos. Does the Chief Secretary agree that the Government's plan for change, which aims to provide a stable economy and raise living standards in every part of the United Kingdom, and has economic growth as the No. 1 mission, is the right approach to ensure that the United Kingdom can weather the global uncertainty that we face?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let me set out the difference that the British people will experience. At the end of 14 years of Conservative Government, they had higher mortgages, higher bills, a higher cost of living and public services on their knees. At the end of this Labour Government, pointing towards the next general election, as set out in the Prime Minister's plan for change, they will have more money in their pocket, public services will be functioning again, and they will be proud once again of their Government, and of the British economy.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Having listened very carefully to the right hon. Gentleman's responses, I believe that he is making a more significant statement than many of his colleagues might realise. By underlining that there will not be any tax or borrowing increases, he is, in effect, saying that austerity is back, because there is no way that the public finances can be remedied by another Budget of wishful thinking that pretends that increased borrowing and spending will produce growth. That is once again being proved by a Labour Government to be a false way of leading the economy.

Darren Jones: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for thinking that I am making such substantive interventions, and for his continued support in that respect. This is not austerity, as he will know full well. Austerity was ideological cuts to public financing and the size of the state. It was 3% cuts, irrespective of what that meant for public services or for people across the country. That is far from what the Chancellor unveiled in her autumn Budget. That was the absolute opposite of austerity; we increased financing for frontline public services, and will continue to do so.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Will the Chief Secretary outline the steps that this Government have already taken to fix the fiscal foundations and put this country on a stronger footing for growth?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend asks an important question. Why did we have to take that action? Why was this Government's first Bill about fiscal responsibility? It was because of the mess that Conservative Members left this country in. That is why we have given the Office for Budget Responsibility stronger, independent powers of oversight in statute—something that the shadow Chancellor presumably welcomed, given his comments criticising Liz Truss and her Budget when he was Chair of the Treasury Committee. We brought that change forward, which the Conservative party failed to do. That is why we have set fiscal rules that are non-negotiable, why public services must live within their means, and why the Government's absolute focus is on securing growth, investment, reform and long-term sustainability for public finances.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Is the Chief Secretary aware that the last two months' GDP figures, for September and October, are both down? Is he aware that sterling is falling—in fact, almost collapsing? Confidence is falling and investors are fleeing. The only things going up are inflation, wasteful public spending and the cost of debt. Be under no illusion: we are heading towards a financial crisis. Will he ask the Chancellor to return from her ridiculous trip to China, to reverse course, and to cut daft spending and wasteful regulations, so that we can create some growth?

Darren Jones: I think the question was whether I was going to demand that the Chancellor come back from her trade trip to China. I will not, no.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): Does the Chief Secretary agree that there is an irony in the Conservatives raising concerns about the cost of borrowing, when they oversaw debt rising from 64.7% of GDP to more than 96% of GDP and left a £22 billion unfunded black hole in public finances—and now continue to oppose the tough decisions that we are making on tax and spend to fix their mess?

Darren Jones: That is exactly why our fiscal rules are non-negotiable. While the Conservatives borrowed to pay the bills every month because they did not have enough money to pay for all their promises, this Government are investing in the future of our country, whether through reforming public services or investing in infrastructure and opportunities for growth. That is exactly the right approach to the economy; it is what our fiscal rules demand, and what we will be held to.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Next has said that it will increase prices by 1%, directly because of the increases to national insurance contributions, and has warned of slowing growth. With business confidence plummeting, gilts at a 26-year high and growth stagnating, do the Government still maintain that they have an iron grip on public finances, or will they admit that their Budget has done exactly what the Conservatives warned: increase costs, increase prices and reduce growth?

Darren Jones: The question was whether the Government have an iron grip on public finances; the answer is yes.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras ha myttin da, Mr Speaker. Does the Chief Secretary agree that the only way that we can wrest the economy out of the clutches of the Conservatives' doom loop is to go for growth? The Government's new industrial strategy will be a core foundation underpinning that growth.

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our industrial strategy, through which we will invest alongside businesses and industries of the future, and our infrastructure strategy, which sets out how we will get Britain building again, are two examples of the Government playing their part by bringing economic and political stability. By, for example, reforming the planning system, we will unlock billions of pounds of private sector investment in UK plc—something that did not happen under the previous Government.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I completely sympathise with the Chief Secretary about the incredible brass neck of the official Opposition. He talks about kick-starting growth, but can he give us any evidence that growth has been kick-started? Does he not realise that the only way to kick-start growth in the near future is to re-engage with Europe?

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman will know that this Government's approach to stimulating growth in the economy is about stability, investment and reform—the political and economic stability the Chancellor has brought to this country; the investment from private sector partners, as well as from the state, where appropriate; and the reform of policy areas such as the planning system, or the financial services reform that the Chancellor set out in her Mansion House speech. He is also right, of course, that we need to improve our trading relationship with countries around the world, which is why the Chancellor is going to China today, and why we have begun negotiations with our friends in the European Union on how we can improve our relationship on a whole host of issues, including trade, energy, defence and security.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Does the Chief Secretary agree that the Conservatives, having added gutter politics to their fantasy economics and unfunded spending commitments, can no longer call themselves the party of decency in public life, and of sound money?

Darren Jones: Yes.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is deeply disappointing that the Chancellor is not here to answer questions in the House on such an important topic, so I shall have to ask my question to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury instead. It is quite a simple one. Will he stand by the Chancellor's comment that she will not come back with more tax increases?

Darren Jones: I am sorry to disappoint the right hon. Member, but I will answer the question none the less. She asked me whether I stand by the Chancellor's statements, and the answer is yes.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I want us to get serious for a minute here. *[Interruption.]* Many of my constituents in North East Derbyshire, who will have just heard the guffawing from the Opposition, have been really struggling with the cost of living crisis. They voted the Government in, and we are committed to restoring the foundations of our economy. Will the Minister assure me that we are doing everything we can to deliver on that promise?

Darren Jones: It is absolutely right that the Labour Government are bringing fiscal and economic stability back to this country, because we know that when you play fast and loose with the nation's finances, you play fast and loose with family finances. That is what voters in every constituency experienced when the Conservatives were last in government. They will not experience that under this Labour Government.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): We are looking at higher interest rates, lower growth and a higher cost of borrowing to the Government; as my hon. and right hon. Friends have said, we are grateful to

[Graham Stuart]

the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for being so honest with the House. It is clear that if he sticks to his word, there will not be any more borrowing, or any more tax rises. Given the numbers, that leaves only one option: cuts in public services. I wonder whether his colleagues behind him on the Government Benches realise that reality. What word other than “austerity” will he use to describe it?

Darren Jones: As I have said, it seems that the Conservative party is proud of its record on austerity. We do not support austerity, which was blind ideological cuts to public services—3% cuts—irrespective of the outcome for the people who rely on public services. The Chancellor increased investment in public services at the Budget in the autumn, and we will continue to increase investment in them, because we need to get them back on their feet, and they are an important foundation for economic growth. I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman recognises my statements, and says that they are honest, because of course they are. I look forward to coming back to the House in future months and years to show him the progress that the Government are making.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a relief for me and my constituents in Doncaster Central that we finally have a Labour Government providing economic stability and investing in the industry of the future. [Interruption.] It is all right for Conservative Members to chunter, but after the mess they made, a period of silence on their part is warranted. Will my right hon. Friend lay out the action that he will take to ensure that all regions of the country, including places like Doncaster and South Yorkshire, benefit from growth?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the Government are in the service of working people. What does that mean? It means that people’s lives—the money they have in their pocket, and the ability to pay the bills, get a roof over their head and seek opportunity—are at the very heart of what it means to be in the Labour party and in this Labour Government. Conservative Members might not have suffered from higher mortgage bills or worried about the cost of living during their supermarket shop each month, but people across the country did, and they suffered as a consequence of the Conservatives’ behaviour. I welcome my hon. Friend’s comment that they should have a period of silence while they learn the lessons.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I think that I heard the Chief Secretary say that the Chancellor has not gone to China. Will he confirm first that she is still planning to go? Secondly, if she has not gone to China yet, why is she not here? Lots of people would like to hear from her. Thirdly, has the Chancellor talked to the Governor of the Bank of England about market turbulence at any point in the last seven days?

Darren Jones: The Chancellor is going to China, as has been well documented. Again, I am sorry that it disappoints the hon. Member that I am here. I refer him and his colleagues to the urgent question, which is about a statement on borrowing costs and public finances. He will know that I am the Minister for public finances, which is why I am here answering his questions.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirm that the Government’s No. 1 mission is still growth? That is the only way that we can break out of the Tory inheritance of low growth, high borrowing, high taxes and squeezed living standards for people in my constituency in Livingston, and across the UK.

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. His constituents will know from their family finances that they cannot just put the bills on the credit card every month without having a plan for how to pay it off. That is not a sustainable way to manage household finances, and it is the same for the country. One of the reasons why we have such a mess left to us by the Conservative party is that it did just that—borrow money every month to pay for the day-to-day bills, and stack up the promises. That is why in the end there were so many promises and not enough pounds to pay for them. That is not a way to run the economy or family finances. That is why fiscal responsibility is at the heart of the approach taken by the Chancellor and the Government. We will never play fast and loose with the nation’s finances, as the Conservative party did.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): According to media reports today, the former Member of Parliament for South West Norfolk is issuing cease and desist letters to those who have accused her of crashing the economy

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Be careful or you might get one!

Max Wilkinson: I hope not. Members will be conscious that I am being very careful with my wording. I wonder whether the Chief Secretary might wish to take advantage of parliamentary privilege to compare and contrast the impact of her disastrous mini-Budget with what is being discussed today.

Darren Jones: You will correctly tell me, Mr Speaker, that it would not be right for me to comment on legal proceedings, but I am happy to say that one of the huge lessons for the country, for the British voting public and perhaps, one day, for the Conservative party is that the actions that the Conservative party took were not just reckless and negligent, but had a direct impact on public finances in every single constituency. There was a direct connection: it was Conservative Ministers’ hubris, ego and lack of focus on working people that ruined the lives of people across the country. I say that today and I will say it every day, because the British people must never forget the recklessness of the Conservative party.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I thank the Chief Secretary for his statement—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is an urgent question, not a statement.

Luke Murphy: I am sorry, Mr Speaker. During these exchanges on the urgent question alone, we have heard chuntering from Opposition Members about the cut in the winter fuel payment. We have heard them oppose the tax increases that have been introduced to pay for public spending, and we have heard them urge the Government to call off talks with economic partners including China. Is it any wonder that the GDP-to-debt ratio rose by a full 30 percentage points under the Conservative Government?

Darren Jones: It might have been legitimate for the Conservatives to say that their economic policy was to borrow for day-to-day costs—as they did. That could be a decision that they took. What is not forgivable is the fact that they reached a point at which they were making promises to the British people that they knew they did not have the money to pay for, and that is where the £22 billion black hole came from. They should be ashamed of their record on the economy, and they should apologise to the British people.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): When will the Chief Secretary take responsibility for the actions of his own Government? We had a general election, and that is when the public held the previous Government to account. They gave their verdict, and the Labour party is in power now. What the public want is accountability for this Government's reckless decisions: the national insurance increases are an attack on jobs; there has been an attack on the farming community; and business confidence is at an all-time low.

Darren Jones: The right hon. Gentleman may not wish to reflect on his party's performance in government, but I am afraid he has to. Although this is a new Government—we have been in office for six months—the reality is that we are having to clear up the mess that the last Government left us. That is why we have to talk about it, and explain to the country why the actions taken by the Conservative party not only affected family finances, but decimated the British economy and pushed public services on to their knees. We are taking responsibility for clearing up their mess, and that is why we will keep talking about it.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): A key ingredient of economic growth has to be responsible government. People in Stevenage and across the country are still paying the price for 14 years of irresponsible government—the terrible decisions, the mini-Budget—and now we have a party in opposition that still does not get it. Opposition Members responded to this party's Budget by saying that they accepted the improvement in public services, but they would not say how they would pay for it. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that this Administration will be committed to responsible government for the rest of the parliamentary term?

Darren Jones: Yes, I can. There is no denying that the economic inheritance that we were given by the Conservative party makes life very difficult for us: it means that we have to take difficult decisions. The fiscal rules are non-negotiable and public services have to live within their means because that is that the bedrock of any approach in government. Is that going to be easy for us? No, it is not, but it is part of our responsibility in clearing up the mess left by the Conservatives, and from that we can build for the future, as is set out in the Prime Minister's plan for change.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The issue here is spending. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the Labour manifesto said that a Labour Government would increase spending by £9.5 billion a year, and the Treasury Red Book is increasing that to £76 billion? Is that not the issue?

Darren Jones: One of the issues was that the Conservative party made a whole list of unfunded spending commitments. They promised hospitals and train stations, they had unsettled pay disputes with public sector workers—I could go on and on. That is why the Chancellor took the decision at the Budget to wipe the slate clean, to deal with the mess that we inherited and then to bring forward the manifesto commitments that we set out at the election. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to see more detail about our public spending plans, he is very welcome to come to my statement in June.

Jacob Collier: Conservative Members talk about economic stability, but they seem to have forgotten that they were swapping out Chancellors every five minutes. Does the Chief Secretary agree that it is this Government who are restoring stability to our economy?

Darren Jones: Restoring economic and political stability is important. When the markets observed the behaviour of the Conservative party in government, it is no wonder they did not want to invest in the UK, and that is why the market crashed, to the detriment of working people across the country. It is very clear that under this Labour Government, not only do we have stable leadership; we have a stable set of policies in our plan for change and fiscal responsibility as the bedrock for the Chancellor's action. That is a country people can believe in, trust in and invest in, unlike the country that was left to us by the Conservative party.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Every Labour Government leave office with unemployment higher and the economy in a worse condition than they inherited, but I think this Labour Government are taking the record for doing that the fastest—within just six months, we see borrowing costs spiralling out of control, GDP growth tanking and the bosses of some of the biggest recruitment firms in the UK warning of job postings plummeting and that a recession is just around the corner. I look forward to seeing how the Chancellor spins this period of employment on her CV in the future. If the Government breach their own fiddled fiscal rules so ingloriously and so quickly, who on the Treasury Bench is going to update their CV and take responsibility?

Darren Jones: The fiscal rules are non-negotiable, and they will be met.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the reckless ideological austerity measures taken by the Conservative party in government have directly led to my constituents being significantly worse off and made it harder for them to get on in Darlington? Can he outline the impact that the new Office for Value for Money will have on the huge inefficiencies and waste that the last Government presided over?

Darren Jones: The Office for Value for Money is an important part of our spending review process, as we undertake for the first time in 17 years a zero-based review of every single pound of public spending. We should focus on that for a moment: not once under the last Conservative Government was there a zero-based review. Not once did they go line by line through every pound of taxpayers' money and public spending to check it

[Darren Jones]

was being spent in the people's interests. Not once did they think that was a responsible thing to do. That is the first thing we are doing in government.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): At the back end of last year, borrowing figures were the second highest monthly figures on record. That was in no small part driven by the Chancellor's decision to give inflation-busting pay rises to unions. Given that we have more union pay negotiations this year, should my constituents be braced for the Government giving into those union demands, at risk to taxpayers?

Darren Jones: I think the hon. Member might want to ask his constituents whether they appreciated their doctors and nurses being on strike for so long or whether they wanted them to be able to see their patients. He may want to ask his constituents whether they were grateful to have the trains not working for so many months because the train drivers were on strike. He may want to ask his constituents how pleased they were with the performance of their public services over the last 14 years of government. I think I know the answer they would give him. That is going to change under this Labour Government.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): On the economy, as with so much else, does my right hon. Friend agree that Conservative Members should sip from the elixir of personal responsibility and that the two words we most need to hear from them are, "We apologise"?

Graham Stuart: That's not a question.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Stuart, I need no advice from you. I think you are on the Panel of Chairs, and I need to see some better behaviour if you are going to stay on it.

Darren Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is important, when you are paid by the House, to act responsibly; I agree with you.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) makes a really important point, and Conservative Members who have their head in their hands may wish to listen to him. It will be important for the Conservatives to apologise for their behaviour before the British people start listening to them again, but for as long as they wish to grunt and groan and claim that everything was wonderful, the better for us, so long may it continue.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I have heard that the Minister is the future, but all he wants to talk about is the past. The fact of the matter is that, today, borrowing costs are up, business confidence is down and growth is going nowhere. Is it not time to admit that this lefty economic experiment is not working? It is time to cut taxes and cut spending.

Darren Jones: I did not realise that the hon. Member knew my mum and that I am apparently the future. It is very kind of him to say so; very few have that in their thoughts. He talks about lefty experiments. Fiscal responsibility is not a lefty ideology. Economic responsibility is not a lefty ideological and political experiment; it is what the British people expect. One of the reasons why

the Conservatives had such a historic defeat at the last election is that they lost all control and all sense when it came to the public finances. For a party that is supposedly the best-performing in western democracy, and which has had great leaders in the past, is it not a great shame what the Conservative party has become? Given its performance over 14 years and its descent into disinformation, I feel very sorry for Opposition Members.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I hope that the Minister can quickly turn this situation around for my constituents and the country, and I wish him all the best in doing so. Given the challenges of business confidence and the markets, I had hoped that he would come to the House this morning with a plan that lays out the scope of the problem and the solution to fix it. Instead, he has spoken more about the Conservative party, rather than Labour's plan for the economy. Is that because the Chancellor is not here today? When will she come back?

Darren Jones: I am very happy to set out the Government's plan, as I have done repeatedly today. The hon. Member will have seen in the Chancellor's Budget last autumn a clear plan to wipe the slate clean, to deal with the mess that we inherited, to protect working people, and to invest in our public services. He will have seen it in the Prime Minister's plan for change, which sets out the direction of this Government over the years ahead. We will put more money in working people's pockets across the country, get our public services back on their feet and make sure that this country is in a strong position. The hon. Member will know that the Government are working through our spending review, which I run as the responsible Minister. I have already confirmed that we will come back in June to confirm the spending plans for Departments, which will have to live within their means and in line with the fiscal rules in the years ahead. I cannot think what more he would want.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope that people who are standing were here at the beginning.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): Within the last week, has the Chancellor spoken to the Governor of the Bank of England about the impact of soaring borrowing costs?

Darren Jones: The Chancellor meets the Governor of the Bank of England on a regular basis and will continue to do so.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It has been widely reported that the Chancellor now faces a choice between raising taxes or cutting public spending if she is to stay within her non-negotiable fiscal rules. Given reports that she will now conduct group meetings with Ministers, rather than the less combative approach of one-to-one meetings conducted by the right hon. Gentleman, to discuss departmental cuts, it sounds as if Government spending is being dictated by the Ministers with the sharpest elbows. Can he reassure the House that there will not be any departmental cuts?

Darren Jones: I am pleased that the hon. Member can afford the subscription to *Bloomberg News*; I cannot, unfortunately, so I could not read the article to which he

refers. He inadvertently asks me a question about the process of the spending review. [*Interruption.*] That was the question. We are embedding mission-led government, which is what the Prime Minister set out in his missions in his plan for change. That requires Departments to work together to make sure that they are absolutely focused on the delivery of the plan for change priorities, which is why the spending review is being done on a multilateral basis in a new way. I will be giving a speech on this issue in a couple of weeks' time, and I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman gets an invitation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for all his answers this morning. The UK's public debt has risen sharply over the decades. At the moment, it is reaching levels not seen in the post-world war two era, meaning that a large proportion of our expenditure is focused on paying back, as opposed to public spending. I always try to be constructive, as the Minister knows. Nowhere will the impact—on health and education, for example—be greater than in Northern Ireland. I have a very specific question for the Minister: what discussions has he had with Departments, and particularly the Finance Department, at the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Darren Jones: I lead for the Treasury on inter-ministerial relationships with Finance Ministers in the devolved Governments. I regularly meet my counterparts, and I will meet them in Wales in the coming weeks to talk about our spending plans for the future.

Business of the House

11.30 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 13 January includes:

MONDAY 13 JANUARY—General debate on hospice and palliative care, followed by a general debate on the impact of food and diet on obesity. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 14 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Renters' Rights Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill.

THURSDAY 16 JANUARY—Motion to approve the draft Deposit Scheme for Drinks Containers (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, followed by a debate on a motion on the performance of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee (in unallotted time).

FRIDAY 17 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 20 January will include:

MONDAY 20 JANUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 21 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill.

Jesse Norman: Madam Deputy Speaker, may I start by wishing you a very happy new year? I hope that all colleagues in the Chamber had a zestful and restful Christmas. I also pay tribute to those members of the House Service who were honoured in the recent honours list.

The new year is always a time for new starts and fresh beginnings; a time when people step back, look at themselves in the mirror, pinch an inch or two, and perhaps make a few resolutions—lay off the pies, resist the siren call of the cheeseboard, spend less on self-indulgences and more on things that matter, take themselves in hand, and perhaps try to manage things a bit better. The Government might consider adopting these new year's resolutions for themselves. After all, by any standards, their first six months in office have been pretty catastrophic. They have had six happy months blaming everyone else; now they need to take responsibility and lead.

We have seen how the Budget continues to have devastating effects, both on key sectors and more widely. Just a few weeks ago the National Institute of Economic and Social Research warned that the UK economy did not grow at all in the fourth quarter of last year. High street retailers have reported their worst sales decline since covid, both offline and online. Business confidence is at a four-year low. Employment continues to fall, and job vacancies are at their lowest for three years.

Only this week we saw that long-term interest rates in the gilts market, as very well highlighted by the shadow Chancellor in this morning's urgent question, have risen to their highest level since 1998, 27 years ago—that was

[*Jesse Norman*]

before some Members of this House were born—reflecting severe investor worry about Labour’s spending plans and about increased UK vulnerability to increases in the national debt. The Government cannot blame that on the past. It is a straight judgment on their own credibility, and it is costing this country dearly every day.

The problem is not just that the Government have damaged key parts of the economy with their Budget decisions; it is that the long-term effect of those decisions is so counterproductive. The CBI has calculated that the Government’s raid on inheritance tax will cost £1.25 billion more than it raises. The Chancellor has said:

“I’m really clear, I’m not coming back with more borrowing or more taxes.”

Last month, she specifically ruled out an emergency Budget in the spring.

The effect of these rising interest rates is to reduce fiscal headroom and make new tax rises or spending cuts very possible—indeed, some would say almost inevitable. We must wait to see whether that means emergency tax rises or an unexpected fiscal event in the spring, with a detailed investigation by the Office for Budget Responsibility. That also raises the question: how can the Government plan a spending review at all if they are not in control of the public finances? The damage will not be just to the Chancellor’s own reputation; it will damage the pockets of every person in every household in this country.

As we think about the new year, what resolutions should the House encourage the Government to adopt? I suggest three. First, stop taking politically driven measures that actively hurt the economy. Stop punishing the retail and hospitality sectors, which give so many young people their first jobs. Stop attacking farmers and the rural economy. Stop the madness of the Employment Rights Bill, which will make it harder than ever to start and build a business. We should be celebrating and rewarding drive, energy, aspiration and entrepreneurship, not undermining them.

Secondly, come clean to the people of this country about the Government’s own uncertainty, conflicts and incompetence. We have had endless announcements about new commissions and initiatives, each testimony to Labour’s hopeless lack of planning before the election. We had a delayed autumn Budget and this year we will have a spending review that, if it is not derailed by fiscal events, could easily last until June or July, building up to a full year of stasis and stagnation since the general election.

A final resolution might be to show us some leadership. The Prime Minister pointed out, and rightly so, that in 2010 the incoming Government inherited public finances in desperate need of repair. He said

“we cannot tax our way to prosperity or spend our way to better public services.”

Those are refreshingly honest, cross-party recognitions of the difficulty of government, but when it comes to action, what have we seen? Dither, delay and divisive policy making. Reform of social care is a huge issue for millions of people across this country and could lift huge burdens from the NHS, yet this week we learned that, despite all Labour’s promises of change, it has been kicked into the long grass.

In closing, this Government were elected to own key issues and to address them, not to avoid the hard problems, parrot the usual political lines, blame other

people and play nice to their friends in the unions. They need to stop blaming others, get on and show the country they can lead.

Lucy Powell: May I, too, wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the whole House a very happy new year? I send all our sympathies to the residents of Los Angeles who are being hit by wildfires—the situation unfolding there is very concerning indeed.

May I also take this opportunity to congratulate a fellow northerner, Luke Littler, on winning the world darts championship? He might support the wrong football team, but he has been a great role model and is making darts a very compelling sport.

It is the new year, but I am afraid it is the same old Tories. Their decision to try to vote down the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill yesterday was another huge misjudgment. They seem to have learned nothing and are incapable of accepting they got things wrong or having what it takes to rebuild trust. The victims of grooming gangs need politicians to hear their voices, to act without fear or favour, and to take all necessary steps to root out and bring justice to perpetrators and enablers, whoever they are. They do not need pathetic and blatant political bandwagon jumping.

If Conservative Members were really interested in the victims and justice, their leader would have met with victims, but she has not. When she was Children’s Minister or the Women and Equalities Minister, she could have acted or spoken about the subject in the Chamber, but she did not. If this was really about addressing the root causes and making sure our institutions, culture and laws are fit for purpose, the Conservatives would have started implementing the recommendations of the Jay report, but they did not. Their wrecking tactics last night showed that they would rather play politics instead of supporting measures to safeguard children. I find it quite depressing to watch the official Opposition chase the spectre of Reform. These are very serious issues that require serious attention, with victims and their learnings at the centre.

Yet again, the shadow Leader of the House raises the economy but, as ever, I will take no lectures from him. After all, he admitted that we inherited a “struggling” economy with “anaemic” growth. Our commitment to economic stability, sound public finances and meeting the fiscal rules is non-negotiable, as we have just heard from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We are borrowing only for investment and we will see net debt fall. As the right hon. Gentleman knows well, the cost of debt fluctuates, often because of global markets. That is in stark contrast to the chaos we saw under his Government, when Liz Truss’s kamikaze Budget directly and immediately led to the gilt market crashing, needing the Bank of England to intervene to buy up Government bonds. She might want us to cease and desist, but we will not cease and desist from telling the truth that they crashed the economy.

When we talk about fixing the foundations of our economy, we are talking about tackling the fundamental and huge structural problems we face: years of low growth; very low productivity; chronically low investment; poor connectivity; a labour market with high levels of sickness; a health service on its knees; low skills; and an overreliance on record levels of immigration, which, in turn, puts more pressure on the housing crisis.

There are no quick fixes, but that is why the decisions we have taken, such as those in the Budget, are different and represent our vision of sustainable, shared growth. That begins with investment in health, investment in education and skills, and investment in the jobs of the future. It begins with providing a pay rise for the lowest paid, investment in transport and connectivity, and decent homes for people to live in.

Our approach is fundamentally different from that of the Conservative party, which is based on short-term, deregulatory, trickle-down economics. Opposition Members cannot have it both ways. We would have had cuts now—huge cuts to health and education—if they had been in government. They cannot have the benefits of the Budget without the measures it took to achieve them. Their agenda saw living standards fall for the first time in decades, with stagnant growth, poor productivity, high waiting lists and sickness rates and, perhaps most telling of all, in their last year of office net migration at nearly 1 million. We recognise that it will take time and we are beginning to turn the oil tanker around.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): In 1984, the global Sikh community suffered catastrophic collective trauma when the then Indian Government ordered the storming of the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, which led to devastating destruction and bloodshed, with thousands of innocent people losing their lives. Thirty years later, to our shock, new documents exposed that the Thatcher Government had helped their Indian counterpart by providing advice prior to that military operation. In its pursuit for the truth and transparency, the British Sikh community duly launched a campaign for an independent inquiry to establish the extent of that involvement. While previous Conservative Governments have tried to brush the issue under the carpet, Sikhs expected the new Labour Government to establish that promised independent inquiry. When will that be initiated?

Lucy Powell: I know that this matter is of great importance to the Sikh community across the UK, so my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise it today and to continue to do so on behalf of the Sikh community and others. We need to get to the bottom of what happened, and I will ensure that the Ministers responsible are in touch with him to discuss the matter further.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I wish you a happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Community pharmacies are fundamental to our healthcare system, providing essential advice and services while alleviating pressure on the NHS. We simply cannot do without them. Indeed, we are all now encouraged to “Think Pharmacy First” for some medical conditions. However, it is hard to understand how that is possible if pharmacies are facing closure because the NHS is not covering the cost of the medications they dispense.

The contract between the NHS and pharmacies has simply failed to keep up with the rising costs of many medicines. The result is that many pharmacists are

operating out of their own pocket, taking huge losses year after year. The outcome feels inevitable. We have seen 1,200 pharmacies close since 2015, including nearly 500 in the past year alone. When the Company Chemists’ Association reports average shortfalls of £60,000 per pharmacy per annum, can we really be surprised?

We are warned by the National Pharmacy Association of pharmacy deserts, where many rural and deprived areas risk having no immediate access at all. This can only spell a health inequality crisis, which will be felt more intensely by those who already struggle the most. This needs to be fixed. We must avoid even more pharmacy closures up and down the country.

Pharmacies are vital not just to the communities they serve, but to the NHS as a whole. Will the Leader of the House grant Government time for a debate on how our pharmacies can be better supported for long-term viability and sustainability?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important matter. Indeed, it was raised in stark terms at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday by one of her colleagues. What she describes happening in our community pharmacies as well as in other parts of the broader healthcare sector is a crisis. We are dealing with difficult circumstances that we inherited followed 14 years of under-investment, industrial action and other problems in the health service. She will know that this Government are committed to extra investment. That is why the Budget, which many Conservative Members have opposed, allocated record levels of investment to our national health service. Part of that is about ensuring that we have early intervention services in the community, and our community pharmacies are central to that drive. That is why the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will continue to support our pharmacies and help turn around the terrible situation they face.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): A recent report stated that there was an increased risk to life at Doncaster’s hospitals if a fire were to occur. There is also a risk of electrical failure due to the age and condition of the infrastructure. Despite much fanfare and promise, the previous Government did nothing to improve the condition of Doncaster royal infirmary. Added to that, we have one of the biggest repair backlogs in the country. Can the Leader of the House ensure that a Health Minister meets me and other Doncaster MPs urgently to ensure that our constituents have access to safe secondary care?

Lucy Powell: Yet again, my hon. Friend raises the important matter of Doncaster royal infirmary in her constituency. I know that she is doing great work to highlight the problems that it faces. She will be aware that the so-called new hospital programme—the previous Government’s capital investment programme—was a work of fiction. The programme did not have the funds our hospitals needed, but I will ensure that she gets a meeting with a Minister, because the circumstances that she describes are unacceptable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Happy new year to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone.

[*Bob Blackman*]

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, the Backbench Business Committee has organised debates in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 14 January on railway services in the south-west; on Thursday 16 January on Government support for the marine renewables industry; on Tuesday 21 January on the provision of auditory verbal therapy; and on Thursday 23 January on the United Nations International Day of Education, followed by a debate on the innovation in the field of rare retinal disease. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, on Tuesday 28 January, there will be a debate on road safety for young drivers.

The Leader of the House has announced the debate on the performance of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. She will know that that debate was frozen out before Christmas, because the Government put on a succession of statements and there was insufficient time for it to take place. She has said that it now has an allocated day, but will she arrange for it to be given protected time so that that debate can take place in full?

We have a heavily subscribed request for a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day, which takes place on 27 January. Obviously, the Leader of the House has not announced the dates for debates during that period, but it would be helpful for all Members if she could indicate whether she will allow a debate either on the 27th or on one of the two relevant Thursdays. This will be the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and sadly many of the survivors will not live to see another significant memorial day, so I hope that she will be able to facilitate a debate.

Yesterday, our allies in the United Arab Emirates announced that 19 entities and individuals have been proscribed and put on their watchlist for terrorist links across the world. Sadly, eight of those entities exist in the UK, where they operate freely and are not proscribed. Could we have a statement from a Minister early next week on what action the Government will take following the actions of the United Arab Emirates, to ensure that these Islamist terrorist groups, which are linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, are proscribed in the UK and are not allowed to operate freely?

Lucy Powell: I will pick up on a couple of the Backbench Business issues. I put on record my thanks to the Chair of the Committee; it is great that he announces some of those debates.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency debate next week, which I am pleased we have found further time for, will come after a statutory instrument debate that will be limited to 90 minutes. As things stand, I am confident that the debate will get enough time. Should the situation change, I will of course look into ensuring that it has sufficient time on that date.

On a Holocaust Memorial Day debate, while I am unable to confirm the date of 27 January for the hon. Gentleman right now, I recognise the importance of the issue and how time sensitive it is, this year of all years. If he bears with me, I am sure we can continue to have that conversation outside the Chamber.

On the issue of the United Arab Emirates proscribing individuals, he knows that we are close allies and work very closely with that country. I will ensure that there is

a ministerial response on the matter and on the subsequent action that the Government are taking regarding those individuals.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): A very happy new year to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The listed places of worship grant scheme permits VAT to be refunded on repairs to some of our oldest church buildings, as well as other religious buildings. Since its introduction under the last Labour Government, the scheme has helped with the restoration of thousands of buildings across the country. It is vital that the scheme does not come to an end on 31 March, as it would make it near-impossible for many buildings and parishes to restore their spaces. Can we have a Government statement on the future of the listed places of worship grant scheme?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important matter, which I know is of wide interest in this House; it has been raised many times over the years that I have been a Member of Parliament. I understand the concern about the imminent deadline, so I will ensure that either she has a discussion with a Minister or a Minister comes to the House and explains the future of the policy to everybody.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This week, temperatures are plummeting across the country. In the west midlands, we are expecting it to reach minus 6° this evening. Will the right hon. Lady assure the House that all constituents who have been forced to apply for pension credit in the hope that they are eligible for the winter fuel payment will receive the payments in good time? They are faced with an awful decision about how to afford to heat their home.

Lucy Powell: I recognise the issue the right hon. Member raises. Of course, temperatures are very cold at the moment right across the country. She will know that, in addition to the support that is there for pensioners—the increased state pension this year; the record increase in applications for pension credit, which are being processed at pace; the £150 warm home discount; and the extra money being distributed by councils to many pensioners, which in some cases is £200 and above—people will be eligible for the cold weather payments over this cold period. She can be assured that pensioners who are eligible are getting the support they need in this cold weather.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The Government have said that by June, they intend to ratify the agreement on biodiversity beyond national jurisdictions, more commonly known as the global oceans treaty. They have also said quite correctly, and highly unusually, that before they do so, they intend to take steps to put in place the measures to implement the agreement. That will require primary legislation. Can the Leader of the House tell us when such legislation may be brought forward and what form it might take?

Lucy Powell: I am well aware of this issue and the legislative time that would be required. The Government are completely committed to ratifying the BBNJ agreement, and work is already under way to implement provisions in the agreement before we can ratify it. My hon. Friend will be aware that we have a heavy legislative agenda—one

of the most ambitious of any incoming Government. The legislation about the treaty will come forward in due course.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Young cancer patients are subject to a three-month qualifying period before they can even apply for disability living allowance or personal independence payments, on top of a 20-week delay for the processing of disability benefits. Children have often died before the benefits have been awarded, due to bureaucratic inertia by the Department for Work and Pensions. Hugh's law, proposed by Ceri and Frances Menai-Davis, would seek to remove the three-month qualifying period for DLA and calls for day 1 financial support. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on the merits of Hugh's law?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising the plight of young people who have cancer and face difficult challenges in their lives. He raised an important issue about the timely awarding of disability living allowance and other benefits, and described Hugh's law. I will ensure that he gets a full ministerial reply and, if that is not sufficient, I will ensure that we make some time for it.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Residents living in the Brockhill development in my constituency have been fighting developers for nearly two decades to have roads and land parcels adopted and for fit-for-purpose estate management. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time to discuss how we can hold developers to account on their promises during the planning process, so that residents do not have to spend 20 years fighting for what they have paid for?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise those issues, and that is why the Government are bringing forward a major piece of legislation, the planning and infrastructure Bill, which will make sure that developers play their role in ensuring that we have the local services and infrastructure that is needed to sit alongside the kind of developments he describes.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Leader of the House plan to set aside some Government time for us to discuss the enormous changes to local government announced in a statement just before Christmas? That forced a lot of councils to come up with plans at very short notice. There has been limited opportunity for any kind of democratic engagement from our constituents. It seems to me that we ought to spend some time in this Chamber debating the implications of potentially cancelling a series of local elections? Will she spare that time?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As was set out in that statement, our White Paper contains major reforms to deliver on the devolution agenda and put power back into communities, which we said we would do. There have been knock-on consequences, but I assure her that we will consider postponing elections only where doing so would help to deliver reorganisation and devolution in the most ambitious possible timeframe. She makes a good case for a general debate to discuss those issues more broadly, and I am sure that such a debate would be well attended.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): The year 2025 is a jubilee year, which is a motivation for many Christian organisations and others to campaign to cancel the debts of global south countries and tackle the root causes of the endless debt crisis. More than 3.3 billion people live in countries where more is spent on servicing debt than on health and education combined, so might we have a debate in Government time on debt relief for low-income and debt-distressed countries?

Lucy Powell: Jubilee 2025 is a great campaign. The hon. Gentleman may wish to raise those issues with the Foreign Secretary and his team at Foreign Office questions next week. The matter would make an excellent Backbench Business debate, and I know that the Backbench Business Committee has granted debates on it before. While I am at it, I encourage colleagues to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for debates.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In Fylde, it feels as if our green belt is under attack from all directions and not in a co-ordinated way. The Morgan and Morecambe wind farm cabling corridors and substations are coming in at St Anne's on the coast and cabling all the way through Fylde to Penwortham; solar farm applications are being made left, right and centre; and our housing target has just been doubled with pretty much nowhere to put housing other than on the green belt. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the demands placed on the green belt and our countryside by different Government Departments, which result not just in lost farmland and countryside, but in flooding, congestion and other dangers? If we are to preserve our countryside, the Government must tackle those issues in a co-ordinated way.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the green belt is, and remains, protected. The Government plan to unlock what we describe as "grey belt"—not particularly good-quality green belt—and we want a policy of "brownfield first" in planning decisions. He raises the issue of different aspects, including energy supply, infrastructure and transport, all coming together. Our planning and infrastructure Bill, which we will soon introduce to the House, will consider all those issues in the round, and I am sure that he will take part in those debates.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): On 31 December, we marked the 95th anniversary of the Glen cinema disaster—one of the UK's worst disasters—which took place in my constituency. Seventy-one children, the youngest of whom was only four, lost their life in a crowd crush caused by a smoking canister of nitrate film. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the legacy of those lost lives lies in the UK's fire and building safety regulations? Next time she sees a lit emergency exit sign, will she pause to remember the children of the Glen cinema?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that the whole House will take a moment, 95 years on, to remember all those who were killed in the Glen cinema tragedy, as my hon. Friend reminds us on behalf of her constituents. She will be aware that things have moved on, and in recent years we have learned the lessons and ensured that our public places are safe. Although Martyn's law, which is going

[Lucy Powell]

through the other place at the moment, is focused on terrorism, it will also support action against fire and other hazards in our public spaces.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Last week, my constituent Jordan Maclachlan from Ardnamurchan was killed while serving as a medic in Ukraine. Jordan volunteered to go to Ukraine at the start of the war, and his family have said that by serving on the frontline,

“Jordan always believed that he was making a difference”.

Will the Leader of the House join me, not just in sending our deepest condolences to Jordan’s heartbroken family and friends, but in saying that we in this House also believe that in his work as a Ukrainian army medic, Jordan did make a difference? Does she also agree that it is now incumbent on all of us who believe in democracy and the rule of law that we keep Jordan’s memory alive by ensuring that aggressors such as Putin will not win?

Lucy Powell: I also express our deepest condolences to Jordan’s family and friends. I know that consular officials are in touch and supporting his family. While I would not want to encourage people to go to Ukraine in that way, I absolutely share this Government’s commitment to ensuring that Ukraine wins in this war against Putin’s illegal aggression. We will do whatever it takes to support Ukrainians in that endeavour.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I have tabled an early-day motion calling for Disclosure and Barring Service checks for all Members of both Houses.

[That this House believes that all Parliamentarians should be subject to a Disclosure and Barring Service check when they take their place in the House of Commons or House of Lords.]

That would make us all feel safer in the corridors of power, but more importantly, would give the institutions we visit—such as care homes and schools—much greater confidence in who they are letting through their doors. My submission to the Modernisation Committee also makes that proposal. Would the Leader of the House support such a proposal?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and for writing to me and to the Modernisation Committee about it. I absolutely understand her motivation—to ensure that the House of Commons and, indeed, the wider Parliament is a safe place for people to work, and that our constituents and others can feel safe in their interactions with us. That is why over recent years, we have developed more robust systems around those issues, and we are looking further at them. However, I say gently to my hon. Friend that we need to strike a balance that ensures we can also represent our constituents freely and openly.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): This week, Scottish Labour announced that it will abstain to allow the SNP Government’s Budget to pass through the Scottish Parliament. This is now typical of Scottish Labour, sitting on the fence and not standing up to the SNP in Scotland. Does the Leader of the House agree that there should be a statement on the

UK Government’s priorities for Scotland, considering that her party promised change but is now endorsing the same old SNP tactics?

Lucy Powell: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation. Scottish Labour and the Labour party have done more than most to stand up to the failures of the Scottish Government, of which there are many. That is why we have returned a record number of Labour MPs in Scotland who won seats directly from the Scottish National party. The Scottish National party and the Government there now have a huge amount of extra money thanks to this Government’s Budget. They have the powers to get that money to the frontline, and we want to see the lives of people in Scotland improved, but we believe that that will be done better when people vote for Scottish Labour in the future.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that throughout the pandemic, the Conservative Government excluded nearly 4 million self-employed and other workers from financial support. Lives were lost and livelihoods ruined, and many of those workers remain struggling. Will my right hon. Friend please make time for a debate, so that we can yet again look to right the wrongs of the previous Government?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a very good point about those who were excluded and those who were left in great difficulty as a result of the pandemic, which was a huge shock to the economy at the time. Treasury questions are coming up in a couple of weeks; my hon. Friend might want to raise that issue then.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) mentioned the subject of devolution. In Gloucestershire, we stand on the cusp of a democratic outrage: the county council leadership has suggested that districts are backing it in cancelling this year’s elections, and backing a single unitary authority for the whole of Gloucestershire. Having spoken to other districts, that is not the case, and I know that Labour Members from Gloucestershire share my concerns. I add my weight to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire’s call: that, if county councils persist in this kind of democratic outrage, we must have time to debate that in this House. I hope the Leader of the House agrees.

Lucy Powell: I hear what the hon. Member says. To reiterate what I said earlier, the Minister for Local Government has set out some very clear criteria that must be met in relation to any requests for postponing elections, and one of the things he will be looking for is support across the area for that decision. However, I will certainly listen to requests for a broader debate on this issue.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): A few years ago, my cousin John took his own life. It is something that, as a family, I can say here and now, we will never ever get over. There are Johns out there today—many Johns—contemplating their future; January is a particularly tough month for many people. Will the Leader of the House join me in raising awareness about mental health so that people know it is actually a strength of character to speak up and speak out and

talk about their feelings? Will she also recognise the amazing organisations out there that welcome people through their doors every day to a safe space and environment, such as the Jackson Hope Foundation in my constituency of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I am really sorry to hear of the death of my hon. Friend's cousin John from mental health issues. He is absolutely right to raise this, especially at this time of year when we have dark nights and cold weather. It is after Christmas, and many people do not feel as optimistic at the start of the new year as the rest of us. He is absolutely right that speaking up, sharing and being open about these things is one of the best ways in which we can tackle the blight of mental health.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): A constituent of mine, Maria Culley, has long been campaigning for a comprehensive regulatory framework for nannies, such as mandatory background checks, standardised training, ongoing professional development and the inclusion of other standards, all to ensure that every nanny in the UK is held to a high standard, while protecting families with the security of knowing that their children are safe and in capable hands. I have been asking for a meeting with the children and families Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby)—for some time. Could the Leader of the House push that meeting along, so that I and my constituent Maria can meet the Minister to discuss this campaign?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raises a really important issue about ensuring that all those looking after our children are operating to the highest standards, and doing so safely and with strong levels of accountability. I would gently say to him that that is often not the message that comes from those on his Front Bench about these issues, and we are often asked to do the opposite when it comes to the early years sector. Our Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which passed its Second Reading yesterday, will look at some of these issues, and I will certainly ask for a Minister to give him a full response about the nanny sector.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): This week, we have spent a lot of time talking about Elon Musk and his concern about violence against, and the sexual abuse of, women. I am aware of an ongoing case in which a woman continues to be stalked by a man who has already been convicted of stalking her, and who has set up an X account in her name and is posting pornography. However, Elon Musk's company refuses to provide the IP account address needed to increase the level of sanction against the man. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate to discuss what Mr Musk and his company can do to ensure that those guilty of harming women are properly prosecuted?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a very concerning case, and it is not an isolated one. That is why this Government are taking real steps against stalking, with our stalking prevention orders being strengthened. She will know that we have a debate this afternoon on ending violence against women and girls. She raises a particular issue about the responsibility of social media companies. Unfortunately, the previous Government did not include some of those in the Online Safety

Act 2023, as they watered it down at the last minute. However, I will ensure that she gets a proper reply from a Minister about what powers the Government and the police have to take action in this case, and we will look at what needs to be strengthened further.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I need you all to work with me. If your questions are fast and the answers are just as fast, I will be able to get everyone in, otherwise not everyone will be able to get in.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Two days before Christmas, the Government pulled the plug on the community ownership fund. This is a devastating blow to organisations, charities and community groups across the country, such as Much Marcle community shop, Pencombe parish council, which wanted to buy the local pub, and the local disability charity ECHO for Extra Choices in Herefordshire. They are all in my constituency, and all have fantastic projects that now have no prospect of Government funding. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to come to the House to answer questions from Members about why the Government pulled the rug out from under projects such as those, and how they will support community projects to serve their communities?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue, which I know is of concern to other Members across the House. She is right that we have taken the very difficult decision, due to the challenging economic situation and the inheritance we were left by the previous Government, to end this particular fund. However, we do remain committed to the community sector and community empowerment, and we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to replace the community right to bid with a strengthened right to buy assets of community value. I will ensure that further updates are given to the House in due course.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Deeplich community centre in Rochdale has just celebrated 35 years of providing pre-school clubs, holiday playgroups and elderly lunch clubs, as well as jobs and training for people in the heart of Rochdale. The key thing is that it proudly retains its Sure Start status, as it did under the last Labour Government, and it is the family hub that helped rebuild the nearby Deeplich primary school, which I had the pleasure of welcoming to Westminster last year. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sohail Ahmad and all those who have built this fantastic community device over the last few years?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved with the Deeplich community centre in his constituency on celebrating its 35th birthday. He is a fellow Greater Manchester MP, and we are both well aware of the really good work that the Mayor, Andy Burnham, has been doing there to ensure we have early years provision. We have maintained the Sure Start model to some degree to ensure that everybody gets the very best start in life.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House will be celebrating with the people of the Falkland Islands tomorrow as they gather for a

[Andrew Rosindell]

public holiday to commemorate Margaret Thatcher Day. She was the Prime Minister who went there 42 years ago tomorrow, 10 January, following the liberation of the islands. Self-determination was of course what she fought for for the Falkland Islanders. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Government make an urgent statement confirming the same principle of self-determination for all British citizens of all British territories, including the British Indian Ocean Territory and the right of self-determination for the Chagos Islanders?

Lucy Powell: I perhaps will not celebrate Margaret Thatcher Day in quite the way the hon. Member wants me to, but on behalf of the Government I absolutely make clear our commitment to the Falkland Islands. I remember very well the passionate defence that the Prime Minister made of that at this Dispatch Box in recent weeks, and of his family's involvement in the Falklands war. He raises the Chagos issue, and he will be aware that his own Government began those negotiations. I think there were 11 rounds of negotiations about the future of the air base there under his Government's watch, so it is very much something we inherited and that was in train at the time.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): The Museum of Scottish Railways in my constituency, at the site of the Bo'ness and Kinneil railway and operated by the Scottish Railway Preservation Society, is Scotland's largest railway museum. It is playing a key part in the celebrations marking 200 years of modern railways, in recognition of its importance in preserving heritage and attracting over 60,000 visitors every year. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on supporting and celebrating heritage railways?

Lucy Powell: Heritage railways such as Bo'ness and Kinneil often get mentioned in these sessions, and I join my hon. Friend in thanking them for the brilliant work they do and thanking the volunteers they rely on for makings sure that heritage railways, which are so valued, continue to flourish.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Small retailers, restaurants and pubs add huge vibrancy, colour and character to the Great British high street, but the Budget posed an existential crisis to many of them, with the increases to national insurance and the slashing of small business rates relief. Will the right hon. Lady grant a debate on how we can better protect the future of the Great British high street and the many jobs it provides?

Lucy Powell: As the Member of Parliament with the highest number of pubs in their constituency, I strongly echo the hon. Member's support for the hospitality sector and the vital role it plays in keeping our high streets, town centres and city centres vibrant, with all the employment, joy and everything else that they bring. It has been a tough few years for the hospitality sector—we all recognise that. We had to take some difficult decisions in the Budget to make sure that our health service and education service would not face cuts. In the long run, our hospitality sector will benefit from all the investment we are putting in to make sure it has a healthy and highly skilled workforce.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Just before Christmas, I was fortunate to attend the latest passing-out parade for graduates of the Firebreak scheme at Stanground fire station in my constituency of North West Cambridgeshire. That intensive five-day intervention programme provides a positive alternative learning environment and is aimed at young people aged 10 to 18 who are struggling with the mainstream education environment. Participants leave with certificates in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, basic lifesaving and all sorts. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Paul Clarke, the children and young people lead, and the community fire safety group at Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service? Will she consider a debate on how supporting such interventions can help young people get back on the right track by re-engaging with and thriving in their education?

Lucy Powell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the community fire safety group at Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service. The alternative provision that he highlights is crucial in helping children who might otherwise be taken out of school, or perhaps have nowhere else to go, to get the support they need so that they can flourish in life.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I share the concerns of the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) about the closure of the community ownership fund. East Neuk community in my constituency made a 50-page application, with the support of the Development Trusts Association Scotland, but was told to wait until after the Budget. I heard the Leader of the House's response to the hon. Member, but may we have a debate in Government time so that community assets in Scotland and other parts of the UK do not suffer?

Lucy Powell: I hear that more than one Member—I know there have been others this week—is interested in the future of the community ownership fund. As I said to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns), this Government are committed to the principle of community ownership and to making it easier for communities to take ownership of assets. I hear their calls. There are oral questions to the Department coming up next week. If the answers are not satisfactorily resolved, I will certainly look at a debate.

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Many of my constituents are rightly concerned about animal welfare. I join them in wanting to see more action in that area, whether that is an end to trail hunting, the phasing out of animal testing or abolishing the use of snare traps. I welcome the Government's pledge to introduce a range of measures in support of animal welfare. Will the Leader of the House give us some indication of the likely timescales for reform?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising these issues. She will be aware that in our manifesto, we made a number of commitments to animal welfare issues, of which some will require legislation and some will not. We have a packed legislative programme for this Session, but we are committed to bringing forward legislation in this space where necessary to improve animal welfare standards in this country.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Tara and Keith in my constituency have written to me about the appalling one-hour delays on First Bus's 22 bus service. Lessons are being missed and a gentleman in my constituency missed a serious operation because of the appalling service. Will the Leader of the House arrange time to debate public transport in Somerset, including the need to reopen Wellington station on the same route as the 22 bus service?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the delays that Tara and Keith have suffered from poor bus services in the hon. Member's constituency. Obviously in Greater Manchester we have suddenly got great buses, but apart from us, I think that people can recognise the situation he describes, especially in our rural communities. That is why we have brought forward the bus service reform Bill, which is currently in the House of Lords, and it is why we are putting extra investment into buses—so that local communities such as his, can have a reliable and affordable bus service.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): The number of survivors of historical abuse at Medomsley detention centre is decreasing. Victims are seeking justice for the serious and widespread abuse that took place between 1961 and 1987. Will the Leader of the House help me secure a meeting with the Home Secretary to discuss how the survivors, as well as the families of those who are no longer with us, can finally achieve full justice?

Lucy Powell: I will help my hon. Friend to secure a meeting with either the Home Secretary or the relevant Minister to discuss this historical abuse case.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Some 160,000 people live in residential park homes in England. However, when they come to sell their property, they are required to pay 10% of the sale price to the site owner. Although local authorities are responsible for the site licence, they often do not have the specific knowledge necessary, made worse by the fact that they do not have to have a named park home officer. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate how we can give park home owners more rights over their properties and fix some of these issues?

Lucy Powell: This is not something I am aware of; I have not come across a park home in my constituency, but the hon. Member raises an important point. It would make an extremely good application for an Adjournment debate, but in the meantime, I will ensure he gets a full ministerial response about park homes.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Over the Christmas recess, I was lucky enough to visit South East Harlow Sports and Youth Association, a fantastic grassroots organisation that supports young people in my community to get access to sport and thrive. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can support such grassroots youth organisations to ensure they survive and thrive and support young people in our communities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating South East Harlow Sports and Youth Association for the great work it does. He is right to raise the vital role of grassroots sport facilities. That is why this Government

have set aside budgets for them to continue and flourish. He might want to raise this issue with the Secretary of State in questions next week.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder services in Oxfordshire are in crisis. There are no adult specialised commissioned services available and waiting lists have been closed. Those lucky enough to have a diagnosis and treatment cannot get medication, because of shortages. In one case, a constituent was unable to continue their care, having turned 18 and been kicked out of paediatric services. Will the Leader of the House make time to discuss ADHD services nationwide in this House?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising ADHD services and the broader issue of special educational needs and disabilities provision in this country, which is raised regularly in this session and in many other ways on the Floor of the House. He will know that we are not getting the outcomes we need, and families and children are not getting the support they need in this area, even though costs go up and up. We set aside £1 billion extra in the Budget to support special educational needs, but he is right that we need to look at these services and ensure that they are fit for purpose and that we are providing support and getting the outcomes we need.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Last month, I worked with Aylesbury town council to convene some of the businesses that are so central to our community. They raised concerns about antisocial behaviour, and the data backs up those concerns: in the past year, more than 750 incidents were recorded in the constituency. Does the Leader of the House agree that we must not only tackle this challenge in our town centres but promote positive, respectful behaviour? Will she make space for a debate on this issue?

Lucy Powell: Antisocial behaviour chips away at communities' sense of confidence and pride, and makes people feel at risk in their own communities. Our new respect orders will begin to tackle this issue, and the crime and policing Bill, through which we can discuss this issue further, will be introduced to the House very shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I again thank the Leader of the House for all her answers. In Bangladesh in 2024, over 400 attacks were carried out in places belonging to Hindus and other religious minorities, including some 25 temples. These attacks have had an impact on some 20,000 people across 47 districts, and resulted in the death of at least 60 Hindus. There were reports of rape and mob lynchings, including the very brutal killing of an 18-year-old in the presence of police and military personnel. Furthermore, Chinmoy Krishna Das, a Hindu clergyman, was arbitrarily arrested for raising issues about the treatment of religious minorities and their leaders in Bangladesh. Will the Leader of the House urge the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to raise these alarming violations of freedom of religion or belief with the Bangladeshi Government?

Lucy Powell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises an important matter. We have been very clear in our discussions with the interim Government in Bangladesh about the importance of political consensus and stability, and the need for national reconciliation in the country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have 20 Members left, all on the Government Benches. If you work together, you will all get in. It is up to you.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's announcement that Yorkshire and the Humber is getting £123 million to repair potholes. Since the announcement, many of my constituents in Leeds South West and Morley have been in touch about key roads in the constituency—Cross Peel Street, the Tingley roundabout and Asquith Avenue. I have mentioned this three times in the House already. Will the Leader of the House grant an urgent debate on the need to help these local authorities spend this money quickly, so that all our residents feel the benefit?

Lucy Powell: That avenue in my hon. Friend's constituency is becoming famous in Parliament. He is right that fixing potholes is a priority for this Government. That is why we have announced record levels of investment. The equivalent of an extra 7 million potholes could be filled just this year, if councils spend that money quickly and well.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): One year and one day ago, the Prime Minister visited my constituency to see the flood damage. Over the past weeks, properties in my constituency have once again been ruined by flooding. When the Prime Minister came a year ago, he met Jacob. Jacob spent the last year fixing up his house. It was finished last month, and now it is ruined again. Can the Leader of the House assure me that this Government will do everything they can to protect my community, including with some of the £2.4 billion of flood defence money?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear that Jacob has yet again been affected by flooding. As my hon. Friend will be aware, flooding incidents are becoming more extreme and occurring more often. The flood defences that we inherited were pretty shocking, but we are turning that around. We have the flood resilience taskforce and extra money going in, but I will ensure that this House is kept updated about our plans on flooding, as it has been this week.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Rugby union is the national sport of Cornwall and is integral to many of our local communities. Having spoken to several rugby clubs across and associated with Cornwall over recent months, including Camborne rugby club, and Redruth rugby club, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary, I know that there is deep and widespread unease at the current governance of English rugby. Several grassroots community rugby clubs are reportedly on the financial brink. This issue is not restricted to Cornwall—clubs all over the country report the same issues. Will the Leader of the House grant Government time to debate this important issue?

Lucy Powell: As ever, my hon. Friend raises important issues for his constituents in Cornwall. I am sorry to hear of what is happening with rugby in his constituency. He might want to raise that next week at Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions, but if he does not get a good reply, I will make sure that the Minister gets back to him.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): A recent London Councils report highlighted major issues in the capital with special educational needs provision, workforce capacity and inclusion. In the light of that, I welcome the new Government's significant financial commitment to SEND. However, this year, Conservative Hillingdon council is proposing a £7 million cut to schools in my constituency, due to its own failure to manage the local SEND system. That will devastate SEND inclusion in local mainstream schools. Can we have a debate in the House to discuss SEND provision, and will my right hon. Friend relay my concerns to the Department concerned?

Lucy Powell: I will relay my hon. Friend's concerns about what Hillingdon council is proposing for special educational needs and support for schools. This Government have allocated an extra £1 billion for special educational needs. We have also allocated significant extra money for local councils. There really is no excuse for Hillingdon council to behave in this way.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Earlier this school year, the Friary school, a secondary school in my constituency, held a school-wide referendum, which included parents and the wider community, on lowering the voting age to 16. I am proud to say that this will be the topic for the Litchfield schools speaking competition, thanks to the sponsorship of Arthur Price and the Rotary Club of St Chad. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the organiser of that referendum, head girl Emma Mackenzie, and agree that it is high time that we followed Emma's lead and had a debate on the topic in this place?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate Emma, and all those involved at the school, on highlighting these issues. As my hon. Friend is aware, votes at 16 is a Government manifesto commitment. We will bring forward legislation to make that a reality when parliamentary time allows—likely in a future Session. I am sure that he will want to report that back to his school.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): With the recent poor weather, too many of my constituents have had sleepless nights watching river gauges, fearing a repeat of last year's flooding. Could the Leader of the House assure me that we are doing everything we can to combat flooding, and update me on our progress?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue. Flooding is affecting many more constituencies and communities, and is doing so more often, as we see the effects of climate change on this country. We have a Government-wide approach to tackling climate change, but also we are taking steps to make sure that our communities have flood resilience and flood support. I will ensure that the House is kept up to date on developments.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Wherever I go in my constituency, local residents raise with me the poor standard of the local bus service. One resident in Livingston Village told me that the elderly and people with children are forced to walk a long way, or pay for a taxi, to get to hospital appointments. Adamrae has lost its bus, and in Addiewell, Stoneyburn and Longridge, my constituents

have to take multiple buses to get to the hospital. Unfortunately, this is not unique to my constituency, as statistics show that local bus services in Scotland have collapsed by 44% since the SNP took charge. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the importance of local bus services to our constituents? Perhaps the SNP Government in Scotland can learn something from the UK Government about protecting our bus services.

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in saying how important local bus services are. That is why this Government are taking steps to ensure better bus services here in England. The Scottish Government will receive almost £48 billion in the next financial year. They really should use that to support local services such as buses in his constituency.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Government's commitment to crack down on waste incinerators. In my constituency, I have campaigned for 16 years against the Sinfin waste treatment centre, which failed initial testing in 2017 and has never been put into operational use. But the project continues, and over £150 million has been wasted. It is clear that this incinerator needs to be stopped. Where there are legitimate local, environmental and financial concerns, as there are in Sinfin, we need to take the tough decisions. Will my right hon. Friend allow time for a debate on the management of incinerator projects?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I think it is his first business question, and I welcome him. This Government will back only those new waste incinerator projects that meet strict new conditions. This issue is raised with me a lot, so I encourage him to work with Members from across the House—many other Members have raised the issue—and get a Backbench Business debate on waste incinerators.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): We are seeing an alarming increase in heavily pregnant women and families with complex medical needs being shipped in, sometimes in the middle of the night, to our asylum hotel. Our area was abandoned by the previous Government, and we have one of the worst hospitals in the country, yet the previous Government put an asylum hotel in one of our most deprived wards. Can we have a debate in Government time about the support we can give to our NHS workers who are working through this appalling legacy?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the situation in my hon. Friend's constituency. He will know that we inherited an asylum system that broke under exceptional strain. We are committed to ending the use of asylum hotels, but that will take time while we tackle the small boats, which we are doing; we have also put record levels of funding into the national health service. However, he is absolutely right to raise this issue. If we do not get on top of the illegal and net migration figures, which are incredibly high, this will continue to put pressure on our national health service.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Prostate cancer costs the NHS around £93 million a year, but more than a third of those costs are avoidable through early diagnosis. Prostate cancer remains the only major

cancer in the UK without a national screening programme. I understand that requesting screening can be a real obstacle to some men, so I give heartfelt thanks to my constituent Steve, who is fighting prostate cancer, and who opened up to me about the importance of helping men to get a diagnosis early. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on the targeted screening programme that is urgently needed to address the gap and improve outcomes for vulnerable groups?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. What an important issue my hon. Friend raises. As she may be aware, the UK national screening committee is undertaking an evidence-led review into prostate cancer screening, which is due to be completed soon. I will ensure that she and the House are updated as soon as that happens.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Parents in my constituency are deeply worried about the prevalence of ketamine in our communities, and staff at my local hospital tell me that an increasing number of young people are presenting with serious harm caused by the drug, including life-lasting bladder damage. Use of ketamine by young people in the UK is estimated to have tripled since 2016, so I was pleased this week to read that the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention has sought advice on upgrading ketamine from a category C to a category B drug. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning criminals who peddle drugs such as ketamine to children, and grant a debate on the important issue of tackling drug use in young people?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Many of us are seeing the dangerous impact of the rise in ketamine use across our constituency and in young people. My hon. Friend mentioned the actions that Ministers have taken; we will do whatever it takes to clamp down on the growth in ketamine use.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Criss Connor, who sadly died over the Christmas break? Criss was a long-standing member of Labour, a former borough and county councillor and an honorary alderman of Basingstoke. Criss will be remembered for not only his service to our community, but his kindness, passion and steadfast belief in fairness and justice. My thoughts are with his wife, Angela, his family and friends, and all who knew him. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate to enable hon. Members across this House to pay tribute to dedicated public servants such as Criss?

Lucy Powell: What a beautiful tribute to Criss and all the work he did. I am sure that Criss's family and friends will have listened to my hon. Friend's words with great comfort. Councillors up and down this country do an enormously valuable job for our country and our communities, and I am sure a debate on such a subject would be very well attended.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the young women across the country who took part in the CyberFirst girls competition, and especially the winners in the Scotland section, Charlotte, Jess, Sania and Aoife of Hyndland secondary school in my constituency? Does she

[Patricia Ferguson]

agree that it is increasingly important that girls are encouraged to pursue an interest and, perhaps, a career in cyber security?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. What a fantastic achievement for Hyndland secondary school. I join my hon. Friend in saying that young girls should get into computing and cyber-security. Let us not forget that Ada Lovelace wrote the world's first computer program.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I have a large Sikh population in my constituency and have received many letters from constituents expressing concerns over transnational repression and political interference by the Indian Government, creating risks to safety and security for Sikhs not only travelling to India, but in this country. They have referred to the mysterious, sudden death of Avtar Singh Khanda in Birmingham in June 2023, days before the assassination of the Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada. Will the Leader of the House ensure that UK Ministers make representations to their Indian counterparts on the need to respect and comply with the rule of law and the UK's sovereignty, for the safety and security of Sikhs in this country?

Lucy Powell: I know that my hon. Friend's question will be welcomed by the Sikh community across the UK. He raises very important issues relating to transnational aggression, and I will certainly ensure that Ministers have heard what he has said and that the House is updated in due course.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Around 153,000 people in the UK are living with Parkinson's, including many of my constituents who have told me about the difficulties they face in accessing treatment. I welcome the plan set out by the Health Secretary on health reforms and investment, but may we have a specific debate on the challenges faced by those with Parkinson's in the UK?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in saying that we want a society where every person with a disease such as Parkinson's receives the high-quality care that they need and that they can afford. That is why we are taking steps to reform and invest in our social care sector. It will take some time and will not be easy to do, but I will ensure that this House is updated at every stage.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I recently met two special educational needs teachers in my constituency who are two of the thousands of teachers across Scotland who are owed millions of pounds in overpaid taxes. Unfortunately, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the 16 local authorities affected are at gridlock. Will the Leader of the House consider granting time for a debate so that we can help to overcome this intolerable situation for our valuable public sector workers?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. This is the right place for my hon. Friend to raise such an issue with me. I will ensure that Ministers look into the matter for her and get back to her with a full response.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): With the new year comes the new year's honours list. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating my friend and constituent Barry Hyde on being awarded the British empire medal for his exceptional voluntary contribution to our community in Rossendale and Darwen? Barry, and thousands of volunteers like him, are at the heart of our community. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a general debate on the value of the voluntary sector to our society?

Lucy Powell: I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Barry Hyde on all his work. We hear time and again in business questions about the crucial role that our community volunteers play in making our constituencies great places to live and work.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating my constituent Audrey Mutongi-Darko, founder of the No. 1 Befriending Agency? It was announced in the new year's honours list that she is to receive the British empire medal for services to tackling loneliness and isolation in older people in Scotland. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate to discuss how this Government can do more to help vulnerable older people and to tackle loneliness and social isolation?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Audrey on her great achievement. Yet again we are hearing of the amazing work that our constituents do day in, day out to support others and to ensure that they can access the care and support they need. I will certainly consider a debate on the issue.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): A number of my constituents have grave concerns about homes being repurposed into houses in multiple occupation without any requirement for planning permission. Currently, planning permission is not needed for homes in Bolton with six or fewer bedrooms, yet I know of three houses in Horwich that are being redeveloped into six-bedroom homes without any oversight, with concerns raised about parking and antisocial behaviour. Will the Leader of the House therefore make Government time available for a debate on this important issue, to ensure that there is a level playing field across the country on planning requirements for HMOs?

Lucy Powell: We can all recognise the real issues that occur when unregulated HMOs take hold in communities and the challenges they bring to community cohesion and in poor housing standards. I just announced that the Renters' Rights Bill will be back in the Chamber next week, and that will be a great opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise those issues.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that I am frequently contacted by constituents from some of the most rural parts of my constituency urging the Government to move swiftly with the manifesto commitment to extend the ban on trail hunting, which is a blight on rural communities and encourages antisocial behaviour. May I echo that in the strongest possible terms and urge the Government to move on with that landmark legislation?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues. He will be aware that we have the most ambitious plans in a generation to improve animal welfare, and I have absolutely heard his call to look at that when parliamentary time allows.

Point of Order

12.51 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition said:

“The Labour party has adopted the APPG definition of ‘Islamophobia’. The same APPG report said that talking about sex groomers was an example of Islamophobia.”—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2025; Vol. 759, c. 839.]

That is an inaccurate description of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims’ definition of Islamophobia. Its definition cites the example of using the symbols and images associated with classic Islamophobia to characterise Muslims as sex groomers. Can the Leader of the Opposition return to the Chamber to correct the record and confirm whether she agrees that characterising Muslims as sex groomers is indeed an example of Islamophobia?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. As he will know, the Chair is not responsible for the Leader of the Opposition’s comments in the Chamber, but he has succeeded in putting his point on the record, and no doubt that statement has been heard.

Violence against Women and Girls

12.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling violence against women and girls.

As things stand today, the scale of violence against women in this country is intolerable and a national emergency, so I welcome the opportunity for the House to unite and debate it. Tackling violence against women and girls in all its forms is a top priority for the Government and central to our wider mission to make the country's streets safer.

Let me be clear from the start that I condemn the threats against the Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), in the strongest possible terms. They are abhorrent and demonstrate all too clearly how some men view women's place in the world. I know that so many right hon. and hon. Members have experienced that kind of hateful misogyny online—threats and abuse levelled at us just for doing our job—but we will continue to speak out; we will not be silenced. I am sure that the House will join me in offering my friend every support. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

The Government were elected on a landmark pledge to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade, rightly putting the issue at the forefront of the political agenda after years of neglect, and where women have been let down by the system. It is an ambitious target, but it is absolutely right that we are ambitious when it comes to the safety of women and girls.

In this country, it is estimated that a woman is killed by a man every three days, on average, yet that rarely makes the headlines. Their deaths have become normalised and I think we, as a society, have become desensitised. That is nothing short of a national scandal. Every woman lost is a daughter, a mother and a friend with her life brutally cut short. They are not statistics to me, and nor are they to the Government; their lives matter and we are determined to act. We will use every tool at our disposal to target perpetrators, protect victims and address the causes of this appalling abuse and violence. We will go further than ever before to transform how we work together across Government, public services, the private sector and charities, and our efforts will be underpinned by a new strategy to combat violence against women and girls that we will publish later this year.

As a first principle, prevention will always be better than cure, so if we are to tackle these crimes we must start by tackling their root causes. Education will be fundamental to our approach. We need a culture shift where abusive, harassing and discriminatory behaviour is called out for exactly what it is, where women are at last respected and championed and where every woman can be safe wherever they are, whether at work, at school, online, in the street or in their own homes.

Women make up over 50% of society, but the mission shared by those of us in the Chamber cannot be achieved by halves or by women speaking only to women; everyone needs to play their part. Men must be part of the conversation and part of the solution, and I am clear that there are many great male role models out there—many of them in this Chamber. We need to understand why

boys and young men are being drawn down the rabbit hole of toxic masculinity that so often fuels these crimes. Critically, how can we step in, support them and steer them away from that?

No one agency can solve this alone. It will mean working across the House and across society with schools, parents, police and the judiciary—everyone—if we are to make a difference for the next generation of women. That is the approach the Government will take.

Secondly, we must ensure that our legal system is able to respond effectively to these crimes so that women are protected and perpetrators are swiftly brought to justice.

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I understand that there may be some difficulties with the criminal law in relation to people being followed. In the event that they have been actively harassed and threatened, there is a potential crime in the threat, but there may be a gap in the criminal law for those who are simply followed, with that not being part of a continuing course of conduct. Will the Minister commit to looking into that, please?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We will happily look at that. We have already done some incredible work on stalking and harassment, but we will look to go further wherever possible.

Let us look at the offence of rape. As it stands, about 60% of adult rape complainants, despite bravely coming forward, eventually withdraw from the criminal justice process. That means too many offenders are getting away with their crimes and too many victims are being left without the justice they deserve. Often that is because the agony of a long wait for justice is much more than they can bear. It is a sad fact that some victims, and particularly those of sexual offences, are waiting almost three years for their case to come to trial. Some decide not to pursue their cases at all, feeling, quite understandably, that they need to focus on their own mental health and move on with their lives.

I once spoke to a victim who told me that she had been raped and her case had taken years to come to trial. She told me something that I will never forget: that the experience had made her want to die. That anyone should feel that way about our justice system is unconscionable. The Government are determined to do better. Justice must be swifter. We will work with the judiciary to fast-track rape cases through the courts so that victims like her are not left in limbo.

There is no escaping the Government's bleak inheritance of a criminal court system under the most intense pressure. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Crown court, where the outstanding caseload stands at over 73,000—a record high. We have taken decisive action to drive the caseload down, funding an extra 2,000 sitting days, which will see courts sit for a total of 108,500 days this financial year—the highest level in almost a decade. We are also extending magistrates court sentencing powers from six months to 12 months for a single triable either-way offence, which we expect will free up about 2,000 sitting days and allow judges to deal with the most serious cases.

But if victims are to see justice done more swiftly, we cannot simply do more of the same; we have to go further. It will take once-in-a-generation reform. That is why the Lord Chancellor has commissioned Sir Brian Leveson, one of the country's top legal minds, to carry out an independent review of the criminal courts. Sir Brian

will consider the merits of longer-term reform during the first phase of the review. That could include consideration of an entirely new type of court entirely, intermediate courts, in which cases too serious to be heard by a magistrate alone could be heard by a judge flanked by magistrates. The second phase of the review will consider how our courts can operate more efficiently, and the timeliness of processes. Sir Brian will report his findings later this year, and I am sure that Members will await them with interest.

As a third principle, we must ensure that the criminal law is equipped to deal with the evolving range of threats that women face today. I am sure the House agrees that sexually explicit deepfake images are particularly appalling, and shares my concern about the fact that this kind of abuse is on the rise. Artificial intelligence technology now means that perpetrators can, at the click of a button, turn innocent images from a person's social media account into pornographic material—images that can then be shared with millions online, in milliseconds. It is not funny. It is not banter. It is a gross violation of a woman's privacy and autonomy which causes untold harm, and it is disturbing to hear that a third of women report falling victim to intimate image abuse. It cannot continue unchecked.

Our laws must protect victims and punish those responsible. That is why the Government made a clear manifesto commitment to ban the creation of these vile images, and it is why we are committed to tackling the creation of sexually explicit deepfakes by introducing a new criminal offence in the policing and crime Bill.

However, we are going further. While it is already a criminal offence to share, or threaten to share, an intimate image without consent, it is, quite bizarrely, an offence to take an image without consent only in certain circumstances. So-called up-skirting is an offence, while taking photos down someone's blouse or setting up cameras in a changing room is not. As I am sure the House will agree, that makes little sense, so as I explained earlier this week, the Government will introduce new offences for the taking of intimate images without consent and the installation of equipment with intent to enable the taking of an intimate image without consent. We are sending the clear message that this appalling, misogynistic behaviour will not be tolerated and that predators who violate women's trust in this way will face the consequences, which could mean up to two years in custody, depending on the perpetrator's intent.

As women, Madam Deputy Speaker, we should not have to watch our friends' drinks while they go to the bathroom. We should not have to worry about being spiked by a needle, or a vape. The Government will therefore introduce a new criminal offence covering spiking, and will work hand in hand with police and business leaders to crack down on this behaviour so that women can enjoy a night out without fear and victims are empowered to come forward, knowing that they will be taken seriously.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the Government's announcement just before Christmas that spiking will become a specific offence. Will the Minister join me in commending the campaigning work of my constituent Dawn Dines and the organisation Stamp Out Spiking, and will she commit herself to working with Stamp Out Spiking and other organisations to ensure that the new law and other issues related to spiking are embedded in the knowledge of, in particular, police forces around the country?

Alex Davies-Jones: I will take every opportunity to commend Dawn Dines and the work of Stamp Out Spiking. Both the Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), and I have met Dawn Dines many times. We will, of course, be working with every single agency to ensure that we crack down on this abhorrent crime.

In November, we announced pilots of domestic abuse protection notices and domestic abuse protection orders with Greater Manchester police, in three London boroughs and with the British Transport police; North Wales police and Cleveland police will come on board early this year. Domestic abuse protection orders will impose tough restrictions on abusers and keep victims safe, making it a legal requirement for perpetrators to inform the police of any change of name or address, with the option to impose electronic tagging to keep tabs on offenders. They will also enable assessments for behaviour change programmes to be ordered to prevent the cycle of abuse from being repeated. We need to stop this behaviour.

Fourthly, we must ensure that victims are given the right support, wherever they are in the justice process. We need them to be empowered to come forward in the first place, whether to make a report or just to obtain the help that they need to rebuild their lives. Every woman should know that she is seen, heard and taken seriously—that is the kind of justice system to which we should aspire—but sadly that is not always the case, especially for those who have endured rape or other sexual offences. We are determined to improve women's confidence in the justice system by ensuring that it focuses on perpetrators rather than pointing the finger of blame at victims. No one who has been burgled has been told, "Maybe you gave the wrong signals, and he thought you wanted to be burgled." No one who has had their wallet stolen has been asked, "What were you wearing at the time?" For far too long, the way in which survivors of rape and sexual offences have been treated has been unacceptable, and this Government are determined to stamp out those harmful, misogynistic stereotypes. They are a threat to justice, and a threat to women in all aspects of our society.

My colleague the Lord Chancellor has announced the introduction of independent legal advisers who will offer free legal advice to victims of adult rape at any point from report to trial, helping them to understand their rights in relation to, for example, the use of personal information, such as counselling details or medical records, to which access can be gained during an investigation. As will have been said in the House before, such demands have sometimes gone too far, causing unnecessary upset to victims, compounding their trauma and, on occasion, resulting in their dropping out of a case altogether. Requests of that kind should be made only when they are relevant, necessary and proportionate to the case. The advisers will not undermine the right to a fair trial or prevent evidence from coming to light; they will simply help victims to understand and, if necessary, take steps to protect the rights that they already have.

More broadly, the Government will ensure that all victims know their rights and that those rights are upheld, and that they are supported as they go through the justice process, not retraumatised when their day in court finally arrives. The victims code helps victims to understand what they can expect from the criminal justice system, and sets out the minimum level of service

[Alex Davies-Jones]

that they should receive. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 has the potential to improve awareness of and compliance with the victims code by ensuring that the victims know about their rights under the code, and it sets out a new compliance framework to ensure that agencies will be held accountable for delivering those rights. The Act also places a duty on local commissioners in England to collaborate in the commissioning of support services for victims of domestic abuse, sexual abuse and serious violence. We will soon consult on a revised victims code and the duty to collaborate guidance, and we will ensure that the right data and systems are in place to monitor compliance with the new code. The Government have also pledged to increase the powers of the Victims' Commissioner so that there is more accountability when victims' needs are not being met.

Let me emphasise that while women may suffer these horrific crimes more often, I am well aware that many men are affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence. They too deserve every protection and support, and these measures will of course apply equally to them. Let me also take a moment to thank victim support organisations. I am sure the House will agree that they are vital to the justice process: without them, many victims would struggle to see their cases through, which means that many more perpetrators would get away with their crimes.

As I have said, this Government inherited a criminal justice system under immense pressure, and a black hole in the nation's finances. While we have had to make difficult decisions to deliver the justice that victims deserve, through the courts and across the system as a whole, I am pleased that we have been able to protect dedicated VAWG victims spending in the Department by maintaining the 2024-25 funding levels, which have been ringfenced for sexual violence and domestic abuse support next year. We want to ensure that help is available to survivors of these awful crimes as they seek to rebuild their lives. That includes funding for independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic abuse advisers, and is in addition to the core funding that the Department provides for police and crime commissioners to allocate at their discretion on the basis of their assessment of local need.

As I have also said, the answer to these appalling crimes does not lie with a single Government Department or agency. It demands a united effort across Departments, across the system and across society. We must all commit ourselves to ambitious change, and I know that everyone here today shares that view. I look forward to hearing from Members in all parts of the House, and to a productive debate that will move this important conversation forward as we collectively say, "Enough is enough." Violence against women and girls can have no place in our society, and every woman and girl deserves to live her life free from violence, abuse and harassment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister and my Sussex neighbour, Mims Davies.

1.9 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called in this important debate to speak on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition.

I welcome this general debate being called by the Government on such a topical issue as we return to the Chamber in the new year. It is important that there is a significant focus on women and girls being heard in every single community. I agree with the Minister: enough is enough. That is one of the most magnificent campaigns the Home Office could have come up with, and I applaud all those who work in the Department on this important issue and who are focused on protecting women and girls in every nation, region and community.

I heard people being congratulated in business questions on their awards in the new year honours. One of those was Nicole Jacobs, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, who I had the pleasure of working with, and I know that Ministers will enjoy working with her.

Let us all agree in the Chamber this afternoon and say clearly that we do not accept any abuse directed at us as Members of Parliament, Ministers and people speaking up for women and girls, such as that we have seen in recent days. There are women and girls in our communities who want to know that we are here and are focused on keeping them safe. When it comes to domestic abuse or any kind of criminality aimed at women and girls in our community, criminality is criminality, wherever it is found. Domestic abuse, wherever it is, must continue to be tackled. It cannot remain untackled; it must always be uncovered. I welcome the measures that the Minister outlined in her speech and the strategy, in terms of education, support and the pursuit of justice, particularly in respect of deepfakes and intimate images.

I appreciate the focus on halving violence against women and girls, but that is not enough. Let us focus on pure eradication—that is one thing that those from all parts of the House can agree on. We can equally agree on how wonderful Dawn Dines is. She has led the Stamp Out Spiking campaign and brought such energy to it. In my brief time working in the Department, I wanted to see a focus on an updated spiking law, so let us celebrate with Dawn when that comes through.

We very much welcome the protection orders that have been brought forward. On behalf of my party, I want to thank and applaud all the charities, groups and networks that support survivors and victims, so that there is always someone to turn to. I would like to reiterate that: there is always someone to turn to, so please speak out. All too often, people feel that they will not be heard. Sadly, there is a leap from rhetoric to intimidation and then potentially to violence when it comes into the political arena. We need to ensure that that does not seep down into what victims feel might happen to them if they come forward and speak out.

Our men and young boys are key, as the Minister said. This is a partnership. Everything in life and in the community is a partnership. I have the honour of co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group on men and boys' issues, and I ask the Minister to update the House on the men and boys ambassador and the ministerial work being done on this.

It is the duty of any Government to keep their citizens safe, and I am proud of the work of the outgoing Conservative Government. We did our utmost to fulfil that job. In the face of the pandemic and the war on our continent, we focused on ensuring that our constituents felt safer and that our commitment to this never wavered. Progress is best made when a Government build on the foundations of the previous one; perhaps

this fixing of the foundations is one area that we can agree on. It was therefore a little bit disappointing to see in the Labour manifesto—some of us did read it—that

“For too long, violence against women and girls has been ignored.”

I do not think that is the case, but let us not have 50% of it ignored; let us have the whole lot eradicated. Let us ensure that the voices and the asks of the women and girls in our communities are listened to.

In the last 24 hours there has been a vote on victims of grooming gangs, which was very difficult. We need to set the record straight on why the Opposition are strongly focused on getting agreement that no stone should be left unturned on this issue. The previous Government accepted 18 of the 20 recommendations in the important Jay review, and it is disappointing that the legislation could not be agreed on before the change of Government, although it was put forward in the wash-up—a techie term, for people watching. Ultimately, we wanted to tackle the issue, and my party is again determined to work with the Government to get this moving.

The last Conservative Home Secretary to focus on grooming gangs was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman), who rightly set up the taskforce that led to 500 further arrests and over 4,000 more victims protected. In all the hubbub of the last day or two, what is important is that the questions of victims and survivors are answered on the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

The taskforce set up under the Conservative Government worked with 43 forces in England and Wales on supporting investigations into child sexual exploitation and grooming. It is right to give our police officers on the frontline the support they need to tackle this scandal. The Minister rightly talked about justice, but it must start with coming forward to the police. I completely agree with her: the crucial step of coming forward and saying what has happened is the bravest and hardest thing imaginable for a young child or woman who knows that the people around them should have been protecting them. We need to ensure that the police are there for them.

As a vital next step, let us all agree to collect the data on ethnicity. Let us not shy away from this. Let us get it and share it. This is at the heart of the matter. People feel that political correctness should not hold us back. To protect all victims from sexual abuse and abhorrent crimes, no stone should be unturned. This is further and wider than what IICSA investigated, which is why my party believes that a further-reaching inquiry is urgently needed. There was nothing in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) said, nobody in the Chamber should feel that they cannot raise on the Floor of the House, without fear or favour, something that is happening in their constituency. That is what we come here to do.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): No one should ever feel afraid of raising any issue in this Chamber with me or anybody else. To reiterate, the ethnicity data is collected. It was published for the first time in November, and I am not entirely sure why the Opposition keep insisting that it has not been published. To be honest, the data

that had started to be collected under their Government is not good enough, and we will be working to improve it, but ethnicity data is collected and published.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for coming to the Dispatch Box to give that undertaking to the House. Our friend Sajid Javid and others were keen to ensure that that was out there. I am sure that will reassure the House.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I want to go a bit further on that data. Does the hon. Member accept that in the 2022 police report on child sexual exploitation, where there were more than two perpetrators, the ethnicity data pointed to 76% of the perpetrators being white, 9% being black and 9% being Asian?

Mims Davies: I thank the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee; hers is a welcome voice for women and girls. I agree with her: we are keen to look at the data. What has been underscored this week, however, is that some people feel that we have not got to the broadest extent of the issue. That is why some people feel disappointed.

Let me broaden our discussion of VAWG. Significant measures were introduced by the former Conservative Government, including a rapid increase in the number of police officers and the introduction of the all-important law enforcement tool that they need in communities to listen to victims and act on their behalf. New legislation was introduced—crucial legislation that the Government are rightly building on—in the form of the Conservatives’ landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which was passed to recognise the more insidious forms of abuse that blight victims’ lives, often before they realise it themselves. Lady Theresa May and others have campaigned against those insidious forms of abuse, which can also lead to gateway crimes in other areas.

On VAWG specifically, a further domestic abuse plan was launched in 2021, with over half the commitments completed by the previous Conservative Government. Many people will remember that, crucially, it brought young children and family members into the purview of domestic abuse. Other strategies included spending £6.6 million on delivering interventions to improve our understanding of what works in preventing violence against women and girls; ensuring the consistency of support services through the introduction of the national commissioning standards of the victims funding strategy, to which the Minister alluded; and launching the VAWG support and specialist services fund, with £8.3 million to support victims who face barriers to coming forward.

The Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 brought in a new duty for employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of employees. From my time at the Department of Work and Pensions, I know that talking to people about what is going on in their world and bringing it forward to their employer is often a gateway for people to be able to move to safety. We delivered £150 million of funding for the safer streets fund and the safety of women at night fund, with a range of projects helping to improve public safety. Sussex’s police and crime commissioner Katie Bourne and others will know about that.

Importantly, we have the national domestic abuse helpline, other helplines on revenge porn and the Suzy Lamplugh Trust national stalking helpline, and I welcome

[Mims Davies]

the Minister's comments on that. Through the important flexible support fund, we provided a further £2 million to remove the additional barriers that domestic abuse victims face when leaving their abusers, which can be costly. Domestic abuse is in every corner of our country and at every economic level. People perceive that only certain women and certain families can be affected by this matter, which often stops those who are in fear coming forward.

I know that Labour Members like to conclude that we did nothing for 14 years, but let me quickly remind them that we won four elections. We did not do nothing on women and girls; we made a real and tangible difference in tackling violence against women and girls. I am sure that we all agree this afternoon that there is always more to be done in every nation, region and community.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very effective speech and showing that this is a process, not an event. Governments have been working hard on this issue for many years, and this year marks 10 years since the introduction of the coercive control offence, which I was very proud to take through as a Minister in the Serious Crime Act 2015. That is the kind of change that Governments have built on and worked on, and we are all on the same page on this issue.

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for her work. We in this House will go wherever this issue takes us in every community. What is crucial is that victims and, equally, perpetrators know that VAWG will be tackled and that we will act in uniformity where we can.

Rightly, the Minister mentioned that we banned upskirting and ended the so-called rough sex defence. We introduced the offence of non-fatal strangulation and, through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, ended the automatic halfway release for serious violent and sexual offenders. From my time at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I remember that we extended the “positions of trust” focus on sports coaches and faith leaders. The Minister rightly talked about the courts process and the feeling of justice; what would be the point of letting people out halfway through their sentence?

I remind the House that, sadly, the Labour party did not always support us, but now it is in government. Women's charities have continued to express concerns about the Government's early release scheme, including Women's Aid back in October. Following the first wave of releases last month, we have seen our long-standing concerns come to fruition. On behalf of Women's Aid, I ask Ministers to reiterate the importance of tackling this matter. On the early release of perpetrators, the issue is not necessarily finance but the mental health of their victims.

In this afternoon's debate we need to think about the women and girls—our constituents—growing up in our communities and families. We will continue to have a thoughtful examination of the facts, find a way forward to tackle this set of horrendous crimes, and give women and girls the confidence to come forward and have it tackled.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

1.27 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank the Government for providing time for this incredibly important debate. The debate is timely, but unfortunately it is always timely to discuss violence against women and girls, given the issues that we face. I thank the Minister for her opening remarks, and for showing the dedication that she has throughout her working life as an MP to making our spaces—online, in person, at home or at work—safer for all of us.

Why are we here to discuss violence against women and girls? It is because we live in a country where 97% of recorded rapes go unpunished. That is an improvement on the 98% that went unpunished just a few years ago. If they do get processed, it takes years for victims to fight through the backlogs for justice, as we have heard.

We know that over 80 women were killed by men last year. The true figure is probably much more, because at least 11 cases of women's murders are still to be solved. As the Minister rightly said, a woman is killed every three days at the hands of a man.

The revenge porn helpline deals with 9,000 cases every year, and the number is increasing. We are increasingly seeing men and boys become victims of sextortion, but the victims of revenge porn and non-consensual intimate image abuse are predominantly women, and the problem is only going to get worse with new AI technology and nudification apps.

One in three women has been sexually assaulted, so the chances are that we will know women and girls—see them, work with them and cross paths with them every single day—who have been victims. Given the level of under-reporting in this country, we can assume that they have probably been sexually assaulted multiple times.

We live in a world in which Iraq has lowered the age of consent for girls to nine years old. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women and girls describe their bodies as being an extension of a battlefield. Médecins Sans Frontières estimates that at least 25,000 women have been raped by militia in Congo.

If that is too far afield for Members or people at home to empathise with the seriousness of the situation for women and girls not just in this country but across the world, what about the group of 70,000 men in Germany who shared tips on how to rape, how to drug, how to get away with sexual assault, and how to wreak revenge on women and girls? Just in Germany, 70,000 men shared those tips. Can we guarantee that something similar is not happening closer to home? Probably not.

We are about to witness the inauguration of a President who openly boasted about grabbing women “by the pussy,” enabled by the richest man in the world, Elon Musk—who, on the one hand, has pretended over the last few weeks to care about the victims of sexual violence while, on the other hand, targeting and inciting hatred against the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), calling her an “evil witch.” That is digging deep into historical misogyny. How long have powerful women who stand up been constantly called a witch, or something that rhymes with it? I am pretty sure that most of us have been called something similar for standing up to those in power.

The hypocrisy of this man continues. He helped to elect a man who has lost another lawsuit against a woman who claims that he raped her—a man who has

26 claims of sexual assault against him. We have Members of this House who champion both those men. We often share this Chamber with a man who has been convicted of kicking a woman, and with others who think that is acceptable.

Sadly, violence against women and girls does not start or end with politics and war. As we have heard, society's view of women is such an important part of this. In 2025, where are we as a society when it is okay for 70,000 men to get together to share tips on how to rape and sexually assault women and get away with it? What is our place in this world? What is the place of women and girls in this world? Are our institutions designed for us? Are they working for us? Are our services actually protecting or supporting us? For over a decade, when it comes to health, the police and justice, no one can say that is clearly the case.

We have been failed by institutions and individuals, which is why many of us still ask our friends to text us to say that they have got home safely. It is why many of us will not run at night, and why many of us wear just one earphone, if that, when we are walking around. It is why we carry keys in our pockets, rolled up in our hands. It is why we have to explain to our daughters what is appropriate and what is not, and it is why we should also explain that to our sons.

All of this happens, and continues to happen, to women and girls, and more so if they are black, Asian or minority ethnic, if they are disabled or if they are LGBT, which is why I am so grateful that we have a plan of action for halving violence against women and girls. That sounds like an incredible aim—an impossible task—but I hope it is not.

I have printed just one page, but the measures that will happen under this Labour Government to tackle violence against women extend over many pages. The ones I pick out are, first, that there will be domestic abuse specialists in every 999 control room, which will be life-changing for those with the bravery to pick up the phone and say, "I am being abused by a loved one."

Rape cases will be fast-tracked through the courts. We have heard that justice delayed is justice denied. The minuscule number of reported rape cases that actually find their way to court are being dragged out to the extent that people give up hope.

Banning the creation of deepfakes and non-consensual intimate images is hugely important. The Women and Equalities Committee has heard evidence from brave survivors and victims of this cruel, degrading abuse. The impact that has, and continues to have, on their lives does not match the punishment that perpetrators currently face. I am grateful that we will see a minimum two-year sentence for these offences.

The Government are seeking to ensure that all victims of violence are seen, supported and protected, particularly migrant women and girls, as well as black, Asian and minority ethnic, LGBT+ and disabled women and girls. We can receive abuse and violence for multiple reasons—because we are a woman and because we are an ethnic minority, or because we are a woman and because we are disabled. Hatred never stays in one lane, or at least not for very long.

These measures are all needed and, in many areas, they have been neglected for years. We cannot take our

eye off the ball, because there are those who seek to sell off our rights and freedoms to the highest bidder on the world stage.

Violence against women and girls does not come out of nowhere. I do not believe that any child is born with hatred in their heart and their mind. No baby boy is born thinking that he has a right over a woman's body, or the right to abuse or rape her. It is society that instils that belief.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Before upskirting became a specific criminal offence, people said it was "just a laugh". Does the hon. Member think we have a massive problem in society when offences against women are dismissed as just a laugh and seen as acceptable?

Sarah Owen: Yes, and that is why I want to talk about why society needs to move on. We can implement all these measures in the criminal justice system to make sure that the right people get the right support when they need it, but ultimately, we need to see the societal changes that the hon. Member outlines to ensure that we are not here having the same discussion 10 years down the line.

It is so important to address how society views not just women but men. What makes a good man? What makes a good boy, and which men should he aspire to become? I am looking forward to hearing more about the men and boys ambassador, but who are boys aspiring to become at the moment? Unfortunately, it is the men who shout the loudest and have the most money, even if they got their money, power and influence through the sex trafficking of women or by starting new political parties for "bros".

This is nothing new, sadly. Whether it is the Harrods scandal, Harvey Weinstein or Jeffrey Epstein, we see the same pattern, time and again, of influence, power and money making them unaccountable to anybody until it is far too late. The answer to that is good role models, and there are plenty of them. There are so many. Being a strong, good man is very different from being the men I have highlighted. I am lucky to work alongside some of them, I am lucky to call some of them my friends, and I am really lucky to have some of them in my family.

It is also about holding up a mirror to the men who use their power, position and money to try to crush women and girls, and who see it as a badge of honour, rather than the badge of shame that it should be. What path leads a man to conclude that it is okay to rape someone? What path leads a man to believe that women are just commodities to buy, sell and traffic to please his needs? What kind of man uses his body to kick, punch and strangle women? How hollow is the shell of a man who gets his kicks from sending intimate videos or photos of a girl to embarrass or degrade her?

Unfortunately, just as we know many good men, we also know bad men. We work alongside them, and they are around every day of our lives, in every part of our lives. We like to paint rapists, perpetrators of sexual assault and predators as monsters or something "other", but if we think about the statistics of sexual violence and rape that were highlighted earlier, we see that those men walk among us. Young boys need better role models than those promoted on X, Telegram and soon, I fear, Meta.

[Sarah Owen]

I want to end by talking about the people who embody the mirror that ensures shame is reflected on those who deserve it: Gisèle Pelicot and every other victim of abuse who steps forward. Gisèle Pelicot was drugged by her husband and raped by 51 men—betrayed by the person who should have loved and cherished her. As with so many cases of violence against women and girls, it was a supposed loved one—a close one. She waived her right to anonymity because she felt the “shame must change sides”. She could not be more right, but are we up to that challenge? Will women and girls stop being blamed and shamed, and will male perpetrators actually be held to account?

We are seeing action, but with technology we are always playing catch-up. The founder of the website that hosted the ads placed by Gisèle Pelicot’s husband to recruit his wife’s rapists has just been arrested in France. I am grateful that this Government are introducing measures to tackle online abuse and violence against women, but we cannot let up. We have to continue.

During my Committee’s most recent inquiry into non-consensual intimate image abuse, we heard that police officers were handing devices containing intimate images back to the perpetrators. That was a ludicrous situation, so I am grateful that the Minister outlined that there will be strengthening of the codes to ensure that no perpetrator of NCII’s will have devices or materials related to the original offence returned to them. We need to continue the fight against violence against women and girls, because it was never won in the first place. Perpetrators are using new technologies to evade justice and to inflict greater harms.

I will end with the words of Gisèle Pelicot after the verdicts against her husband and her rapists were given. She said:

“I now have confidence in our capacity to find a better future where everyone, women and men alike, can live in harmony with respect and mutual understanding.”

My goodness, I wish I shared her confidence, but I do share her hope. Much of that rests on the Government’s aim to halve violence against women and girls, and that the next generation of women have fire in their bellies, and a hunger for change and equality in their hearts.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That was very powerful indeed. I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats.

1.42 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): Nine years ago or thereabouts, I was sitting in a courtroom supporting victims of domestic abuse. I saw at first hand how our systems of justice were failing women and girls when they were at their most vulnerable. That was my first motivation to enter politics, and it is a privilege to stand here and speak today, in this Chamber, in honour of all the women and girls who have faced abuse, violence, misogyny, harassment, stalking, spiking, non-consensual image abuse and everyday sexism.

Violence against women and girls is systemic. It transcends constituency boundaries and national borders, and it is embedded in a global culture of discrimination and inequality that is even present in this House. I have heard casual sexism roll off the tongue as a female MP’s

domestic context was used as a reason she should not progress. To those who believe that feminism has gone too far or that equality is here, I say this: the evidence shows otherwise.

As if all the shocking statistics we have heard so far were not enough, here are some more. There is still a 13% gender pay gap. Some 41% of women provide unpaid care for children, grandchildren, older people or people with a disability, compared with 25% of men. Despite significant progress, we still do not have a Parliament that is representative of society with 50% women. This inequality manifests itself in discrimination across our systems, which just do not work for women. Our society still sees femininity as “less than”, and too much violence is tolerated.

Some 3,000 crimes of violence against women and girls are recorded every day, and that is just a tiny part of the story. We have heard already about the number of women murdered every week by a partner or ex-partner, a figure that has not changed in decades. At least one in four women has been raped or sexually assaulted since the age of 16, and hundreds of thousands of crimes against women and girls every year have an online element. Given the fear and shame around reporting, it is certain that in reality, the figure is significantly higher. A woman in a domestic abuse situation will experience an average of 35 assaults before calling the police. We are not talking about a few isolated incidents; 2.3 million people aged 16 years and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2024. Those numbers seem abstract, but they represent real women, real children and real lives.

That violence is enabled by a bedrock of inequality and a culture of disbelief. The experiences of women and girls are ignored, deprioritised and doubted. The Jay report on child sexual exploitation—yes, the same report on which the former Government took no action—found in 2022 that individuals and institutions often thought children were lying when they tried to disclose what was being done to them, and found that victims were frequently blamed for their own sexual abuse. We are not beyond the days of saying, “She was asking for it.”

That disbelief has consequences for abusers. Last year, fewer than three in 100 rapes recorded by the police resulted in someone being charged in the same year. The Government must do what the previous Government did not: tackle violence against women and girls head-on. I support the Government’s ambition to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. It is a bold aim, but a vast undertaking. To achieve it, we must have cultural and legislative change. We have the opportunity in this House to create laws that not only protect women and girls, but effect significant cultural shifts. Passing the Domestic Abuse (Aggravated Offences) Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), would enable domestic abuse to be considered an aggravating factor in assault cases. That would distinguish it from other offences, and its severity and gravity could be understood more clearly. The Bill would exclude domestic violence perpetrators from schemes for early release from prison, and protect survivors of domestic abuse.

In a survey conducted for a Crown Prosecution Service report on prosecution of rape and sexual offenses, 92% of CPS staff agreed that current court backlogs

inhibit the prosecution of rape and serious sexual assault. The Government must address these backlogs, improve safety for women in the justice system, and fully support the staff who are working daily to support victims of trauma and abuse. Training of those who work with victims is of the utmost importance, but has not been prioritised.

From my previous work supporting victims, and from my casework, I know that victims of domestic violence have had their and their advocate's safety compromised because details have been shared with an abuser by someone working in the statutory services. All reports and information surrounding domestic abuse must be handled with exceptional sensitivity. That highlights the need for more specialist training, not just for our police forces—that will be welcomed—but in social services. The majority of cases in children's social care involve domestic abuse, but the training done on it as part of social work qualification is insufficient.

We must ensure that funding for services supporting survivors of domestic abuse is sufficient and secure. Charities that provide refuge and community services for victims inherently require long-term decisions and planning, but are frequently left with one-year funding agreements and one-off grants that limit their capacity to operate effectively.

What about the men? I was pleased to see that a debate on paternity leave was extremely well attended by male MPs, who clearly wanted more time with their children. I am also pleased to see so many men supporting this debate. Unpaid caring work is still disproportionately done by women, but men are also disadvantaged, as valuable time with loved ones is lost. Our culture maintains an imbalance in expectations and opportunity for both men and women. The UK's two weeks of statutory paternity leave lags far behind the entitlement in most advanced economies, and I call on the Government to make improvements to all parental leave, so that parents in every family have the opportunity to bond with their children in those first crucial months.

Financial independence is a significant factor in women being able to leave an abusive partner, so for both men and women, we need to tackle the gender pay gap. We also need to tackle paternity leave, pay for carers, violence and issues with the criminal justice system, so that we stop seeing femininity as "less than". We must tackle all aspects of inequality that underpin violence against women and girls for justice to become a reality.

1.51 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I am glad that we are discussing this most important issue today. The National Police Chiefs' Council rightly stated last year:

"Violence against women and girls is a national emergency."

Action must be taken against our societal epidemic of violence, including sexual violence, against women and girls, and I am glad that the Government are committed to halving it in a decade. I will do my part to ensure that promise is delivered.

We rightly talk a lot—although not nearly enough—in this place about victims. They must be at the heart of our work. Society has reached a place where most of us can accept the fact that we will all know victims of domestic or sexual violence. How could we not, with the National Police Chiefs' Council's statistics showing

that approximately one in 12 women will be a victim in any given year, and as many as one in three over the course of a lifetime? Violence against women and girls is endemic in our country. It happens all around us and is committed by people—mainly men—whom we all know, and often trust and love. Societally, that is the aspect with which we have failed to grapple.

Even though we accept that we know victims, far fewer people can accept that they know perpetrators. Instead, the 3,000 offences that happen each day, which leave behind psychological wreckage, seem to be rhetorically and conceptually driven by some sort of mysterious, passive, abstract force. It may be tempting to imagine that predators and perpetrators are unusual and could be identified if only we ditched our politically correct attitudes. However, that ignores the majority of abuse that takes place. Worse, it leads to a complacency that makes women and girls more vulnerable. It is easier, psychologically and societally, to hold to the idea that sexual violence is a rare thing, perpetrated by monsters that we can spot a mile off. Finding any excuse to delegitimise those who come forward—for example, by victim blaming, or by having preconceived ideas about how a "real" victim would behave—is key to upholding that. We see excuses made constantly for such behaviour, including in this place, and often by people who claim to be feminist or Christian, but who do not demonstrate any of the values that they claim to hold when it comes to having to confront the behaviour of someone in their circle.

It is easier to immediately accept the abuser's wholesale narrative and deflect, minimise, deny, defend or rubbish the victim's credibility than to accept that someone we know is not only capable of that type of violence, but has perpetrated it. That tendency is at its most egregious when there is an institutional failure of reckoning, but all institutions are made up of individuals who share in and perpetuate that culpability. Even in the vanishingly rare cases in which someone is successfully convicted for domestic or sexual violence, we need only look at the comments online about how they had been "hard done by" or were "such a nice neighbour" and "couldn't possibly have done it". We all know that the vast majority of cases will never even make it that far, so what then?

Let us be clear. According to the National Police Chiefs' Council,

"1 in 20 people are estimated to be perpetrators of VAWG per year".

Many of those will be repeat perpetrators. We will all know at least one of them. They hide in plain sight. They may very well be the last person we expect to be a perpetrator, and they know exactly what they are doing. Failure to acknowledge that means forcing victims to carry the shame that belongs to their abusers. We cannot say that we support victims coming forward if we cannot reconcile the fact that everyone here and everyone watching will know perpetrators of that form of violence.

If we are to turn the tide, we need better education. We need more honest discussions of women's safety and men's roles. We need cultural change to identify and call out abusive behaviour. We need structures that believe women and girls and take misconduct seriously. We need investment in mental health and victim support services far above that currently on offer, including in the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, and support from independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic violence advisers. We also need a justice system

[Charlotte Nichols]

that works, that can deliver timely justice and in which women can have faith that they will not be further traumatised, as happens all too often, when seeking justice. Fundamentally, we all—in this place and right across society—need the courage to be more honest with ourselves about what we collectively look away from because it is too difficult. If we are ever going to hold perpetrators accountable and create and sustain a culture where women's and girls' safety is the norm, not the exception, that is where we need to begin.

1.57 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I was not expecting to be called so early. I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate.

I have taken part in many debates on these topics over the years, and they show the House at its best, because they are when we come together. This House, when speaking with one voice in our determination to tackle these issues, is incredibly powerful. What we say is heard beyond these walls; it is heard by law enforcement, the judiciary, the media and others. I am grateful for this chance to speak together and come together to find ways to tackle horrendous crimes.

As I said in my intervention on the shadow Minister, we are talking about a process, not an event. We are all working towards the eradication of these crimes, and making them socially unacceptable in our country, but that is a massive challenge. Anybody—any Government—who stands still on this issue will go backwards, because the offences change and technology enables new offences. When I was a Minister in the Home Office, the idea of deepfake imagery or even revenge porn was simply not coming across my desk. It simply was not happening; the technology was not there. We all have to be on our guard, and must make sure that we all work towards tackling those crimes.

I agree with the Minister, who made a powerful speech, that this is not a problem that can be solved only by women. Women and girls are predominantly the victims, but we need men to be part of the solution, and I am grateful to see so many men in the Chamber today. There have been too many occasions when taking part in this sort of debate has felt like being in a women-only club. We need men to be part of the solution and to work with us.

I have sat where the Ministers are sitting, and I suspect that I have felt the frustrations that they are feeling. I have probably felt what one of the Ministers—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips)—is feeling particularly acutely this week, having been through many media onslaughts on social media and otherwise over the years. I have immense sympathy for what she is going through.

There is frustration as well because the levers that can be pulled by a Minister to resolve these issues are really quite limited. We can legislate—of course we can—but the police need to understand what the crime looks like. I refer here to my taking the coercive control offence through Parliament 10 years ago. I remember the media at the time saying, “Why on earth are you doing this? There is no way that this can ever be prosecuted. There is no way that anyone can ever understand it. There is

no way that they can ever get the evidence.” I remember saying to one journalist, “So is that your answer—just don't do it, because it's too hard?” Surely we need to do these difficult things, but we also need to recognise that seeing the fruits of our labours will take a long time and that these things do not change overnight.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important point. Does she agree that this House has to legislate in order to lead cultural change in our country? Furthermore, does she support some of the work that the Government are doing in exactly that direction?

Dame Karen Bradley: I do agree with my right hon. Friend: I fully support what the Government are doing and I fully support their aims and goals. We might have slightly different ways of getting there, but all of us in this House want the same thing. We need to be supportive. If we scrutinise the Government and suggest areas where they might improve their position or their policies, it is not a criticism of their intent; it is merely that we think there may be other ways of doing things or that there may be improvements that could be made. I took such suggestions when I was a Minister in the faith in which they were intended, and I hope that that will happen here. I am certain that, with the two Ministers on the Front Bench, that will absolutely be the case.

Earlier, I was talking about the levers that can be pulled. When those levers need to be enforced by law enforcement, local authorities, the health service or education, there is a real frustration that there is not a simple direction that can be given so that everyone understands the changes that, as a Minister, one wants to see. That is why cross-departmental work is so important. I believe that inter-ministerial groups are being deployed again, which is an excellent step, and I wholeheartedly congratulate the Government on that. When I was a Minister, such groups were so, so important.

We must also ensure that there is a multi-agency working. We have to make sure—I saw this myself as a Minister—that the police are not the point of last resort. I remember going to visit the A&E at the Royal Stoke, my local acute hospital, 10 years ago and seeing the domestic violence specialists spotting the signs of domestic abuse. That is vital. So, too, is the schoolteacher recognising that when the child is coming to school late every day, or missing their class, something is wrong and action needs to be taken. We cannot always leave this to the police and law enforcement. We must make sure that there is multi-agency working. Having domestic abuse specialists in 999 centres and emergency centres is another a good step.

I introduced a VAWG strategy in 2016 when I was a Minister. Another one was introduced in 2021, and I know that we will get another one soon. I am certain that that will be victim focused. These are crimes that cannot be tackled without putting the emphasis on the victims. But all victims are different. The abuse that one victim has suffered will be different from that of another victim.

Let us be clear: getting someone who has been a victim of one of these most horrendous of crimes to accept that they are a victim is incredibly difficult. To be brave enough to pick up the phone to dial 999 is a really big step, because that victim has probably been enduring the abuse over many, many occasions. She does not believe

that she is a victim. She thinks that she is in control. She thinks that she can deal with this problem without involving the authorities. We have to get to the point where victims are able to accept that they are victims and where we give them the support that is needed. That is why the multi-agency approach is so important.

A victim of female genital mutation will be different from a victim of modern slavery, and a victim of domestic abuse will be different from a grooming victim. They all have individual needs. Even within the categories, there will be different needs. It may be better for some victims of domestic abuse to remain in their homes and for the perpetrator to be removed and tackled. *[Interruption.]* Absolutely. I see the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley doing a thumbs away sign. I totally agree with her. However, for other victims that will simply not be practical. There need to be places of safety that those victims can be taken to. Those places of safety need to be different for each victim. A mother with children needs a different place from a young girl, and that young girl needs a different place from somebody who has severe learning disabilities, mental health issues or addiction. There are all sorts of problems that victims face—often caused by the abuse—and they need different approaches.

I have made the point about multi-agency working, but we cannot arrest our way out of the problem. There needs to be a strategy that looks across all aspects of the four Ps, as they used to be called in my time at the Home Office—the pursuit, protect, prevent and prepare strands. We need to make sure that we take every step possible.

I welcome the ringfencing of funding that the Minister talked about. I am keen to make sure that police, fire and crime commissioners and mayors who have responsibility for these areas have the correct funding to commission the services that they need to support victims.

My final point is on the online world. Not only do new offences get created, but the online world has provided a place of safety for perpetrators. Behaviour that is simply unacceptable offline is something that is normalised, socialised and anonymised online. A person can go online and find somebody who has a similar interest to them in something that is totally and utterly unacceptable. They have some images that they can share. They do not know who they are dealing with, so therefore it is fine. They can look at those images because nobody knows that it is them, nobody knows what they do in the real world, and nobody knows that they are looking at them. It also seems absolutely normal, because everybody else is doing it in this room. This is an incredibly difficult thing to solve. It is really difficult to get normal policing methods to work in this environment.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a valuable point about the dangers online. Does she agree that one of the big threats is the incel community? This highlights the need to approach violence against women and girls from a public health perspective, because we cannot just rely on the police to deal with it. Often there are mental health issues and all sorts of family breakdown challenges. Does she agree that tackling the incel issue is vital in this environment?

Dame Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is something that has to start in schools and in the workplace. We need to ensure that all of society appreciates, understands and gets behind this.

To conclude, I started the internet safety strategy as the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I am pleased that we have the Online Safety Act 2023, but if the Government wish to do more, they have my wholehearted support. I might scrutinise their work, but I will support them.

2.8 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I wish to acknowledge that I have had the privilege of working alongside the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), for a number of years while I worked in the domestic abuse sector. She was a one-woman safeguarding service. Members from across the House would ask for her advice, so frequently she would advocate for victims when others were unable to do so or when no other service would come to their aid. She has done more for abused women than anyone at X or in the Reform party, Members of which have not appeared here today. I therefore add my voice to those condemning the attacks on her and on others who have spent so long trying to fight for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

Having spent my career working to prevent violence against women and girls, I am dismayed and frankly disgusted by the way the issue of child sexual abuse, mostly against vulnerable girls, has recently been exploited by political opportunists for their own gain. To see the way people both in and outside the House have spoken about this issue, as if victims and survivors were a political football to be kicked about because of the passing interest of social media-crazed billionaires and their political servants, has been disgraceful. We do not need empty rhetoric or opportunism; we need action, and we need it now.

The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, led by Professor Alexis Jay, published its report in 2022, after a seven year-long process that engaged with more than 7,000 victims and survivors, many of them girls. It processed 2 million pages of evidence and published 61 reports and publications. It spent two years working on an inquiry into child sexual exploitation and grooming specifically. In the last three years, I worked closely with colleagues across the children's sector, including survivors of child sexual abuse, to ensure that the previous Government implemented the inquiry's recommendations. I am grateful to the Government for having said that they will take many of them forward, but as organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the National Association for People Abused in Childhood have argued, what we need now, and crucially what victims and survivors urgently deserve, is for the recommendations to be implemented.

I have been shocked by the lack of progress that we have made as a country in tackling violence against women and girls. I pay tribute to hon. Members across the Chamber who have made a number of big steps to ensure that women and girls are safer, most notably through the Domestic Abuse Act, but despite the changes that we have made in this House, the problem is only getting worse. It has been driven by technological changes and exacerbated by cuts over the last few years to the provision of support for victims and survivors and those at risk.

The financial situation facing local specialist charities, for example, is acutely concerning, particularly as many, such as Suffolk Rape Crisis in my area, have been forced

[Jess Asato]

to close. I totally understand the financial pressures facing the Government due to the huge black hole the Conservatives left, but charities such as Women's Aid and Victim Support have raised real concerns after cuts were made to grants in the core victim services budget for police and crime commissioners, at the same time as they are having to grapple with national insurance contributions increasing. After terrible cuts for many years, services are faced with the spectre of having to think about whether they need to close, just as we start our mission as a Government to halve violence against women and girls.

Victims deserve to be, and should have a right to be, adequately supported and kept safe from further harm. Services such as the Waveney Domestic Violence and Abuse Forum in my constituency support hundreds of victims without any statutory funding, yet the work that they do is high risk and specialist, and saves women's lives. Specialist services need long-term, sustainable funding arrangements.

We in this place should look to formulate a new statutory duty to commission services for victims of domestic and sexual abuse, both adults and children, and thereby end the postcode lottery that leaves too many vulnerable women and children to fend for themselves. That would meet a key recommendation of the IICSA review, which was to ensure that all child victims of sexual abuse are offered specialist therapeutic support. Similarly, given the significant harm and trauma caused by growing up being exposed to domestic abuse, we need to address the critical shortage of child independent domestic violence advisers. One in five children experience domestic abuse growing up, yet there are barely any services to support them. The domestic abuse charity SafeLives has estimated that an additional 1,900 CHIDVAs are needed to meet the needs of children identified in domestic abuse cases.

We also need to look at the drivers behind men's violence against women and girls. As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on commercial sexual exploitation, I would like to raise the issue of pornography. Women are the targets of both physical and verbal aggression in 94% of scenes in pornographic content, and most of the time the aggressors are men. One woman involved in the pornography industry describes her experience:

"I was being hit and choked. I was really upset and they didn't stop. They kept filming. I asked them to turn the camera off and they kept going."

I am hopeful that the Government will look more closely at online pornographic content that depicts sexual activity with adult actors made to look like children, and content that depicts sexual activity between family members. Children's charities such as Barnardo's are concerned that such content acts as a gateway for some viewers who, after repeated consumption, end up needing ever-more-real content, leading them to seek out child sexual abuse material. What is the purpose of pornography that dresses adult women as children—girls, with lollipops and teddy bears, in school uniform?

Widely accessible violent pornography is normalising abuse in everyday life, warping the perceptions of both young men and women of sex and healthy relationships, and fuelling the rise of a misogynistic incel culture. Illegal pornographic content is found across the internet,

from the most popular pornography websites to social media apps that children still have access to. Ensuring that the Online Safety Act's age verification checks for children are brought in properly this year, and that websites are held accountable by Ofcom, are paramount in tackling this issue. If necessary, we need to close any loopholes that might allow websites such as Pornhub to swerve their responsibilities under the Act. The Government should also require all online platforms to verify that every individual featured in pornographic content on their site is an adult, consenting to publication, and should bring the regime of online pornographic content regulation into the same system as offline pornography, which is regulated by the British Board of Film Classification.

We know that online pornographic content is normalising strangulation. Devon and Cornwall sexual assault referral centre looked at a five-month period in 2023. Of the referrals in that period, 31%—53 out of 172—were of victims who had suffered non-fatal strangulation as part of the sexual violence that they had experienced. Only seven of those cases involved a stranger. Three had to go to A&E due to the severity of their symptoms. Pornography has repositioned strangulation as "breath play", and so minimised the hugely detrimental health implications: seizures, stroke, paralysis and death.

I am, however, particularly glad to see that the victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), has this week confirmed that the Government will introduce legislation to create a new offence for creating sexually explicit deepfake images. New deepfakes are having an increasingly insidious impact on children's lives in particular, as well as the many women and girls who experience it every day. I have been campaigning alongside organisations such as Internet Matters to ban the nudifying tools and apps that create deepfakes. We know they have only one purpose: to violate women and girls; 99% of the images created on the apps are of women, and many do not work on images of men. I see no reason why they not only are freely available to use, but are free to advertise themselves to young people on platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, and app stores, where there is no true age verification. Even with age verification, it is up to the app stores to determine whether content meets an adult's level of age verification, and I urge the Government to look closely at the regulation of app stores to ensure that the content is independently verified as being suitable for our children to access every day.

We are failing our women and girls, and men, if we continue to ignore the public health crisis generated by violent and addictive pornography and the porn culture it generates. I know just how committed the Government and our Front Bench are to tackling violence against women and girls, and I am honoured to be here to support the—I hope—cross-party work we will do to truly end the huge trauma that too many women and girls face.

2.20 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I just want to take a moment, because I found it incredibly distressing to sit and listen to the brilliant remarks from the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato). Why would I find that upsetting? I find that upsetting because I am a survivor of abuse myself. Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman. I have to say that I am upset that no other Members from Northern Ireland are here at the minute. Eight women

were murdered last year and over 20 in the last four years. But why should I feel like this? It should be the people who are out there perpetrating these crimes—people who are in this building, people who are everywhere. As previous Members have stated, statistically speaking, there will be people in this building who are the perpetrators. More often, the people doing this are people we know, people we love, and that is what makes it even more traumatic, upsetting and disgusting.

We live in a society where it was only in 1991 in the case of *R v R* that marital rape was made an offence. It took until March 2000 for a Belfast man to be convicted for raping his wife. I could talk of the case of Alexander McCartney, a prolific paedophile, which speaks directly to what the hon. Member spoke about. Thousands of children were abused. Whenever I, the hon. Member and other Members across the House met big tech companies just a number of weeks ago, I put it to them:

“Are you aware of the case of Alexander McCartney? We have heard from you that you’re a self-regulating industry and that you take this matter of child abuse seriously. Have you heard of the case?”

Not one of them, bar the one who happened to own the platform where Mr McCartney was so prolific, had heard of the case.

We are living through a crisis where women are having their rights eroded every day. My mum was brought up during a time whenever she could only dream of having some of the rights that I and others in my generation were promised. We did get some of them—we did—but we have seen more rowed back in recent weeks, months and years. We are now literally having to fight for our lives.

Northern Ireland remains an outlier in Europe for violence against women and girls. There are many reasons why that is the case. One of them is the legacy of our troubled past, and we have heard from other Members about the impact of war and conflict, and Northern Ireland is not exempt. We have to deal with that legacy of trauma and conflict. Layered on top of it, we have to deal with the issues that every other woman and girl across the globe faces.

One thing that really disturbs me, terrifies me for my life, is incel culture. I am an elected rep in Northern Ireland. I stood for election for the first time in 2017, and that was whenever I received my first rape threat—my first. That should not be normal. In recent days, Members have sought to put forward a narrative that it should be taken as part and parcel not just of public life, but particularly of the lives of elected reps in this House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] I profoundly disagree with them.

Many trolls, no doubt online, will later consider my contribution to the House to be a self-indulgent rant—shrieking, shrill. I am a privileged woman. What can I say to my constituents in Lagan Valley? I do not know what to say to them. As the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), said, this is a societal issue and not one person will tackle it by themselves. However, various individuals in our society at this point in time are playing an outsized, toxic and disturbing role. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), for the role she has played not just in recent days and weeks, but for years in protecting and standing up for women and girls.

Only a matter of months ago, another Member of this House said to me whenever I talked about wanting to do more on violence against women and girls that it was “topical”—a passing interest, bit of a fleeting thought, topical. Sorry, no. We have been dealing with this for years, and it is now turbocharged. That means our response must be turbocharged. But I have to be honest that, like other Members, I am torn because I do not want to give oxygen or a platform to these hatemongers and women abusers. How can we even deal with what is in front of our faces if we do not call it out in the most explicit way? That does not demean us or bring us down to that level. I do not think for a second that it takes away from the import of what we are saying or doing. It is actually essential, and we should not be ashamed because every single one of us in this House has to stand up for our constituents.

I see many women come across the door of my office in Lisburn who have been through years of systemic abuse, failed at every cut and turn by statutory agencies and others who had a duty and did not report. They are left in a position where we have to build up trust with them, not just in terms of their life but the societal and statutory response. I know every single person in the House today will commit to doing that, and I am delighted to see the seriousness with which this new Government have taken and gripped the issue.

We need to address the root causes, including online abuse and harmful cultural norms. We would see a lot of school groups coming through the constituency. We previously did a lot of visits to the Parliament Building in Stormont whenever I sat there in the Northern Ireland Assembly. During one school visit, a member of the public came up and said that they wanted to rape me.

There were two people there, and we were just kind of paralysed in response. That was not the right response—not from me, but from the people around—but it is so normalised that that was exactly what people thought. That is not good enough. If people have an issue with champions of women and girls, and of marginalised communities, standing up and using their voice to call that behaviour out—if it makes others feel awkward, and if others see it as creating a fuss or causing a big deal—that is not my problem. Otherwise we will never deal with the cause of it.

Sometimes there is a narrative that these murders are a tragic inevitability. That is not the case. Those deaths are preventable—so preventable—yet we are living in an age when, as the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, women dying is just seen as a normal phenomenon. That could not be further from the truth. I feel saddened that I have let myself down a bit by being so emotional at the start of my speech. [HON. MEMBERS: “No.”] That is not my usual style. But like many other Members of the House, I feel that the abuse we have received in the last number of days, preceding the incidents in the House last night and over the hours afterwards, has compounded our feeling of being under attack simply for standing up not just for ourselves, but for the people across the United Kingdom that every single one of us was elected to serve.

I simply implore Members not to forget Northern Ireland in this. We have an incredible Justice Minister in my party colleague and friend, Naomi Long. She and our First Minister and Deputy First Minister are all desperate and anxious to act. But we cannot do it alone; we need the help of every single Member of this House.

[*Sorcha Eastwood*]

Human rights are not devolved, and on a technical point, the regulation of social media is certainly not devolved. I stand ready to partner with the Government to tackle this work. I simply and honestly ask that others help me and the other Members who represent Northern Ireland to end this epidemic of violence against women and girls.

2.32 pm

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) for what was a moving, extraordinary and really brave speech—thank you very much indeed.

The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), rightly said that this is a timely debate. It is timely, but the truth is that violence against women and girls has been a scourge on England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and beyond our islands since time immemorial, and it will take serious, calm and well thought through policies and a collaborative approach to tackle it. That is exactly what the Government are trying to bring.

There should be no illusions about how serious a problem this is. Nor should we pretend, as some on the Conservative Benches have appeared to do in recent weeks, that it is a problem only for one culture or ethnicity. That alone will not remove the threat of sex-based violence. In fact, in most places in the UK, including in my constituency, it would be unlikely to make any difference at all to the threat that women and girls face from violent men.

If we want to be serious about tackling the grooming that leads to such violence, we must recognise the role that social media companies play in monetising hatred, promoting extreme misogyny for profit and making a packet out of legitimising the exploitation of women. The Minister mentioned in her opening remarks the problem of toxic masculinity, which we all know is ubiquitous online. The profiteers of this hatred dress up their indulgence of extremism as free speech advocacy, but they are in fact consciously hoping to create a world in which women—particularly those who stand against the extreme hatred promoted on social media, which is based on sex and ethnicity—are cowed into submission.

In this House, our speech is formally protected, and no billionaire can hope to launch a libel suit to shut us up, but that does not stop them trying to find other means that they hope will silence us—principally the mob. We have all been on the end of it. Every woman in this House knows that anything we say in here that challenges power and privilege can put us at risk in a way that is quantitatively and qualitatively different from our male colleagues.

There has been far too much admiration for the tech bros, and too little willingness to challenge abuse. I thank the Prime Minister and the Ministers for their robust words this week, which made me proud to be a Labour MP. I hope that they mark a departure from what we have seen, and that we will see many more such responses in future. We should do more to tackle the abuse that the tech industry has been allowed to get away with for so long.

I associate myself with every word that my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) said about the role that pornography plays, but I would add one piece

of evidence that I find shocking. Eight-year-old boys regularly access pornography, and that has a well documented impact on violence against women and girls.

I will take this opportunity to mention another area of tech that I think needs to be addressed: pimping websites, on which women's bodies are freely advertised for sale to abusers. UK Feminista carried out a survey just before Christmas, and found that 368 women in my constituency of East Kilbride and Strathaven, and the surrounding area, were freely advertised online as for sale. That is legal. I know that many people argue that that is sex work, but as a socialist and a feminist, I remain wholly and utterly opposed to that dangerous idea. It is grotesque abuse and exploitation of vulnerable women, and it indicates to men that women are commodities to be bought and sold. Money should not make acts of physical abuse legal and lawful.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): At a recent constituency surgery, the lack of care and oversight of dating apps towards their women users was mentioned. Does the hon. Member agree that dating apps, and the operators that profit from them, should be held to account for protecting the women and men who use them, in the same way that social media companies should be held to account?

Joani Reid: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment, and I hope that we can work across the House to make that happen.

My plea to Ministers is that they consider introducing legislation to tackle pimping websites, pornography and the abuses of dating apps. Perhaps the Government could take firmer action against online abuse at its source, and spend money on some of the wonderfully thought through measures that the Minister outlined in her speech, the likes of which we have not seen for some time.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, Members will have seen how many people wish to speak in this debate. It is such an important debate, and I do want to get everybody in, so I am going to introduce a six-minute time limit.

2.39 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak in this incredibly important debate. I very much welcome the Government's ambition to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade, and I hope everyone in this place will work together to ensure success, because if we do not, it is our daughters, mothers, sisters, neighbours and friends who will all pay the price.

There are many factors driving sex-based violence, and many powerful contributions have been made today laying them out. I intend to speak specifically about the impact of online pornography on attitudes and violence towards women and girls, especially when viewed by young people during their formative years. With 50%—yes, 50%—of all internet-using adult males in the UK visiting Pornhub in September 2020, this is not a fringe concern or something that can be ignored.

To be very clear, we are not talking about the type of content once seen in '80s jazz mags, but about harmful, degrading and violent imagery that dehumanises women.

This type of extreme online pornographic content has proliferated over the last decade and includes footage featuring physical aggression and violence, predominantly directed at women. This material has become mainstream, though it bears little resemblance to real sex or what goes on in genuinely loving relationships. Worryingly, in these videos, women are typically shown responding neutrally when on the receiving end of this aggression, or even with pleasure. Make no mistake, this content reinforces the idea that women desire and derive pleasure from violence, and ultimately perpetuates rape culture. When we then layer on the fact that this content can be pulled out of anyone's pocket and watched repeatedly throughout the day on smartphones, even by children, it becomes clear why this is such a problem for our society. Boys will think that this type of activity is normal in the bedroom, while girls will think it is expected.

A survey done by the Children's Commissioner in November 2022 found that one in 10 children had seen pornography by the age of nine, with half having seen it before they turned 13. It is horrifying to think of our children watching these acts of sexual violence that they cannot properly comprehend or understand. Its consequences can be clearly seen, with 47% of young people between the ages of 16 and 21 stating that girls "expect" sex to involve aggression, and a further 42% stating that most girls "enjoy" it. A study that analysed heterosexual scenes published on two leading free pornographic websites found that between 35% and 45% of content contained at least one act of physical aggression, the most common of which were gagging, choking, spanking, slapping and hair-pulling. Women were the target of the aggression in 97% of those scenes. It can be no surprise to anyone that if young men are watching this content day in and day out, it will impact their perceptions and relationships with women negatively.

Hundreds of studies have been undertaken over the past 30 years, which confirm the obvious: porn culture is pervasive and influential. It has normalised and sexualised choking and strangling of women during sex, spitting on them, and other unsafe and degrading acts. As Dr Jackson Katz, an educator and author, has said,

"It requires wilful naivety to pretend that this has no negative effects on generations of young people's sexuality or has no connection to the ongoing pandemic of men's violence against women".

Moreover, disturbingly, frequent viewing of online pornography can desensitise some men to sexual content, driving a need for ever more hardcore content to satisfy them. This causes some boys and men who would not otherwise do so to escalate to viewing illegal content such as child abuse imagery or rape videos.

So what do we do to address this situation? It is not easy—it is a bit like trying to get the genie back in the bottle—but we must address it. I suspect that in the years to come, we will look back at the content that was so accessible to our children and so damaging and be utterly incredulous. Today, I have two asks for the Minister. First, we must put in place basic safeguards requiring online platforms to verify that every individual featured in pornographic content is an adult and gave permission for their content to be published. Verification information must be provided by each individual featured in the content, not by any other person, and most importantly, failure to comply with this requirement must result in robust sanctions by Ofcom, including

preventing the website in question from operating in the UK if need be. Enforcement must be swift and robust to protect victims and create the necessary deterrent effect.

Secondly, we must bring the regulation of online pornography in line with that for offline pornography. The main statutory regulator of offline pornography is the British Board of Film Classification. It is responsible for classifying pornographic content before it can be published and ensuring it does not contain illegal content such as child sexual abuse, incest, trafficking, torture, rape or strangulation. Any such offline illegal content cannot be sold or supplied in the UK, yet the law has never been extended to cover regulation of online pornographic content. This is anachronistic.

Dame Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point: what is illegal offline must be treated the same way online. I fully support everything she is saying.

Rebecca Paul: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and I completely concur. The fact that our laws have not been extended in this way demonstrates that they have not kept up with our ever-changing world. I therefore call on the Government to ensure that online pornographic content is held to the same standards as offline pornographic content.

Lastly, I thank the all-party parliamentary group on commercial sexual exploitation for its groundbreaking inquiry into pornography during the last parliamentary term. That APPG has shone a light on this important issue, and has not shied away from harsh truths. We cannot end the epidemic of male violence against women and girls in this country without recognising and confronting the role that harmful online pornography is playing. Enough is enough. If everyone in this House cares about women and girls—and our boys too, because this is bad for them as well—it is time to take action and ensure that online content is properly regulated.

2.46 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood). Her speech was incredibly courageous and brave. In recent days, like most women Members of this House, I assume, I have received online abuse, but her courage and bravery inspire us all, and give us the confidence to stand here. I give her my personal thanks for sharing what she did with us.

Violence against women and girls is nothing short of a national emergency. In my constituency of Thurrock alone, 317 sexual offences and 1,841 incidents of stalking and harassment were recorded in one year. Behind each of those statistics is a woman or girl whose life has been impacted by some of the worst crimes, but those figures are just the tip of the iceberg—the sharp end of unrestrained misogyny and hate directed towards women and girls—so I strongly welcome the Government's commitment to halving violence against women and girls in a decade, and the measures that have been outlined so far to deliver justice for victims of these awful offences, and to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable.

We must tackle the root cause of this epidemic of violence—more often than not, male violence—towards women and girls. The societal attitude that women and girls are second-class citizens, and are less worthy of respect and value, and expectations of the "perfect victim"—these all need to stop. Young boys and girls

[Jen Craft]

are exposed every day to a virulent mix of misogyny and sex-based hate crime online. It cannot be right for children to view strangulation as a standard practice in sexual intercourse, or for there to be any question around when no does not mean no.

To bring the meaningful change needed to end this scourge of violence, we need to tackle these issues at root. We need to educate and empower boys to show respect and call out misogyny in their peers. We need to encourage and support men to identify and speak out against all forms of sex-based hate, challenge their peers on what is and is not acceptable, and reflect on where the communities and spaces that they are in can do and be better.

We need to support women and girls who have experienced the worst of our society through male violence. SERRIC—the South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre—in my constituency is a pioneering rape and abuse support service. Set up by women determined that rape victims would not be left unsupported, it provides specialist support, built up through years of experience, to victims of rape, sexual abuse or violence. It allows survivors to reclaim control over their life, understand the impact of what they have lived through and move forward.

SERRIC is keen to highlight that for all victims, a criminal justice outcome alone is not enough to repair the harm done. Indeed, for some victims, a criminal justice outcome is not the desired or best approach. Retraumatizing victims in the criminal justice system by forcing them to repeatedly retell what happened to them needs to be minimised, and support needs to be prioritised, but that will require a cross-Government effort. Health services need to be equipped to recognise the signs of physical and sexual abuse, and to provide support for victims that is not purely focused on gathering evidence for prosecution. Specialist support services such as SERRIC need to be funded to deal with referrals from health services, particularly community therapy services that will not treat a woman who has been the victim of sexual violence or rape.

There is no statutory framework for specialist rape and sexual violence support services, so specialist support is often under-supported, compared to more generic provision. I welcome the Minister's commitment to developing a strong and sustainable model that ensures that specialist services are protected, and I request that she meets me and SERRIC to make sure that we do not miss out on its valuable input on amplifying the voices of victims of male violence against women and girls.

To conclude, with the spotlight on this issue—as a woman, I know that it very seldom is—we have an opportunity to tackle the causes of male violence against women and girls at root, to implement the recommendations of IICSA, and to listen to the voices of victims and provide the support that they need to rebuild their life. I hope this opportunity is not squandered by those who seek to put their political ambition, or spreading misinformation, insinuations and division, ahead of making real change.

2.51 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): In 2021, Plymouth, part of which is in my constituency of South West Devon, had two horrific tragedies affecting a

number of people. We had the Keyham shootings, which were incel-linked, hence my question about that earlier, and the tragic murder of Bobbi-Anne McLeod. I know that both Ministers are well aware of those cases. What came out of those tragedies was an opportunity to shine a light on VAWG in the city in a way that had never happened before, as well as to see what was already being done, and what more could be done to make things even better, and ultimately to make women and girls safe, and feel safe.

The Plymouth violence against women and girls commission was established in response, and I had the privilege of leading it. It took us six months, but we worked cross party, and we reported back with 15 recommendations, which were supported by organisations and businesses right across the city. Hon. Members may be interested to know that we deliberately called it the “Male Violence Against Women and Girls Report”. At the time, it felt as though we were breaking ground, but we have moved on a long way since then. In January 2023, one of the recommendations, which was for a Westminster Hall debate, came to fruition, so my name was mentioned in *Hansard*. The Ministers both took part in that debate, which my predecessor, Sir Gary Streeter, organised, and it enabled us to share our learning, which we were really keen to do.

We all know that violence against women and girls is a huge topic, and it is very difficult sometimes even to figure out the best way to approach it. That is why we approached it through the lens of public health. We recognised that there are no quick fixes, and that multiple factors influence the likelihood of someone being a perpetrator or a victim, and that was key to what we did. We wanted to change culture and behaviour in the city, and to support women and girls by being victim-focused and trauma-informed. I pay tribute to the organisations that were already working hard to do that in the city, including Trevi, First Light, Ahimsa, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and our police and crime commissioner, Alison Hernandez, as well as the police and the city council. In particular, I want to name Hannah Shead, who has worked for Trevi for a number of years and is now moving on. I thought it would be nice to get her mentioned. We also recognise the importance of creating safe spaces and the building blocks for the future.

That was two years ago, and I will briefly update the House on what we have done since. A key thing we did was appoint a strategic lead in the city, and there are now four women—Meghan, Verity, Tracy and Lisa—whose job it is to bring everything that is happening across the city together. If any Members want to take a good example back to their constituencies, I would highly recommend that one.

On changing culture, there was a focus on allyship and education for those of all ages. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has done fantastic work in schools focusing on pornography, and we have seen the establishment of a group called Man Culture, which wants to work collaboratively on reducing VAWG in the city. It received funding under the serious violence duty, and has delivered workshops that facilitated conversations about healthy and positive masculinity, a subject raised today.

A huge amount is being done to support women and girls and to make it easier to access support. Since 2022, the city has been pursuing co-ordinated community

response accreditation. It is working with Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, and we want to ensure that we have an assessment of how we deal with all this multi-agency work. There has been a review of the city's multi-agency risk assessment conference, which has led to improvements and a new steering group, which is ongoing. It is looking at developing a multi-agency tasking and co-ordination process in the city, and the working group for that was launched in autumn 2024. We want the council, police, probation and local charities to work with perpetrators, engaging with them, disrupting their behaviour, and seeing high-harm domestic abuse perpetrators tackled.

A huge amount has been done on creating safe spaces. Of particular note is—the House will have to bear with me; it is a long name—Plymouth's evening and night-time economy predatory behaviour disruption partnership. It is working on a pilot looking at how we can bring together civic and criminal justice tools to tackle predatory behaviours. Criminal justice tools are often not enough, or do not hit a trigger point. In the past 12 months, we have had 12 community protection notice warnings served, one antisocial behaviour stage 2 warning served, and five meetings at police stations with words of advice. That is cracking action. We have brought together those criminal justice actions to tackle that predatory behaviour. Well done to everyone involved. The key is working together and holding each other to account.

Still on the theme of safe spaces, I will touch on single-sex spaces. I ask the House to hear me out, as I say this with a real spirit of gentleness. I appreciate that there are a lot of women out there—some are my constituents—for whom this issue is particularly important, and it is important that their voices be heard. There is a concern among women about the lack of clarity over language and guidelines, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), when she was Women and Equalities Minister, called for examples of guidance that might wrongly suggest that people have a legal right to access all single-sex spaces and services on the basis of their self-identified gender. The new Government responded to that in December, and we are concerned that it has led to a lack of clarity about whether a single-sex space can be used by those who self-identify, or is specifically just for women.

Dame Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is making another powerful speech, and her real-life examples of how we can change things with a multi-agency approach are so powerful. Her point on clarity is important, and I urge her to keep fighting to make sure we have that clarity.

Rebecca Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for her contribution. It would be great if Ministers could address that point this afternoon, so that those who are watching this debate can understand whether the Government will recommit to doing something on single-sex spaces.

To go back to Plymouth, the experts in our city are beginning to look at the fact that the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 created the statutory standing for children to be considered victims in their own right. The men and women working on the issue in Plymouth are beginning to wonder whether we should call it violence against women and children, rather than girls, because the challenge with any label is that it can take our focus off what we need to be talking about. I would be interested to hear the Minister's response to that.

I have briefly set out the results of the commission on violence against women and girls and our recommendations. Members are all welcome to visit Plymouth to see what we have done. We have not solved the problem, but we have gone a long way to playing our part in tackling violence against women and girls.

2.58 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Members for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), and for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), and my hon. Friends the Members for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid), and for Thurrock (Jen Craft). They have all made powerful and compelling speeches. It is such a shame that certain Members from some parties simply did not bother to turn up.

I welcome the largely constructive tone from the shadow Minister, but I want to say something about the tone of the recent debate and how it has unleashed yet another tide of misinformation and lies. Overnight, Facebook groups have become a sewer of misinformation on last night's vote. I proudly voted for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill because it toughens the law to improve child protection and safeguarding. Anything else that is said about me or my colleagues is a lie.

I have made it clear to my Rochdale constituents that I am open to a new inquiry into grooming gangs, if that is what is most helpful to the victims and survivors, and, crucially, if it can be done in a way that does not conflict with live police investigations and prosecutions. We must not forget—as people are forgetting—that the Jay inquiry had victims and survivors at its very heart. They were built into its process and consulted all the way along—at the start, during and after it. Many victims and survivors have said that they want that report to be implemented in full—that is their priority. Alexis Jay's clear demand is to get on with it. That is exactly what this Government are doing.

In Rochdale, a predominantly Pakistani-heritage grooming gang raped our local girls and tarnished our town's good name. Andy Burnham's independent inquiry into the council and police failures in Rochdale was published last year. Like the Jay report, the Rochdale report listened to victims and came up with recommendations. Crucially, the prosecutors and police have been able to get on and pursue further prosecutions as a result. That is what the public want. Their priority is locking up these paedophiles, and making sure that they get the strongest possible sentences and are brought to court swiftly.

Telford is another excellent example of a local inquiry that builds on the survivors' experience and makes sure that they are involved all the way along. They know what the flaws are, what the best solutions are and how they can be embedded locally and nationally. It is clear from the Greater Manchester inquiry that the central failure was working-class girls not being believed or respected, and the police thinking that their cases would not stack up in court. That was also the problem in the abuse of boys by Cyril Smith, which I had a role in exposing as a journalist more than a decade ago. Working-class youngsters were simply not believed by the authorities, locally or nationally. It was this Prime Minister, as Director

[Paul Waugh]

of Public Prosecutions, who brought in real change to make sure that those working-class voices could be heard in court.

The additional problem in Rochdale was delays in multi-agency working: social workers and the police not getting their act together, not getting the right specialist help and not spotting the patterns of organised abuse. We need specialists within police forces—rape specialists and child protection teams. We need to disrupt this wherever it happens and be tough on the sentencing. But what I loathe is the suggestion that this should be a political game. It sickens me that politicians can think that another party can be damaged or tarred by the idea of child abuse. I pay tribute to Theresa May for setting up the child abuse inquiry and to the former Prime Minister for setting up the grooming gangs taskforce. We should have cross-party consensus on this and maintain it at all costs.

It is sad to see that certain Reform party Members are simply not here today. A responsible politician does not ride the wave of justified anger about child abuse; they do something about it. We can have a robust debate about policy, delays, action or inaction, but to suggest that someone who disagrees is somehow complicit in or endorses child abuse is completely unacceptable. The real danger in all this is that politics will suffer and the victims will suffer.

I pay particular tribute to Sara Rowbotham, the former health worker in Rochdale who later became a Labour councillor. Her tireless work led to the exposure of the grooming gang in our town. Sara was played by Maxine Peake in the BBC drama “Three Girls”, the broadcast of which led to huge change and justice for many girls, not just across Rochdale but across the whole country. There is a remarkable effort in Rochdale—a collective movement that has long been at the forefront of protecting women and girls from domestic and sexual violence.

Our town is not just a place of resilience, but a beacon of hope, support and empowerment of the most vulnerable in our society. I pay tribute to the exceptional individuals leading this work: Khaldha Manzoor, CEO of the Rochdale Women’s Welfare Association; Kathy Thomas, CEO of Rochdale Connections Trust; and Councillors Sameena Zaheer, Janet Emsley and Amber Nisa. They have all driven this work. Finally, I must pay tribute to the youngsters. Falinge Park high school’s white ribbon ambassadors and initiatives by the Rochdale Islamic academy girls school demonstrate how education can play a pivotal role in preventing abuse and changing societal attitudes.

Rochdale stands as a testament to what can be achieved when individuals, charities, public institutions and political parties unite for a common cause. Let us honour their efforts not just with words, but with the continued support that they need to thrive.

3.4 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I very much welcome the Government bringing this important debate to the House today.

Every single day, 3,000 crimes of violence against women and girls are recorded. That is 3,000 acts of harm inflicted on women in our society. Yet according to the End Violence Against Women coalition, the true

figure is likely far higher, as so many victims simply never come forward. One in 12 women will become a victim of these crimes each year, while it is estimated that one in 20 people will be a perpetrator annually, although, again, the actual number is thought to be significantly greater. These figures are not just statistics; they represent lives disrupted, confidence eroded and safety stolen.

Violence against women and girls is horrifyingly prevalent in our society. Too many women feel unsafe walking down their own streets, in their homes and workplaces, and online. The reality of this violence has been felt profoundly in my constituency: in 2023, Emma Pattison and her seven-year-old daughter were brutally killed by her husband. There were warning signs of coercive, controlling behaviour, but they were not picked up on. The loss of Emma and Lettie Pattison should serve as a reminder of how domestic abuse can escalate rapidly, and how we must be ready to listen to women and pick up on these signs of abuse. We must learn from such tragedies and act decisively to prevent others.

Our criminal justice system is failing women, survivors are not supported as they should be and, far too often, perpetrators evade justice. Online abuse, workplace harassment and daily intimidation are all too common, and they reveal a society that continues to let women down. We need a whole-system approach to tackle this issue. Criminal justice partners, Government bodies, voluntary organisations and industry must come together to improve early identification, risk assessment and the provision of support for survivors. Most importantly, when there are reports of any sort of violence or sexual misconduct, they must be taken seriously. We will not end this surge of violence against women and girls in our society if the police do not take women seriously, investigate the reported crime and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Liberal Democrats believe in a clear path forward that includes making misogyny a hate crime; fully implementing the Istanbul convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, with protections for all survivors, regardless of nationality or immigration status; and ensuring sustainable funding for refuge spaces and rape crisis centres to meet the overwhelming demand.

Survivors deserve better. They deserve domestic abuse specialists embedded in every police force, mandatory trauma training for officers and prosecutors, and real action to address the delays in the justice system that put women at further risk. Social media companies must also play their part by addressing the appalling abuse faced by women online, including Members of the House today. This is often how abuse starts. Transparency and accountability must be non-negotiable.

No woman should have to live in fear of violence; no girl should grow up thinking this is the norm. We have the tools and knowledge to make a difference; what we need now is the will to act. I welcome the announcements from this Government and the fact that they are maintaining this as a key priority, and I stand ready to work with anyone in this Chamber to build a safer, fairer society for women and girls.

3.8 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Before I begin, I want to remind everyone that every woman—and some men—has a story. Some are awful;

many are devastating, including those of women in this House, like myself. If anyone is feeling affected by this debate and the issues raised, either in the House or watching online, please reach out to the many amazing organisations; for people in Milton Keynes, MK-ACT is one partner. It is for women like me and the women of Milton Keynes that I extend my thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), because it is women like them who are making our lives safer.

Previous Governments have treated violence against women and girls as inevitable, or, more recently, a political opportunity, instead of the national emergency that it is. I feel sorry for the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), who I know feels strongly on this, but who is not in the Chamber today? There is not a single Reform MP, which shows how much they care. There is no show from the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who said that he really cared about the issue, and no show from the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who also said that he cared about the issue. I guess they care about it only when they can put out Facebook ads afterwards.

We are sick and tired of seeing women and girls facing the same threats of violence and abuse generation after generation. After Sarah Everard was killed, women across the country demanded action, but too little changed. After Raneem Oudeh was killed, we expected major overhauls of policing and the criminal justice system, but barely anything was done. After the reports and the reviews, not a single recommendation was enacted. The passive response from previous Governments to those devastating crimes was hopeless. For those of us who care, the constant frustration, the mourning, the tragedy and the inevitability of male violence against women and girls in this country is exhausting, but we will never stop fighting.

Every new case that makes the news of a woman killed by a husband, killed by a boyfriend, killed by a stranger or killed by an ex is a gut-wrenching reminder that you are never safe. Your daughter, your mother, your friend and your sister may never be safe, either. It has to stop. It happens everywhere, in every corner of the country and in every community. Unfortunately, it happened on Christmas day in Milton Keynes when two women, Joanne Pearson, 38, and Teohna Grant, 24, were killed.

While the previous Government did not do enough, they did not create the crisis alone. How do we sort it? By understanding it. That starts with the House becoming the first white ribbon Parliament in the world. I am grateful to the Leader of the House, the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers for their support in that.

We have to understand online radicalisation. A generation of young men are being raised in radical anti-women spaces online. Those used to be niche places that would have to be searched for on some kind of Telegram or 8chan channel, but they have been mainstreamed. Growing up, our children heard those jokes only from the drunk uncle in the corner who everyone ignored; now, they are there every day and have become popular with young and older men with aspirational lifestyles.

I have spoken before in the House about Andrew Tate, but he is just one of an endless supply of misogynists repackaging hate for women as standing up for men. The tactics and content used by these men to radicalise men in this country are the same psychological process used to radicalise Islamic extremists, yet the law, the press and the public do not treat it the same.

The harm is extreme, with one woman killed every week in the UK, and the average age for rape is now 14 years old. That has been compounded by violent pornography. One young man reported on by Laura Bates—for those who want to read more, she is fantastic on this issue—was asked:

“Why didn’t you stop when she was crying?”

He looked back, bewildered, and said:

“it’s normal for girls to cry during sex”.

That is what our young people—and older people—are facing.

We have to strengthen the Online Safety Act 2023 and ensure that the criminal law is robust and can keep pace with emerging technology issues, especially when we have social media tsars pushing their radical free-speech agendas that make our children less safe. We have to step up to prevent online radicalisation of our young men and boys and keep our women and girls safe online and offline. I believe in the Government’s mission to halve VAWG, I am proud of the work done so far, and I am proud of the women leading the effort to build a world where women can exist in online spaces without being exposed to sexist put downs and where we do not have to say, “This happened to me.”

3.14 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): We have heard many moving and personal accounts this afternoon from Members addressing the scourge of violence against women and girls. It is crucial that we continue to shed heat and light on this horrendous abuse—not just the horrific stories that make the news, but the hidden harms that we do not hear about. In 2024, domestic abuse-related crimes represented 15.8% of all offences recorded by police, with nearly three quarters of those victims being female.

The incident that I wish to highlight involves a young woman who was violently attacked outside a nightclub. The man who was her attacker was also her boyfriend at the time. By his own admission, the young man said he had only pushed her and she fell to the ground and was hurt. Court records subsequently revealed that he had repeatedly kicked her, “around four times”. It was reported in the *Daily Mail* that the attack was stopped only when two doormen dragged the attacker away from the young woman and then called the police. The man was arrested and charged with assault. *The Times* reported that he had initially denied the charge, maintaining his innocence, which meant that both his victim and witnesses were forced to relive the attack by giving statements to the police ahead of going to trial. The young woman herself was left with both injuries and lasting mental scars.

Speaking to the *Daily Mail*, the victim’s mother described how it had taken

“two security guards to pull him off her”.

She explained how he had

“left marks on her body”

from the violence of the assault, going on to describe her daughter’s attacker as “a monster” and stating:

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

“There is no way he should be an MP in the House of Commons representing people.”

As of July, that young woman’s attacker sits on these green Benches as a Member of Parliament. His constituents were made aware of the crime only when the story was reported in the *Daily Mail* on 12 July. After the story broke, the Member referred to it as a “teenage indiscretion”—even as recently as last weekend, during a fractious Sky News interview.

While the Member maintains that the assault was nothing more than an argument followed by a push where his former girlfriend

“fell over and...was hurt”,

the extract from the Chelmsford Crown court records relating to the conviction explains why the judge awarded a custodial sentence, stating that

“the sentence was not suspended in light of the serious nature of the offence”.

It states that the offence “requires immediate punishment”, and that a pre-sentence report indicated a

“lack of willingness to comply”

before the man eventually submitted a late guilty plea.

I find it incredible that a Member of this House has a conviction for a violent assault on a young woman, his own partner, receiving an immediate custodial sentence for it. In a previous interview with Sky News, there was a refusal from the very top of the Reform party to acknowledge that female constituents who might have suffered domestic abuse or violence might be uncomfortable with having an MP who had been convicted of attacking a woman. The party leader stated in November that the Member “wasn’t vetted at all”, but in July a party spokesman was quoted in the *Daily Mail* as saying that the party knew about the conviction because the Member had been

“entirely honest with us when he applied to become our candidate”.

On-the-record comments from the party leader and the party spokesman appear to contradict one another completely in respect of what was known. The Reform party appears to have knowingly put up a candidate with a conviction for attacking a woman—a party that does not believe that violence against women and girls should be taken seriously if the perpetrator is one of their own. We in this House, constituents and the wider public deserve to know precisely what Reform knew about this conviction; what they were told, when they were told it, and what they chose to disclose in subsequent statements to the media.

I believe in the rehabilitation of offenders—I believe that the justice system needs to be rehabilitative in order to reduce the rate of recidivism, and that those who have served their sentences should be free to move on with their lives—but I also believe that being sentenced for such a heinous crime should mean forfeiting some of the privileges that those of us who have never attacked a woman are granted. One such privilege is being a Member of Parliament. If the conviction in question had been related to a sexual offence, would it have been accepted here so comfortably?

Justice should not mean that victims are forced to see those convicted of attacking them being elected as Members of this House because there was no requirement to disclose their past. The Government have pledged to

halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and to provide victims with better support. The presence of a Member of Parliament with a conviction for violently assaulting a woman has never been acknowledged in this House, let alone addressed. Any debate in the House on the subject of violence against women and girls should address the convicted criminal already in our midst. As this Government shape their legislative agenda, I ask the Minister to consider whether it is time to introduce legislation that bars those who have served a custodial sentence for violence against women and girls from standing as a Member of Parliament.

3.19 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I want to thank all my colleagues for their valuable and powerful accounts, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), who has worked so hard on this issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh), who has done a great deal to assist in community cohesion.

Violence against women and girls is undeniably difficult to speak about, especially as so many of us have suffered and will know friends and family who have been affected. Before I begin, I would like to express my solidarity with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who has received further vile and misogynistic attacks this week. I hope members of the official Opposition are brave enough to do the same and call out these vitriolic attacks for what they are. My hon. Friend has always shone brightly as a beacon for all victims of violent and sexual abuse.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, it feels like nothing has changed since the 1980s, when I went to university in Leeds in the wake of the Yorkshire ripper. Women’s behaviour is still dictated by fear of rape and violent attack. Violence against women and girls is a national emergency, not the inevitability that previous Governments have treated it as. We are sick and tired of seeing women and girls facing the same threats of violence and abuse, generation after generation.

Recent generations have faced the new threat of image-based abuse. My colleagues and I on the Women and Equalities Committee investigated image-based abuse and produced a report, which recommended that the Government take action to protect victims. I am pleased that the Government will introduce three new offences to combat image-based abuse. These are steps in the right direction—steps that will protect more women from revenge porn and will hopefully lead more victims to feel confident in reporting perpetrators.

We can go through statistic after statistic, but I want to speak about the experience of one of my constituents, who was brave enough to share her story with me and asked me to share it with the House. Olivia, in her words, was love-bombed before her abuse started. Her abuser emotionally manipulated her and then strangled her and left acid in her car. She did everything that we ask of victims. She called the police. She reported everything at the time and had witnesses who spoke to the police, but she was too scared to tell them about all the abuse that was happening. Then her perpetrator made her believe that he was the victim and convinced her to drop the charges and continue their relationship.

They went away on holiday. There, the abuse continued, and she had to get the police involved abroad. She decided to end the relationship shortly after, but it did not end there.

Her abuser harassed, stalked and threatened her at her own home and in public. Again, she did everything right. She called the police on every occasion to report it. When he was finally arrested, no further action was taken because there was not enough evidence to convict him. When she first reported him, she was told that he would be convicted and charged for non-fatal strangulation, but he still walks the streets, and it is her who must live in fear of what could happen next.

We must confront the uncomfortable reality that even when victims of violence report domestic abuse to the police, they do not get the help they need. I asked Olivia whether there was anything she would like me to share, and she asked me to tell the House that

“when a girl or woman approaches the police, faster action needs to be taken as the perpetrators can very quickly get back into our heads and feel that we are the problem and women are more likely to drop the case, there should be more support from the police when victims ask for cases to be dropped”.

We know that domestic abuse is much more than physical abuse. Coercive control leaves victims helpless and unable to escape their abusers, like Olivia says. It is time we made sure that our first responders, police and ambulance crews know what coercive control looks like. We must make sure that teachers teach their students about coercive control, and that cases of coercive control are spotted and taken seriously by the police before it is too late, as was the case with another of my constituents, who sadly lost her daughter.

The Government’s new ministerial board on tackling violence against women and girls will bring together Ministers from the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Department for Transport, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and many more Departments, to ensure that for the first time we have a truly cross-Government approach to violence against women and girls. I urge them to ensure that tackling coercive control is at the centre of that approach.

This cross-Government approach and the introduction of domestic abuse specialists into 999 control rooms as part of Raneem’s law give me hope in the fight against gendered violence. We have a long way to go, but I am proud to be part of a Government who are committed to tackling misogyny, halving violence against women and girls and taking action now to make that a reality in every corner of our society.

3.25 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very important debate, and I pay tribute to right hon. and hon. Members for their extremely powerful, informed and personal contributions.

According to the Office for National Statistics, 851,062 domestic abuse-related crimes were reported in England and Wales in the year ending March 2024. The NSPCC has reported that police in England and Wales made an average of 669 child protection referrals per day to social services in the last year. This week, I have been shocked to hear that an average of 500,000 children a year might be being abused in our country. We in this place must do

everything in our power to protect those who have been victims and those who may end up becoming victims through our inaction.

I do not want to make this a party political issue. I recognise the potential failings of the last Government to inform the debate, but I acknowledge the positive steps that they took in this space. However, we are here today because those steps were not enough, and I am grateful to those on the Opposition Benches for supporting the motion.

The root causes of VAWG are not excuses for perpetrators to commit crimes, but they may lead to higher risks or a more difficult experience for those affected. Austerity and the devastating cuts to public services reduced funding for services that support victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and the cuts have led to fewer resources and support options for women in need. The weakening of social welfare programmes through policies aimed at reducing social welfare spending can disproportionately affect women, who are more likely to rely on such programmes. That leads to increased economic insecurity and vulnerability to abuse. There are insufficient legal protections and a lack of funding for the courts, and there has been criticism of the enforcement of laws relating to domestic violence and sexual abuse. Inadequate training for law enforcement and judicial personnel can result in poor handling of cases and insufficient protection for victims.

There is also a lack of focus on gender equality. Policies that do not actively promote gender equality can perpetuate systemic issues that put women at risk, because they do not address the gender pay gap, the lack of affordable childcare, the insufficient support for women in the workforce, and the failure to implement the recommendations of the Jay review in order to support victims of child sexual abuse and protect children from the same risks.

A constituent came to my surgery and recounted her experience. The person she was living with had drugged and raped her repeatedly. She had reported this to the police, who promised to take immediate action and arrest the alleged perpetrator.

I will not go into the details here but, unfortunately, the perpetrator is currently living not very far from the victim who alleged abuse against him. I urge the Government to take immediate steps to protect those who have been abused, or who are making allegations of abuse, from the further trauma of living close by and having their alleged abuser walking the same streets, leaving them feeling unsafe every single moment of the day.

I welcome and commend the Government’s commitment to cutting violence against all women and girls by 50% over the next 10 years, and I associate myself with the positive policies that have been proposed, but I urge them not to leave any stone unturned and to put in place, once and for all, the maximum practical measures to reduce the harm to women and girls forever.

I draw attention to the plight of women and children in BAME communities. They face similar issues, but they also face language barriers, the fear of not being believed or understood, and the fear of discrimination by statutory services such as the police and social services.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about people needing to be believed. Could he talk about that a bit further?

Iqbal Mohamed: Every single person who reports a crime, especially violent or sexual abuse, must be taken seriously from the moment they present their issue to the relevant authority or any responsible person. Any person who turns a blind eye to such reports is directly or indirectly complicit. We need to tighten up the processes. Of course, we want to avoid miscarriages of justice, but it is really important that people are listened to.

Women and children in BAME communities fear they may become isolated from their family or community if they seek help or leave a relationship, or, where their immigration status is an issue, they fear they may lose their residency in the UK. It is therefore imperative that support services are culturally aware and sensitive to the needs of BAME women to provide them with specialised—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call David Burton-Sampson. I have to impose an immediate four-minute time limit.

3.32 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Tackling violence against women and girls is a job for everyone. We all know that tackling violence involves far more than just the police and the criminal justice system. Preventing abuse in the first place is crucial, and everyone needs to play their part.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) and others in expressing my disappointment that some seem to pick and choose which type of abuse they wish to champion. Abuse is not a political football. All should come together to tackle abuse.

Across Government, and with mayors, local councils and police and crime commissioners, we need to support strong preventive action. According to the crime survey for England and Wales for the year ending March 2024, 2.2 million women that year had experienced domestic abuse, 1.1 million had suffered sexual assault and 1.5 million had been stalked.

Of course, it is not just physical abuse that women experience; they also experience online abuse. My fellow members of the Women and Equalities Committee and I recently heard evidence from young women about the abuse they experienced through non-consensual intimate images and deepfakes. It was harrowing to hear about the long-term impact this abuse has had on those young girls' lives.

As we have heard, this Government have pledged to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and I am pleased by the action they are already taking. I must mention the tireless and dedicated work of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips). She has stood up and fought against violence against women and girls for many years, supported many victims and is now doing great work to influence the tackling of this issue in her role as Minister for Safeguarding and Violence against Women and Girls.

However, the issue is not just what the Government should do. Preventing abuse in the first place is crucial, and everyone needs to play their part. Men need to play their part—men need to do more. The charity White Ribbon wants to prevent men's violence against women and girls by addressing its root causes. It works with men and boys to change long-established and harmful attitudes, systems and behaviours that perpetuate inequality and violence.

It is clear that many young men are being warped by toxic influencers online. Police chiefs have warned that young men are being radicalised online. The police have demanded that technology companies act more quickly to take down extreme material. Schools have a role to play in providing high-quality, inclusive and effective relationships and sex education that is relevant to the realities of children's lives and empowers young people to understand the true relationship boys should have with girls: respect, respect and respect. That really matters. Men need to be champions of that cause and of women's safety.

Rachel Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend, who is my colleague on the Women and Equalities Committee, for everything he does to set an example to young men. Does he agree that we should call upon all our male colleagues to do the same in their constituencies?

David Burton-Sampson: I agree, and I call upon all men to do everything they can to champion the cause. Men need to be positive champions: there is so much we can do. We need to be allies, calling out poor language or behaviour in our own friendship groups when we witness it. We need to be conscious of our behaviour around women, such as keeping a distance if we are walking near a woman who is alone at night. If we see a woman being harassed on public transport, for example, we can be an active bystander by ignoring the aggressor and engaging the victim with a benign question, such as asking the time or offering a seat. That is non-confrontational intervention that can help diffuse a situation. There is so much more that we, as men, can do. We can all help. We need to educate, act and do more to support, and we need to drive down such behaviour once and for all.

3.37 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): It is a privilege to be here in the Chamber to experience so many astonishing speeches. I direct attention specifically to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), whose speech was one for the ages.

I preface my contribution with the acknowledgment that there are 263 women Members of this Parliament who are often best equipped to speak on matters that impact women and girls. However, in the case of violence against women and girls, it is important that men speak. We should not shy away from the fact that such violence is often inflicted by men, from across society and from all walks of life. The recent convictions of the men who raped Gisèle Pelicot brought to light some information that shook my faith even in myself. Among the men who raped her were a journalist, a councillor, a soldier, lorry drivers, farm workers and even—pause for a moment to consider this—a nurse.

One of the most shattering examples of violence against women and girls was the tragic case of Sara Sharif. Rarely am I moved to such anger as when I revisit that case. The man who tortured and murdered 10-year-old Sara was the one person whose primary responsibility as a human being was to protect his daughter. I echo the statement by the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who referred to labelling such men as monsters. To label him and the perpetrators of similarly disgusting crimes as monsters is to obscure an uncomfortable truth: they are often fathers and brothers, they are often our work colleagues. I note the absence today of the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) and his enablers.

Men across the country are outraged by violence against women and girls, but how many of us are ready to look in the mirror? Men taking a stand against demeaning language, inappropriate behaviours and toxic mentalities will prove central to winning the minds of men and boys, but we must also recognise it in ourselves. As with any other form of intolerance—I draw attention to the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who linked broader intolerance to the matter we are discussing—it is the othering of “them” and the validation of “us” that drives resentment.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): May I associate myself with the words of the Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and others on the comments made to the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls? I am appalled by the comments made online and by well-known members of the public.

Will my hon. Friend join me in wholeheartedly condemning public sexual harassment, including so-called cat calling, which is designed to harass, intimidate and humiliate women and girls? Shamefully, 68% of adult women have experienced sexual harassment by the age of 15. Will my hon. Friend also join me in asking the Government to pass the statutory instrument required to enforce the legislation passed last year on that?

Cameron Thomas: I absolutely stand by my hon. Friend’s comments. May I also congratulate him on the recent birth of his daughter? I am delighted that he will learn now, as I know, that there is nobody more blessed than the fathers of daughters.

The attention of men and boys is often won through divisive and even violent rhetoric and behaviours. It appeals to men’s frustrations. It frames women as opponents—some adversary to be controlled or defeated—or an object to acquire, possess and impose our will upon. For some of us, that rhetoric is first experienced in our own home, growing up. If not, then it is experienced in the playground. It is not long before toxic role models are in our social media feeds, with algorithms repeating and reinforcing toxic messages.

We can decide in this House to challenge toxic influence, predominantly through our schools. Boys and girls should be taught together to respect and appreciate each other for their differences, as well as for what they have in common. We should also mandate social media companies to publish the actions they take to address and control online abuse. Let me be explicit: those who do not measure up must have no such place of influence in our society.

I will end with an acknowledgment that withdrawing our armed forces from Afghanistan and leaving millions of women to the will of the Taliban is a self-made humanitarian tragedy. Together with our allies, for 20 years, we brought Afghan women freedom and hope for the future. With the US-planned withdrawal and our corresponding actions, we condemned and, in so many cases, returned them to a pitiful and hellish existence.

3.43 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I am honoured to participate in this debate and to follow such esteemed colleagues from all sides of the House.

Violence takes many forms, not just physical or sexual, but emotional, financial and coercive control. Those acts, which do not leave physical bruises, have just as bruising an effect—the effect cutting off the women on the receiving end from their families, from the friends who support them, and not necessarily from their abuser. It is the effect of cutting off women from the people who will provide support and help, and from those who will utter the immortal words, “Do you know you are living in an abusive relationship?” I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for what she said. We must not underestimate the power of those words, or the power of those friends. It was a person uttering those words that got me out. I did not believe it; I did not recognise it. I pooh-poohed it in that meeting, but then I sat back and reflected.

Every single one of us here will have come to the debate thinking of women we know—women we met before we came to this place. There were those who I represented in the trade union. There was one I sat in the car with and did the midnight flit with. They got out. I phoned managers and said that we needed to get her moved. There are people whose stories I do not have the privilege or the permission to tell, but one woman—one of my constituents—who did give me that permission got out of the relationship. She moved 400 miles to be beside her family and is now sitting in temporary accommodation, working part-time and on universal credit. She cannot get a tenancy in a private flat, because she does not have the good financial standing to get a reference. She cannot get a council house, because we have a housing emergency, and she has no children. She does not want to sit and wait for 10 years without work.

I know fine well that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and my hon. Friend the Safeguarding Minister know this inside out. I know that they can make the case that, as a joined-up Government, we need to solve the housing emergency, and we need to reform universal credit. It is only when we get this joined-up Government moving and working correctly—

Dame Karen Bradley: Would the hon. Lady like me to intervene?

Katrina Murray: I will continue, if that is okay; I do not need the time. I am good, thank you. Everything I had written down has gone. I have been struck by the power of words in this Chamber. People out there listen. As has been said, we are working for the good today. We need to make sure that everybody out there hears us working for the good. We believe everyone who comes forward, and we thank everybody who has shared their stories this week. Thank you all.

3.47 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Far from letting anybody down, the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) has lifted survivors up with her contribution today. One of them, who has been watching from home, is my mum, who suffered abuse at the hands of a former partner. I witnessed that abuse growing up, and that is apart from some of the things that happened to me. The statistic, and the reality, that two women a week are killed by their partner or former partner particularly terrifies me, and always has. That must

[Josh Babarinde]

change, so I sincerely thank the Government for their commitment to halving violence against women and girls over the coming decade. I also thank the Safeguarding Minister for the work that she has done on this issue throughout her career. The vast majority of us in this House know that no tech billionaire, no pound-shop Enoch Powell, and no keyboard warrior can take away that record from her. The silence from Reform party Members is utterly deafening today. They might tweet about this issue while we are debating, but they are not participating, and shame on them for that.

Domestic abuse is a foul manifestation of violence against women and girls, as the Government recognised when they set out their intention of excluding domestic abusers from the standard determinate sentences 40% early release scheme, but as they have said, people can be excluded from early release only on the basis of the offence that they committed, not other antecedents. A challenge is that it is not possible to comprehensively exclude domestic abusers because there is no dedicated offence of domestic abuse in law. Instead, many abusers are convicted of offences such as actual bodily harm and grievous bodily harm, which are governed by a piece of legislation from 1861 that was not written with domestic abuse in mind. Domestic abusers convicted of such offences are being let out early, or qualifying for early release. We have seen some such cases, and that loophole needs to be closed.

I convened survivors, academics and support organisations to come up with a solution, which exists in the form of a Bill that I introduced: the Domestic Abuse (Aggravated Offences) Bill, which would create a specific offence of domestic abuse in law for the first time. It would work in a similar way to racially and religiously aggravated offences by creating domestic abuse aggravated GBH, ABH or whatever it might be. Beyond giving the means for the Government to exclude domestic abusers from an early release scheme, it would tighten up some of the data, which is very difficult for academics and others to analyse when they are looking into the effectiveness of interventions.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that collecting data is so important in really getting to grips with the issue?

Josh Babarinde: I could not agree more, and I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. If we do not have the data that we want on domestic abuse offences, how can we measure whether we are halving violence against women and girls over this decade, and whether our interventions designed to reduce reoffending among domestic abusers are working?

The introduction of a domestic abuse aggravated offence could help employers with risk management; they could see it when it came up on a Disclosure and Barring Service certificate and press ahead accordingly. I am proud that Women's Aid and Refuge are backing my Bill. They want to see it made a reality. I thank them and many of those in the media for their support. I also thank Members of this House for supporting my early-day motion 523, and for giving me their support in private discussions, especially folks on the other side of the House. I also thank Ministers for my constructive meetings

with them, and the commitment that many have given that we will continue to discuss the Bill, with a view, I hope, to making it a reality. Lastly, and most importantly, I thank victims and survivors of domestic abuse, especially those I have had the honour of working with on the Bill, for their courage, resilience, hope and determination to ensure that others do not suffer as they have.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I ask Members to reflect on whether they should take interventions, given that they cost time and will squeeze out some Members who wish to speak, and who may have personal testimony.

3.53 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I thank all those who have contributed to this powerful debate. Violence against women and girls is a grave issue that urgently demands our attention and action. It is a distressing reality that countless women and girls across the UK continue to live in fear and face unacceptable violence. However, the digital era has led to a new arena for abuse, with the rise of online emotional abuse, emotional blackmail, harassment, pressure and coercion to send sexual images, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and technologies such as deepfakes presenting urgent challenges. Perpetrators are exploiting digital technology to escalate abuse online to the real world. Most worryingly, abuse is now faceless.

I will highlight online abuse in this debate. In deepfakes and synthetic media, a person's likeness is manipulated to create false and often explicit content, which is weaponised. It is disproportionately women and girls who are affected. Our 2023 report found that 98% of deepfake videos are pornographic, and 99% of victims are women. The recent Ofcom report sheds further light on the scale of the problem. Alarming, one in seven adults reports having seen sexual deepfakes. Even more troublingly, 17% of adults thought that deepfakes depicted someone under the age of 18. Those figures expose the harrowing reach of this technology and its potential harm to women, girls and young children. The report also highlights a critical gap in awareness. Nine per cent of adults say that they are not confident that they could identify a deepfake.

I welcome the Government's recent announcement on criminalising the creation of explicit deepfakes without consent. However, legislation is not enough. Ofcom's report underscores the need for a co-ordinated response involving Government, tech companies and civil society to tackle the issue. Developing tools to detect and remove harmful content is absolutely vital, as is ensuring that law enforcement agencies act swiftly to get the images removed. Education is equally important. Many victims are unaware of the risks, and public awareness campaigns can play a vital role in empowering individuals to recognise and report harmful content. Education is not just for the victims, but for young people, young men and men in society. Additionally, we must work with educators to ensure that we have the digital literacy to safely navigate the changing landscape.

While technology brings tremendous benefits to our lives, its misuse should not disproportionately affect women and girls. Legislation like that recently announced by the Government is a vital step forward, but it must

be accompanied by systemic change and cultural awareness to ensure that all individuals, including all women and girls, can live free from fear and abuse, online and offline.

3.56 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) on all the work she has done over the years standing up for women and girls and fighting violence against them.

Violence against women and girls by men is a societal epidemic, and it is right that we in this place and the Government treat it as such. The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's pledge to halve violence against women and girls over this Parliament, and we are keen to reform the law as soon as possible, and to accelerate what should be a national mission to stamp out this awful violence.

I particularly welcome the roll-out of the domestic abuse protection notices and orders pilot in Sutton borough, which covers my constituency of Sutton and Cheam. The orders will allow the police to take stronger, more immediate action in domestic abuse cases, and are a significant step forward, providing greater protections for victims and helping to ensure that abusers face the consequences of their actions without delay. In my borough of Sutton last month, we were tragically reminded of how urgent those protections are. The brutal murder of Gemma Devonish was a devastating blow to our community. Her death underscores the dire consequences of not providing all women with the critical support that they need. It is a dark reminder that those protections are not just necessary, but a matter of life and death. As with any kind of epidemic, we must recognise the warning signs, early indicators and normalised precursors that lead to this awful kind of violence.

Stalking is not just a crime against someone's safety; it is a violent psychological attack on their very sense of self. It chips away at their emotional wellbeing, their sense of security and their right to simply exist without fear. For far too many women and girls, this crime is a daily reality, yet despite previous legislative reforms, the system still is not properly protecting victims of this crime. Data shared with me via a freedom of information request shows that in London, more than one in three stalking cases ends with the victim withdrawing from the process. That is a shockingly high number, and it should concern us all. In some cases, that is because victims disagree with the proposed action, but many have told me that it is also because they feel unable to provide enough evidence, as the burden of proof to achieve a section 4A conviction is set unfathomably high.

When the law places such an onerous burden on victims who are so clearly suffering torment, it is our job in this House to home in on it as a flawed piece of legislation. The current law is inconsistent and confusing, and is failing victims as a result. The current division of stalking offences into sections 2A and 4A just is not working, and the confusion allows perpetrators to buy time and continue tormenting their victims with little consequence. I fear that victims, who are overwhelmingly women and girls, are essentially being told that they need to be the perfect victim to ensure that the police get a conviction. They repeatedly have to expose their pain and humiliation to the system just to secure fundamental protection from the police.

I draw the House's attention to a report published in September by the chief inspector of constabulary, the Independent Office for Police Conduct and the College of Policing. The report, driven by a super-complaint from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, has forced us to face the uncomfortable truth that many of us already knew: the system is failing women and girls. The report explores creating a single clear offence for stalking, rather than splitting it between sections 2A and 4A. The London Victims' Commissioner has echoed those calls, and I strongly encourage the Government to do the same. The Minister for Safeguarding has promised a review of the current stalking legislation, so I ask again for the timeline for that review. More importantly, when will we see real changes to the law to protect victims and hold stalkers to account?

4.1 pm

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the debate and pay tribute to Members for their testimonies. The points raised by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) and the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) relate very much to what I want to say.

This place has gained a terrible reputation, and not just in recent years, for predatory behaviour by those who have manipulated and used the exalted power of our elected positions to groom, touch inappropriately, sexually assault and rape many women and young men who have worked here. We are all aware of the scandals, and some of us will be conscious of the cover-ups. I liken it to the influence that Jimmy Savile was able to wield when he got the keys to Broadmoor—it is that dangerous. Although better reporting systems are now in place, more can always be done to clean this place up.

Every single one of us should have been required to undergo a Disclosure and Barring Service check before entering this House or the other place, particularly because our titles and positions open the doors to our public institutions, including hospitals, care homes, schools and children's clubs and groups. Checks would create more openness and greater transparency, and trust should start before we make phone calls asking for visits or meetings. The other place runs the Learn with the Lords education scheme, for example, and although Members regularly visit schools, there are no checks or child protection or safety considerations.

I also welcome the significant recommendation in the IICSA report to require improved compliance with statutory duties to inform the Disclosure and Barring Service of individuals who may pose a risk of harm to children. Although that would be a significant step forward, I want to raise our standard and begin the process immediately. As a prospective parliamentary candidate presenting myself as a suitable person for election, there was no requirement for me to provide a DBS or criminal record check. That simply is not good enough. Making the DBS check a necessary hurdle to entering Parliament would work to clean up politics, and I believe that it would lead to parties making better and more thorough choices about their candidates. I am here with the mission of cleaning up our politics and bringing the DBS check to Parliament, which would make it a safer place for us all to be in.

4.4 pm

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the Minister for her statement and for bringing this debate to the Chamber. As has already been mentioned, there

[Shockat Adam]

have been some powerful contributions today, none more so than that of my friend the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood). I also echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who mentioned that those who have a history of amplifying the voices of recorded misogynists are not welcome here to tell us how we should be running our country.

Secondly and possibly more depressingly, the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) mentioned that children watch pornography, and cited the statistic that one in 10 children has watched pornography by the age of nine. This has led to a horrendous rise in child-on-child sexual abuse; according to the police, 52% of recorded sexual crime is child-on-child, the youngest being a child only four years old who uploaded an indecent image and shared it. Much more needs to be done on this matter with our children. I thank the Minister for mentioning male victims of sexual violence, and I also thank a charity in my constituency, First Step, which does some incredible work on this issue.

It is really important that we focus on the needs of victims and survivors. That is why I would like to highlight some of the work that is being done in my constituency. Victims of rape, who have already had to endure such horrendous torture, are sometimes left behind and are victims once again because they get no support whatsoever. That is why for the past 35 years, Shama Women's Centre in my constituency has provided sanctuary for victims of domestic abuse, among other incredible work. It helps those victims back on their feet, giving them training, job skills, advice, financial help and somewhere to stay while they are hiding from the perpetrators. This really helps women as they strive for independence in their battle for a better life, and to get away from the horrendous abuse they have experienced. We must do more to protect our charity sector; charities are sometimes the last place that these women have to go to, because they have been neglected by everybody else. Financial support is really needed.

Josh Babarinde: On the subject of charities that support victims and survivors, yesterday I met representatives of Victim Support. They shared that, at a time when demand for their services is surging, they are facing a 7% real-terms cut in funding because of the increase in national insurance contributions, as well as cuts to police and crime commissioner budgets. Does the hon. Member agree that we should be doing more to support—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. If I am going to get every Member in—and I would very much like to do so—interventions must be short.

Shockat Adam: I agree with the hon. Member, which is why I have raised the issue of national insurance on a couple of occasions. In fact, Jasmine House, which supports women who are the victims of rape and already has a two-year waiting list, was looking to add an extra member of staff, but is now going to reduce its number of staff members. It just cannot afford it, because of the rise in national insurance contributions.

With 8,000 cases of domestic violence being reported to the police in Leicester alone, it is clear that we need to ensure that the charity sector receives increased long-term

funding, and that the police receive the best possible training on how to help the victims and investigate the cases. From our side, we offer cross-party support to help the Government however we can, to make sure that we can help with this matter.

4.7 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I commend all the speeches made this afternoon, particularly those made by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) and by my hon. Friends the Members for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) and for Rochdale (Paul Waugh). I have to confess that I felt quite shocked by some of the statistics and stories I heard, even though this is something I have been involved in for quite some time as a trade unionist. I also find myself warning my daughter to be careful when she goes out in a way that I would not with my son, even though they are of a similar age. That is unacceptable in this day and age.

Data published by the National Police Chiefs' Council in July 2024 found that over 1 million crimes of violence against women and girls were recorded by the police in 2022-23, equating to nearly 3,000 offences every single day, and that violent crime against women and girls increased by 37% during the five-year period between 2018 and 2023. Using data from the crime survey for England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics has found that domestic abuse-related crimes represented 15.8% of all offences recorded by the police last year. Domestic violence is something that affects all cultures and societies, as was acknowledged by the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies).

In my constituency of Wolverhampton West, we have the headquarters of the Haven Wolverhampton, a charitable organisation that provides practical and emotional support services to women and children who have suffered domestic violence, abuse and homelessness. The Haven has been established for more than 50 years and is one of the largest refuge providers in the UK, but like other charities it requires financial support to assist these women and children. As a society, we need to maintain and increase such provision throughout the country, and ensure that these organisations get the financial support they need.

We also need to safeguard victims of domestic violence in other ways. Currently, a survivor of domestic violence may be eligible for a debt solution to clear the debt accumulated during their abusive relationship, but once a debt solution is approved, their home address is published online on the individual insolvency register, which anyone can see. That is obviously terrifying for those who have been victims of domestic abuse, because it makes them vulnerable to further harm from their ex-partners, who can find their address online. There is an option to have their details hidden by obtaining what is known as a person at risk of violence order, but this requires them to pay £308 and attend court, which can be very difficult for traumatised survivors who are already in debt. I think that we should look at abolishing the fee for PARV orders.

I am very proud that this Labour Government have already taken steps to halve violence against women and girls within a decade by, for example, introducing Raneem's law, which from this year will see domestic abuse specialists placed in 999 control rooms, and launching the pilot of domestic abuse protection orders, as well as

rolling out the independent legal advocates for rape victims. However, having heard everyone this afternoon, I am sure the House would agree that we all need to strive to do even more.

4.11 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I am humbled to take part in this debate. I do not have my own personal testimony to offer, but the issue of violence against women and girls has become very evident to me in my years as an MP through my constituency surgeries. First, I have learned how hard it is for women to get away and, once an abuser has them in their sights, how very difficult it is for them to escape. Secondly, as has been highlighted, not least by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), I have learned how abuse can be perpetuated by some of the institutions in this country, such as His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the financial system and the family courts.

I had learned those things, but since my eyes were opened to the extent of domestic abuse in my constituency, I have really come to admire the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) for all the work she has done on this issue before she came to this place, as a Back Bencher and now as a Minister. I urge her not to be deterred from the incredible work she has been doing by the awful experience she has had this week. However, I saw her compassionate and typically forthright response to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) after her extraordinary speech, and all I can say is that I have been very reassured on that point. I just want to pledge my solidarity with the Minister for all she has been doing.

I want to raise two particular issues that have come through in my casework. Very recently, constituents of mine who have been victims of violence have told me stories of how evidence of criminal activity has been removed from a crime scene—a violent crime scene—without forensic evidence being taken. I have challenged the Met police about this, and apparently it is no longer commonplace for forensic exams to be conducted due to budget cuts. Consequently, potential key evidence that could have contributed to the safety of my constituents has been lost. I have heard further examples of safety equipment, including panic alarms, being removed from the houses of vulnerable victims who remain under the threat of being attacked, and I am talking about very credible threats to life. I was again informed that this was for budgeting reasons. I have written to the Minister about this particular case, and I really hope she will make time for a meeting with me to discuss it.

It is unacceptable that budget cuts are putting the protection and safety of domestic abuse victims at risk, and I really hope the Minister will be able to take this up with colleagues, because it is vital that victims who are under threat have sufficient safeguards in place to ensure their protection from past abusers. The cases that are being brought to my office have shown the immediate impact that Home Office cuts to policing are having on the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable victims. In many cases involving crimes such as rape and murder, victims and bereaved families do not attend trial to avoid further trauma, and the Minister will know, because we have discussed it directly before, that a constituent of mine who was drugged and raped by her then boyfriend

in February 2020 was quoted nearly £7,000 to access the transcript of the trial in which he was convicted with an 18-year sentence.

Without a transcript, many victims struggle to find out about the proceedings or why a certain verdict is reached. That is even more important in those cases where a not guilty verdict is returned. It is common for victims of violent crime to be advised by mental health professionals that a transcript of proceedings would aid their healing and help them process their experiences. In the previous Parliament, I introduced an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill which, had it passed, would have made provision for victims of crime to access a transcript of their trial free of charge. Victims can apply to the Crown court for a free transcript, but in many cases, such as that of my constituent, this request is rejected. I urge the Minister to take any steps available to her and to speak to colleagues about what more can be done to increase the availability of court transcripts to aid the recovery of victims.

4.16 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent and pervasive human rights violations in the world. As an ongoing survivor of domestic abuse and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on domestic abuse and violence, I know that it can affect women at all stages and in all aspects of their lives. As survivors, we are complex and multifaceted beings, and we are being let down, so I continue to advocate for the need for a multifaceted approach and a comprehensive and cross-departmental strategy that goes beyond criminal justice to social security, housing, employment, health and so on to address perpetrators and empower survivors. A whole-system approach is vital. In the time I have today, I will focus my remarks on the rights of survivors in the workplace.

On Second Reading of the Employment Rights Bill, I raised the point that domestic abuse could have an impact on an individual's working life through unexplained absences, lateness and negatively impacted performance. For one in 10 survivors, the abuse continues in the workplace, often with their partner turning up at their workplace or stalking them outside their workplace, which is something I know first-hand. The statutory guidance of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 reminds us how pivotal the role of an employer can be.

Soon after the general election concluded, the APPG on domestic abuse and violence met and discussed how parliamentarians can advocate for the rights of survivors in the workplace. There are calls from organisations, campaigners and Members across the House in that regard, which I will raise now. First is the call for a right for victims of domestic abuse to take leave of absence from work and for regulations to be introduced to give effect to that right, including a minimum of 10 days of paid leave. Survivors may need to take time off work and may not be able to return to work immediately after escaping a perpetrator, for example. They may need time to seek emergency health or housing needs, attend court and so much more.

I draw the House's attention to the fact that 10 days of paid leave for domestic abuse survivors is a provision available in Northern Ireland. Paid leave measures have

[Apsana Begum]

also been implemented in other parts of the world, such as New Zealand, the Philippines and some states in the USA. I acknowledge that a handful of organisations in the UK provide paid leave for domestic abuse survivors, but many of us believe that right should be accessible to all survivors, no matter who they work for.

Many of us would also like to see protections for workers from adverse treatment if they are, or are suspected to be a person affected by domestic abuse. That surely must include protections from being dismissed to ensure a survivor's long-term earning potential is not negatively impacted, as well as ensuring financial independence and freedom from economic abuse in many cases.

My final point on employment rights and domestic abuse survivors is about the work that organisations, campaigns, such as those led by the Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse, and trade unions have done to ensure that employers take all reasonable steps to prevent workers from experiencing domestic abuse. Those steps could include implementing domestic abuse policies in every workplace and ensuring that risk assessments are done for every worker who discloses domestic abuse. That would surely be a progressive next step forward in the struggle to eradicate violence against women and girls from all parts of our society.

The history of challenging violence against women and girls has always had pioneering activism and fighting for social change at its heart. Because of so many survivors around the world, I would never allow my voice to be silenced. The next step is to look at how we support survivors to make sure that no one has to experience abuse in the workplace.

4.19 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I want to make a brief contribution to this incredibly powerful debate, to draw attention to a specific and extreme form of violence against women and girls that is taking place right now across the whole of the United Kingdom: trafficking and modern slavery. Women and girls are trafficked into and around the UK, for sex and for other forms of exploitation such as labour exploitation and domestic servitude. They are among the most vulnerable people in our society.

Before being elected, I worked for three years on anti-trafficking in Scotland. The stories from my time there will haunt me: women trafficked and forced into prostitution, forced by their captors to have sex with multiple men a day with the money going to their captors, and forced to participate in pornography. These are women with no social networks and no knowledge they were even in Scotland. We say, "Listen to women". These women did not have the English language skills to say no. There are pimping websites where men would leave reviews of the women they had paid to have sex with. I will not quote them, but they are spine chilling. It was perfectly clear that these men knew that the women were trafficked, coerced and unhappy. Some comments showed that that was the point. They knew that some were girls, not women.

We must do more to tackle this extreme violence against women and girls. I want to make four brief points. First, let me do something unusual and praise the previous Government. The Modern Slavery Act 2015

set up structures that were important and effective—the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), who is in her place, was instrumental in that—but it has fallen into severe abeyance. The focus on supposed abuse of the modern slavery system has all but wrecked the good system we had. Extremely long waits for the national referral mechanism have made it essentially dysfunctional, and we no longer give women who seek help the assurance that they will not be deported or prosecuted. This is important: no woman is complicit in her own abuse.

Secondly, we must support frontline organisations. The organisations that support vulnerable women operate on a shoestring budget, such as the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance in Scotland. We have to stop making these organisations apply for funding every year. On that note, when I was working in Scotland, across the sector, even people who were quite suspicious of the Labour party, always spoke extremely highly of the Safeguarding Minister.

Thirdly, we must prevent re-trafficking. I consider it the biggest failure of the British state that women who escape their traffickers and come to the state for help later find themselves back in the hands of their traffickers. Small basic interventions and joined-up thinking would prevent that. But too often we say, "Well, you're rescued now. Off you go and make yourself a life." These vulnerable women fall back into the claws of their traffickers. It should shame us all.

I was a bit nervous about participating in this debate because I am conscious that the fight to stop violence against women must be led by women. We do not need men pontificating about what they think should happen. But I think there is a role for men, not just because men are also trafficked in the UK but because concepts of masculinity are changing for my generation and men younger than me.

Rebecca Smith: Earlier in my contribution, I referred to Man Culture. If I can be of any assistance at all in the hon. Gentleman's quest to find some examples, another organisation I would be delighted to recommend to him is Beyond Equality. If there is anything I can do, I would be happy to do that.

Chris Murray: I very much welcome the hon. Lady's contribution, because it will be for both genders to step up. We can see concepts of masculinity transforming before our eyes, exacerbated by the internet but also by political interventions. It is incumbent upon us—the younger generation of men—to stand up and face that head on.

Trafficking is one of the most extreme kinds of violence against women. It is happening all over the UK right now. We can do more to stop it, and we must.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now have a three-minute limit.

4.24 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): In my very short time in this place, I have always been conscious of the history of this Chamber and the speeches that have been made in the years and decades previously. However, this debate is the first time I have spoken where I have been aware that whatever I say will be dwarfed by what has been

said in speeches previously by every Member who has spoken. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) was absolutely right: this is the House at its absolute best.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I will speak a little bit about some campaigners in my constituency. First and foremost, I will mention the families of Holly Newton and Joanne Tulip, and in particular Joanne's mother, Doreen Soulsby, who has been a diligent and doughty campaigner for more than a quarter of a century. I also pay tribute to the work of Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services; in my first month after being elected, I was extremely honoured to be asked to become one of its patrons. I celebrate the work that Sharon Brown and her incredible team do in providing support to some of the most vulnerable people in England's most sparsely populated county. One thing I would like to do as a result of this debate is to invite the two Ministers on the Front Bench, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), to come up to Hexham to see the work being done by NDAS. I would be absolutely honoured to welcome them and to celebrate the work Sharon and her team have been doing. Since April 2024 alone, NDAS has been into 23 schools across Northumberland and worked with almost 2,000 children on the perils of domestic abuse.

Ultimately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) was just saying, it can be tough to figure out our place in this debate as men. It needs to be led by women. However, if we do not stand up and speak, we are complicit in contributing to that culture of silence.

I have only a minute left, so I will not detain the House's attention for too long. I am aware that in this debate, as in so many others, we stand on the shoulders of giants. I was very pleased to be sent an email by my office manager during this debate from a constituent of mine, saying to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley just how supportive she is, and how supportive constituents across all our constituencies are, of her tireless dedication to women across the country and to safeguarding them.

4.27 pm

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): Other Members have said what an honour it is to speak in this debate, with such expertise from so many; I have been struck by not just the passion, but the compassion from Members across this Chamber. I am pleased to rise and speak in this debate.

Others have mentioned the great work this Labour Government are already doing to reduce and halve violence against women and girls, so, given the time limitations, I will not recount that. I acknowledge that one in four women in the UK will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. In Merseyside last year, nearly 20% of all crimes were related to domestic abuse. I do not think, therefore, we can underestimate the impact of our getting this right.

Economic abuse involves an abuser restricting a victim-survivor's ability to acquire, use and maintain money. It is an insidious form of abuse that means survivors—overwhelmingly women—remain with abusers because

they do not have the money or resources to flee. The charity Surviving Economic Abuse, which I have mentioned in this House before, has found that almost 1 million women were prevented from leaving because of this form of abuse—1 million women. Even if a victim-survivor does manage to leave, economic abuse often continues: wrecked credit scores prevent them from accessing the most basic items, such as a mobile phone; joint mortgages tie a survivor to their abuser so they can continue malicious control; perpetrators sometimes cruelly withhold maintenance payments for children or deliberately make unreliable payments, leaving survivors unable to afford the basic needs of them or their children.

The Government are serious about changing the story and ensuring that levels of violence against women and girls fall. To do this, they must put economic abuse at the heart of their work. It is the key to breaking the cycle and to helping survivors to rebuild their lives.

I heard many harrowing stories during my campaigning of inspiring women facing the most sickening abuse. I pay enormous tribute to one survivor who came forward with her experience—I cannot tell the House the whole story—with Citizens Advice Wirral, which helps such people rebuild their lives. As has been mentioned, support is available from so many people who are doing excellent work. The stories that we have heard show just how important it is that we work in partnership in our communities and in this place to deliver for survivors.

In my final moments, I pay tribute to the survivors. Their work and their bravery has pushed Governments of all colours and financial institutions to improve the lives of survivors. They inspire me, and I will continue to work in this place to eradicate economic abuse.

4.30 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her opening speech. Equally, as hon. Members across the House have done, I thank the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), for her continued championing of this hugely important issue. I will take a moment to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for their incredible strength in telling us their personal stories. I am genuinely ashamed to live in a society where some people see it as acceptable to go up to a woman and tell her that they want to rape her. I find that disgusting. The sad reality is, many of us are not surprised by that. Women I know have experienced online abuse where exactly that sort of language has been used towards them. It is not acceptable. It is disgusting. I am ashamed that we live in a society where that happens.

I want to take a moment—I have only got a moment—to thank two local champions in my constituency who have done so much to raise this important issue time and again: Councillor Lanie Shears and Councillor Kay Morrison. Every year on White Ribbon Day, Kay organises a vigil in Harlow town centre where she and other community champions read out the name of every single woman and girl who has been killed by a man in the previous 12 months. That takes 20 minutes. Last year, they raised a motion on Harlow council calling on all councillors, council leaders and civic leaders to lead by example in their strategic leadership,

[Chris Vince]

in changing cultures, in raising awareness and in engaging with men and boys, because, as the Minister said at the start of the debate, everybody needs to play their part to get this right.

I really recommend that everybody does the White Ribbon training, which gives practical advice on how we can support women. But this issue is about more than that. It does not start with attacks on women or rape or murder. It starts with comments in the workplace—misogyny and banter. That is what needs to change. We have to change the culture. We have to educate men and boys. We have to say, “Enough is enough.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

4.33 pm

Mims Davies: With the leave of the House, I am grateful to respond to the debate on behalf of His Majesty’s official Opposition. The spirit of the debate has been strident. We have not always been wholly in agreement, but where we have disagreed, we have done so with respect and kindness, which is exactly how I approach this issue. I know that the Ministers opposite me do exactly the same. It is not easy to move from being a campaigner to a Minister. As MPs, we are campaigners for our own constituencies; that unites us all.

I am grateful for the range of contributions made by all hon. Members. It is right that we did not shy away from what needed saying, and I will take a moment to cover a few matters that came up. I must reiterate that in our 14 years in government, a huge amount of work was done in this area. None of it is easy, and none of it is done on its own.

I am grateful for the work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), in her role as Minister for Women and in the Home Office; by the former Safeguarding Minister, Laura Farris; by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Dame Priti Patel), in all her time in government; and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley).

As I said earlier, this is about building on the foundations established by many women and much partnership work across constituencies and sectors. I think of the work of Maggie Blyth, who stepped up as the national police lead in the wake of the brutal murder of Sarah Everard, following on from the work of the Casey review, listening to women’s testimony and working on that basis of it. I think of Festus and his time as Bedfordshire’s police and crime commissioner; I remember joining him to learn how mobile phone technology from the Home Office could be downloaded within 24 hours to help women and girls get the justice that they need.

Operation Soteria adopted a transformative approach to tackling rape and other sexual offences: it was a game changer for women in policing, and had the impact that was needed on investigations and prosecutions. It is right that the cross-Government tackling violence against women strategy of 2021 built on the work of those who came before. We have heard about the national communications campaign and the Enough campaign. We know of the work to criminalise virginity testing, the work that we did to change the taxi licensing regime,

the £1.5 million a year spent on specialist support services dealing with revenge porn, and, of course, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which I mentioned earlier.

Let me now turn to some of the contributions that we have heard today. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) rightly talked about halting violence against women and girls, and also said that she felt somewhat sorry for me, which I appreciate. However, I must reiterate that the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which we debated yesterday, contains no additional work in this realm. These debates are important, and the Minister knows that. We need to do more than engage in general debates in the pursuit of justice. I welcome the work that was outlined by the Safeguarding Minister earlier, and we in the Opposition will certainly focus on the full eradication of deepfakes.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), victims can never easily move on from the violence perpetrated against women and girls. Offenders may forget the details after their rehabilitation, but we and our constituents know that the victims will never forget. My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) pointed out the juxtaposition between what is done by the political party called Reform and its belief that other parties do not turn over the stones. What he said was right: no barrier should be unbroken when it comes to talking about what happens to women and girls. Where political differences exist, we can say in unity that we in the House must continue to enable women and girls to feel safe. We must agree that people can turn their lives around only by telling the full truth, which is how victims and survivors can feel that true justice has taken place.

I welcome the cross-Government approach described by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), and her focus on the subject of coercive control. Nothing will get done about that without cross-Government working, and I was very much part of that as a Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) viewed male violence against women and girls through a public health lens, and said that a community partnership was vital. She also spoke about the dedicated work that needs to be done to protect single-sex spaces. Whether it is done in the NHS, by the police or through charities, we need a full picture, and guidance, showing what women and girls expect, so that male violence against them is dealt with and people feel safe through that public health lens and, more important, in those spaces.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), who is no longer in her place, spoke movingly, poignantly and bravely about the fact that the victims and perpetrators are the people we know and love. It was staggering to hear her say that women still feel like they literally have to fight for their lives. She spoke about rape threat culture, and said she was worried that her speech looked like a self-indulgent rant. Speaking up is never a self-indulgent rant. Dealing with the toxicity, bringing the power of women into the debate and calling people out is exactly the bravery it takes, and I pay tribute to her on behalf of my party.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), who is a very brave lady, spoke about the importance of employment and how it can bring someone into the next stage of their life. I pay tribute to somebody I worked with stridently at the DWP who worked on the

employers domestic abuse covenant, which can help get people into work and on to the next steps of life. I hope she will lean into that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) spoke about the change in the perception of what love is and the fact that, through social media aggression, violence in a loving relationship is apparently becoming a norm. She talked about the normalisation of abuse in relationships, how it is confusing for our young men and boys to know what love is, and the link between porn culture and desensitisation. She was right to talk about degrading acts that are not acts of love—they are acts of aggression and violence—and to say that we need to help young men and boys not to get caught up in that culture.

That leads me on to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands, who spoke about AI and tech, about helping men to find the solution, how we deal with these challenges and how our way of life is being undermined, which is very concerning. Despite the coercive control laws, the multi-agency working and the VAWG strategies of 2016 and 2021 and the one coming from this Labour Government, there is a change in the challenges of female genital mutilation, modern slavery, grooming and domestic abuse—and I reiterate that it is not domestic abuse; it is criminality in the home. It is not acceptable, and we must always treat it accordingly and root it out. Whether it is the updated internet safety strategy or other work, all of society needs to get behind the challenge that tech and AI will present.

I thank the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for the focus that she is bringing to this issue, including on the importance of good male role models and the work on deepfakes.

I turn to grooming gangs. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), intervened on me at 1.18 pm to say that the ethnicity data on grooming gangs is collected and published. Will she and her team place a copy in the Library or share it directly with my office, so that we can be clear what data is currently available and where it is linked to? For clarity, we want police-recorded grooming gang ethnicity data, not self-reported CSE data. This links to the previous Government's announcement of April 2023. This proper data was welcomed by Professor Jay, and it is very important. This is not about politics; it is about clarity and not letting this issue lie. The IICSA report looked at six towns out of what is now reported to be 50, so victims' voices have simply not all been examined.

I want to turn to bandwagoning. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) rightly spoke about listening to the voices of the victims. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), the shadow Education Minister, said that we are not going to let this lie when it comes to grooming, because we must not screen out women's and girls' voices. If we agree with the bandwagon, apparently it is fine, but if we do not agree with the bandwagon, apparently it is "politicising" to call something out. Many of us are here focusing on and dealing with causes because we are on the bandwagon—we believe it. It is what has brought us to frontline politics. We will never let it go. Bandwagoning can also come with purpose and real change. If we are going to not just halve violence against women and girls but eradicate it, let us not be afraid to deal with bandwagons.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): As a Minister, I get given a speech that I am told to read out, but the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) reminded me who I am today, so I am going to give an impassioned speech. The first person I will respond to is the Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies). [HON. MEMBERS: "Shadow Minister!"] Sorry, the shadow Minister. No, she is not actually the shadow Minister; the shadow Minister with this brief is not here. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp)—he certainly got on the bandwagon—is not here. The shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), is not here. The Conservatives had to have the same person starting and finishing the debate.

Do you know what? I will give credit to the last Conservative Government for the work that they did. I worked with many Members on the Opposition Benches to carry out lots of that work, but what happened was that loads of brilliant words were written on goatskin and rolled up somewhere in this building. Really good legislation was passed, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which I remember being a Bill, because I worked on it—not that I am jumping on a bandwagon, too. What did not happen was actual, fundamental change on the ground.

Being in this debate has been a little bit like being at my own memorial. My husband said that my house looks like a funeral parlour. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) said she was pleased to see that my gumption has not gone away; I am indeed very much not dead.

I have had lots and lots of correspondence from grooming victims—some I have known for years, and some got in touch with me freshly to ask for help with their case, which of course we will provide—and lots of child abuse survivors. I will read out something that a child abuse victim sent me in the last few days:

"I'm a victim and survivor, and I gave evidence to the IICSA inquiry. I am angry at the lack of response."

He goes on to say:

"We haven't resourced the police, the courts, victim support, therapies, schools, councils, and I am angry that men, by and large, have turned this into a political football."

Lots of good words have been written on goatskin in this place. The hon. Member for Richmond Park said that cuts have meant that panic alarms have not been put in place and so forth. My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) mentioned some of the cuts in her area; lots of people mentioned the issue. Do you know what has actually happened? It is harder than it has ever been for a grooming victim to get a house in this country—a place of safety where she can get away from the grooming, whether it be for sexual exploitation or county lines criminal grooming, in which we see terrible cases of knife crime. We could have amended the Domestic Abuse Act to give domestic abuse victims priority need. I pushed the amendment myself. Cracking! But it would have put them on a seven-year-long priority need waiting list.

As for the Conservatives' record on the courts and the criminal justice system, lots of Members have graciously talked about SDS40 today. The shadow Minister mentioned it at the beginning of the debate. All I can say is that

[*Jess Phillips*]

we—many of the people sat behind me, as well as the victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and the Home Secretary—worked tirelessly to make sure that this time, when it had to be done because of the terrible failures of the last 14 years, we put some exemptions into the system. I do not remember that happening before.

As the victims Minister mentioned, the absolute degradation of our justice system over the last 14 years has left rape victims waiting seven years. People can jump on the bandwagon, and can speak in this building on the subject—I welcome every single word that has been said—but it is action that is needed. “We accepted 18 of the recommendations.” Cracking! I have “accepted” that I am a size 10, but it is not fact. Accepting something does not make it so; it does not change things in people’s actual lives. That is my response to the first speech.

The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), mentioned Gisèle Pelicot. Many Members mentioned issues affecting women around the world, and we do not serve women in this country if we ignore the plight of women around the world. Gisèle Pelicot deserves to be the person of the year, or the century. What a woman! We have all watched what she has done with absolute pride.

Like me, the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) came to this place from the sector; it makes me very happy every time that happens. She talked about the femicide data and the sticky nature of the list of names that I read out in this place every year—my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) said that it is also read out in Harlow.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) talked about a case in her constituency that will go on this year’s list, which has not yet been read out. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), similarly, mentioned the murders on Christmas day in her constituency. I am not willing to keep that list long.

The Government have talked about the metrics by which we will measure change. Of course, I want to get rid of domestic violence and violence against women and girls completely, and I love the suggestion that halving it is unambitious, but I do not remember a previous target. There was no target. Femicide will absolutely be part of the targets. The murder of women by men will absolutely be something that we target and measure, because we count what we care about in this country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) said, focusing on perpetrators is vital. We are working with the police to develop a national framework, using data-driven tools and algorithms, to track and target high-harm offenders. For too long, we have looked only at victims. It is about time we really started to target offenders.

I will calm myself down for a moment. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) said that when she stands up in the House to scrutinise our work—she did not say “criticise,” but that was the intimation—it should be taken in good faith, just as she always showed good faith when under scrutiny from me and my sisters. That is absolutely how the

scrutiny will be received. She has a record to be proud of on both modern slavery and domestic abuse. She took a cross-Government approach to her work on violence against women and girls, and that iteration of the strategy was considerably better, and attempted to do much more, than the one that came later. I promise that my door will always be open to her.

The right hon. Lady talked about welcoming Raneem’s law. That legislation is inspired by a woman close to my heart who comes from Solihull—the neighbouring constituency, close to where I live—whose sister was murdered. When they rang 999, they got no response, so we will embed advice on risk assessments in 999 control rooms, not just make sure that there is somebody there who cares. The measures will ensure that there is real speciality in teams, so that victims are referred to appropriate services, not just given the emergency response that they need. We will seek to put dedicated domestic abuse teams in every police force in the country.

A number of Members talked about domestic abuse protection orders in their areas; I see the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) in his place. Domestic abuse protection orders are a good example of walking the walk, rather than talking the talk. The legislation was passed four years ago, but absolutely nothing was done. Then we took office, and set up schemes that are delivering arrests and custody for people who breach the orders. I suggested to the Home Secretary that we might ring a bell for every arrest we get during the pilot. It is all well and good writing words on goatskin, but they do not put people behind bars, or ensure that victims do not ever have to enter a courtroom to get somebody behind bars. That is the outcome we were all striving for, and that is what we have delivered.

When I became a Minister, I felt I may have left a Jess-shaped hole to be filled by somebody who would always hold to account the person standing at the Dispatch Box. I cannot think of anybody better to fill that Jess-shaped hole than my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft. She talked about funding; I want her to never stop moaning about that. Apart from the funding from Refuge, it is not okay that grants for the work she talked about come solely from the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, which are represented on the Front Bench by Ministers. It is not okay that health services across the country do not fundamentally take on this work.

We are grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) for her beautiful and impassioned speech, but it is not okay that looking at welfare is not a fundamental part of the duty of jobcentres in every part of the country. As many hon. Members have said, domestic abuse affects so many areas of the life of those affected, and just 10% of women affected get a criminal justice response. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), who is a brilliant advocate on this issue, said, working across Government is the only way to tackle violence against women and girls, and that is exactly what we will do.

I am running out of time. Before the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) took her seat, her predecessor, Sir Gary Streeter, came to me and said, “You will love the woman who I think will replace me—she’s an absolute cracker.” He was not wrong. She talked about a terrible incident in her area, and she led

a local response—essentially, an inquiry—that led to recommendations that changed things on the ground. Well done on that, because that is what works.

I want to make special mention of the deft manner in which my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) spoke, and I also want to mention Sara Rowbotham, the whistleblower in the Rochdale case. Hon. Members do not need to look in *Hansard* to see if I have referred to this case before; I wrote a book six years ago about Sara Rowbotham being a whistleblower in Rochdale. She is one of the bravest and best people I have ever worked with. As for the Johnny-come-lately shadow Justice Secretary, I look forward to reading the book he is writing on the subject.

I am about to run out of time. I just want to say a massive thank you to everybody who spoke; I am sorry I have not been able to mention them all. I cannot stress enough that the thing that matters is making something actually happen. As for waving flags, that time is over.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling violence against women and girls.

Debt Advice Services

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

5 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): “Follow that!” is the first thing to say. Let me try.

I will start by saying that often the British public would rather talk about sex than debt. Both can equally cause a lot of trouble, though. A 2019 study showed that the majority of people in this country believed it was easier to talk about miscarriages than about money. How that has changed in recent years, when the cost of living has become the top topic of conversation for millions of people because they are drowning in debt. Indeed, they are now the majority.

In my constituency of Walthamstow, nearly 55,000 people are in financially vulnerable circumstances. That is 58% of my local population and way above the national average of 38%. Yet the truth is that debt is suffocating millions of people in this country; it is not just a north-east London phenomenon. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recognised in October that there were 7 million low-income families in this country going without the essentials in the previous six months, including 5.4 million who had experienced food insecurity in the previous month. That is a fancy term for starving themselves because they could not afford to put food on the table. Furthermore, 4.3 million low-income households are in arrears on at least one household bill or credit commitment, and 14 million people in this country have less than 100 quid in their savings. One piece of Lego stuck in the washing machine and they are done.

Some would say that taking on debt in response to that is manageable—and it is for some people. That is how they have got through the crisis. However, that is not the one person every four minutes who is declared bankrupt or insolvent in this country. The Registry Trust estimates that 4.6 million people have one or more county court judgment. They are issued at a rate of 2.5 times more in lower-income communities such as mine than in higher ones. At the end of last year, lenders wrote off £576 million of debt, of which £291 million was credit card debt. That is £3 million a day being written off because people will just never pay it back.

Four million households hold a loan they originally took out to pay for food or housing—that is worth around £9.6 billion. Some £2.3 billion of that is owed on bills that have a massive consequence if people do not pay them or fall behind, such as council tax, rent or mortgages and energy bills—the kind where people end up losing their home or with the bailiffs at the door. It is not hard to see why. This is not profligacy; there is just too much month at the end of many people’s money.

High inflation since the end of 2021 has baked in higher prices in areas such as food, and energy costs are rising again. Private rents have continued to increase ahead of inflation, up 8.7% last year and higher in places such as Walthamstow. Interest rates might have seen two cuts, but the full impact of elevated interest rates is still feeding through into mortgages. Yes, the legacy of Liz Truss will be felt for decades to come, in the empty pockets and multiple evictions. So sue me for saying so.

[Ms Stella Creasy]

The Government set up a financial inclusion committee with consumer groups and financial institutions to look at how to provide individuals who have poor credit histories with access to safe and affordable credit. In this target-rich environment, there is much for the legal loan sharks in this country to feast on—and feast they do. Low-income households in this country owe £23 billion in unsecured loans and credit cards. That is up from £19 billion just in May last year. A total of 2.2 million low-income families have high-cost credit loans such as payday loans or pawn shop arrangements. Three million people told Ipsos last year that somebody in their family had gone to an illegal lender in the last three years.

Banks do not want to lend to these people because they are seen as a bad bet. That is because of the cost of living crisis: they just cannot get hold of the money to keep things moving. Our credit union movement, which has been promised so much by so many different Governments, just cannot grow to keep up with the need. Governments have promised to invest in it but failed to do so. It has been as ripped off as those who ended up at Wonga or Klarna to make ends meet.

I pay tribute to groups such as Fair4All Finance, which provides funding for credit unions such as the London Capital credit union that works in Walthamstow, but no credit union can compete with the online lenders who are pummelling our constituents on their phones and on their websites, offering them unprotected credit to get through to the end of the month so that they can buy a pizza. Then they stick them with late repayment fees and charges before lending to them again, even though they cannot repay it, because they are stuck in a spiral of unaffordable debt. In all of this debt, the most important thing that a person can do is talk about it. That means that they need somebody to talk to, because it could be the critical difference between getting out of the hole that they are in and burying themselves even further.

The Financial Conduct Authority imposes a levy on all regulated financial services companies to pay for such support, and that includes funding the Money and Pensions Service. Others such as the citizens advice bureaux, which many of us will pay tribute to in our constituencies, and StepChange have to fundraise for themselves. Ultimately, in this environment we cannot afford to keep funding failure. We need to prevent people getting into debt in the first place and move them off the high-cost credit that causes so much of it.

However, so few people in the current environment get the help that they desperately need to get out of this nightmare. The 2018 independent Wyman review found that just 1.1 million people got debt advice, with just 13% of those considered indebted. By 2020, it was estimated that 1.7 million were getting help. The Government set a strategy of 3.7 million by 2030, but, just last year, the Money and Pensions Service only saw 2 million people. That is not through a lack of trying. Some 82% of debt advisers told MAPS that there had been a large increase in demand, while just over half of them reported a decrease in the resources to cope with it. That is the nub of the debate today.

The total funding available for debt advice in this country in 2018 was £196 million, with about a third of that coming from the levy on financial services and the

rest coming either from local government or fair share creditors—the payments that people can get in a debt repayment plan to pay for services. We now know that the financial services levy is raising about £78 million, but we have no idea what is happening to the rest of the money needed, not least because local government is on its knees after 14 years of Conservative cuts. My own local authority is cutting the support that it offers to people struggling with council tax payments, let alone providing any debt advice. It is not alone. Exeter CAB has seen a £125,000 cut to its services, Woking CAB a £189,000 cut and Coventry Independent Advice Service a cancelled grant for £325,000. The numbers go on across the country.

Funding will get harder too because of the cost of living crisis, as more and more people cannot afford to make a debt repayment plan in the first place. The CAB says that half of the people it works with have a negative budget, and 66% of Money Advice Service users were also in that position. Therefore, there is a risk that we will not get the funding to get people out of this hole. The Money Advice Service needs to get involved in cases earlier, but a consultation by the previous Government last year on the future of the service said that, looking at what the overall level of debt advice should be, the funding required was out of scope.

Above all, it is scandalous, given how implicated the “buy now, pay later” companies—the Klarnas, Clearpays and Laybuys of this world—are in the debt problems in this country and the length of time it has taken to get even close to some kind of regulation of them, that they do not even contribute to this pot, because they are not a form of regulated credit. Not only are our constituents going without protection from the ombudsman when they are mis-sold products; these companies are not even paying for the damage that they do. Yet around one third of people who need debt advice have “buy now, pay later” debt. That is why I am urging the Government—especially in the light of delays in regulating companies, which had a windfall this Christmas and will have another one next Christmas—to consider a windfall tax on the BNPL companies to help pay for the debt advice that is so desperately needed.

The companies have written to me claiming that they are not against being regulated, which is odd because I was at the Labour party conference where they stood on a platform and claimed to be so. They have also said that they are happy to contribute to making donations towards debt advice, so let us take them at their word, and squeeze them as much as they have squeezed our constituents.

We also have to stop commercial companies that make millions of pounds from pretending to offer debt solutions and claiming that they are helping consumers rather than pushing them further into debt. At the very least, the Insolvency Service should regulate such companies. Frankly, I would prefer a law that ensured that excessive profits cannot be made from somebody else’s personal debts by capping the charges. Sickeningly, many “buy now, pay later” companies present themselves as a money management service. That is why I am asking the Government to develop measures on what lenders are doing not only to reduce financial exclusion but to ensure that they are not the cause of debt themselves through bad lending practices. Even America, that great bastion of communist thinking, does more. The Community Reinvestment Act gives lenders an explicit obligation to

meet the needs of all borrowers in their localities, including those on low incomes, to help stop them being the main meals of the legal loan sharks in the first place.

That is why we need to ensure that the Money and Pensions Service does not become primarily a website and helpline. Tackling debt in communities means helping people in communities, especially given the variation in debt between areas. If the service is just online, that does not uphold the principle of helping those most in need, and especially the most vulnerable. That matters because of the number of people who would benefit. In 2021, the service defined those in need as people who were behind on one priority bill or facing bailiffs. It separated out those people that it thought just needed money guidance—tips on how to budget—but those people were building up arrears, and were recognised to be at a tipping point. Some 8 million people are listed as needing debt advice, but a further 13 million are at that tipping point. Any of us who have had someone come to our constituency surgery in financial difficulty know that the sooner we intervene, the more chance we have of success. With 21 million people at a tipping point, let us not let them tip; let us help them now.

Research by the Centre for Responsible Credit shows that such people are already under extreme financial pressure. They frequently borrow to make ends meet. They use “buy now, pay later”, have unauthorised overdrafts, and are already behind on their consumer payments. If we underestimate the number of people in debt because the bigger group are better at juggling, can we really say that it is not a problem to be constantly borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, Paul to pay Penelope, and Penelope to pay both of them? Millions of people in this country are one bad argument with their partner, one new school uniform item needed or one parking fine away from being unable to manage, and they have just been through a month when everyone spends, on average, an extra £700 because it is Christmas.

These people do not need us to judge them; they need us to help them. If we do not massively increase the funding for money advice services and ensure that their focus is on preventing debt in local communities, it will not just be personally devastating for millions of people but hamper our chances of getting economic growth. Ultimately, I am asking Ministers to introduce a cost-cutting measure. The National Audit Office reported in 2018 that debt problems are so detrimental to the wellbeing of the British public that they lead to higher public spending on both welfare services, such as mental health services, and state-subsidised housing to the tune of £900 million a year. That is why we ultimately need a financial inclusion committee to look at not just the costs of credit but how we stop people getting ripped off in the first place, and to be a consumer champion across the piece, whether on energy deals, finance or even local public service debt advice provision. In the end, if we join up the dots we really will save everyone money—the one thing that right now nobody has.

5.13 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), who spoke incredibly passionately about the difficulties of debt. There is a lot of debt in my community, which appears, on the face of it, to be relatively affluent, but one of the problems is that people feel a huge compulsion to maintain that appearance. I have

spoken to a lot of people on the doorstep, and in the course of the submission that we made as a constituency to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, about the fact that people are really struggling and finding it incredibly difficult.

In areas such as mine, where there is not a perception of poverty, there are simply no services to assist people who need help. My constituency has no citizens advice bureau anywhere, no law centre—nothing. When people have difficulties, they therefore do not know where to turn. We need to do the best we can to improve civil legal aid. Citizens advice bureaux were partly funded by local government, which was cut, and partly through the legal advice work they did that was charged at legal aid rates. Unfortunately, since those are now so difficult to work under, all those advice services have been decimated.

My local citizens advice bureau spoke to me—I say local; it is not in the constituency, though it can occasionally do some in-person transitory work—about how important it is to see people face to face. It said vulnerable people, older people and others might in theory have online access, but actually cannot go through a complex system to resolve their debt without that consistent face-to-face assistance. We need to aspire not just to improve telephone and online services, but to ensure that in-person advice is provided.

My hon. Friend briefly touched on the quality of advice that people are receiving and the fact that although the Financial Conduct Authority regulates the products that people are being sold around debt reduction—they are products—there is a real problem of mis-selling them, despite the theoretical regulation. Unfortunately, regulation is only as good as the enforcement. It is important that we keep discussing the matter and that we bring real change to the advice landscape because our residents need us to.

5.16 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) on securing the debate. I very much recognise and have seen the work she has done over the years to raise the profile of responsible consumer credit practices and effective debt advice. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) for her contribution and specifically for raising the experience of her constituents.

Credit, when offered responsibly, can be an essential tool for people who have to manage unexpected costs or who need to smooth their cash flow. As a Government, we want to support consumers in having access to credit when they need it. But, at the same time, we are determined to ensure that access to credit comes with robust protections to ensure that lending is affordable and consumers are protected when things go wrong. That is why in October last year we published a consultation on a proposed regulatory regime for “buy now, pay later” products. The regime will introduce better protections for millions of consumers and will bring “buy now, pay later” firms into the regulatory perimeter of the FCA. That in turn will mean that firms offering “buy now, pay later” products will be required to pay specific annual FCA fees and levies. Among those is the financial guidance levy, the proceeds of which fund free debt advice services.

As I turn to the importance of debt advice, I pay tribute to the thousands of debt advisers across the country for the critical work they do to provide support for those in need.

Ms Creasy: We all value the debt advisers. As my hon. Friend has just said, “buy now, pay later” companies do not yet contribute to the levy that pays for those people, but the companies themselves have said that they would make voluntary contributions. Would the Treasury consider approaching them to get that money ahead of their being part of the regulatory landscape, so that we can have more of these brilliant debt advisers?

James Murray: I am sure that Treasury officials and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), will be in close contact with the sector about any proposals they have. It is important to emphasise that because of the regulations we are consulting on for the new regime, that will mean that “buy now, pay later” firms will be required to pay those specific fees and levies, which will help fund free debt advice services. We know that funding those services is important because intervention through debt advice services not only prevents financial difficulties from escalating, but protects people’s overall mental health and wellbeing. More widely, there are positive effects for families, communities and the economy at large.

As a new Government, we are committed to supporting national and community-based services through the Money and Pensions Service, or MAPS as it is commonly known. Those services provide advice to hundreds of thousands of individuals and families in need in England. In December, MAPS published its first debt advice impacts report, which showed that across 2023-24 people accessing debt advice through MAPS-funded services gained an estimated £48 million of extra income. That underlines the fact that for many people, advice not only allows them to deal with their debt problems, but helps them to find a way forward with more money in their pockets. Eighty-seven per cent of people who received MAPS-funded debt advice said they would recommend the service to someone in a similar situation.

Outside of England, the UK Government provide funding through the financial services levy to the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As debt advice is a devolved matter, the devolved Governments have responsibility for delivering those services within their nations and for tailoring provision to the needs of their local communities.

My hon. Friends spoke about the gap between those who need debt advice and those who are currently accessing it. The Government recognise that gap and the need to tackle it. Funding levels, which my hon. Friends mentioned, are regularly reviewed to reflect demand, inflation and evolving needs. The MAPS debt advice budget for the upcoming financial year will be communicated in the usual way in the spring, and I will ensure that my hon. Friends are informed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow mentioned the MAPS consultation last year on the future of its debt advice commissioning strategy. MAPS published its response to that consultation in October, setting out its commitment to increasing debt adviser wellbeing, further building advisers’ skills and delivering digital transformation across the debt advice sector. As part of its efforts to address unmet demand for debt advice, MAPS has also launched its debt advice modernisation fund, a grant initiative designed to support projects aimed at enhancing and modernising debt

advice services in the not-for-profit sector. Projects are currently under way and will be completed by the end of March.

My hon. Friends touched on the wider issue of financial inclusion. I assure them that the Government are taking further steps to ensure that individuals can access the financial services they need.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): In my constituency, the Whitmore Reans Welfare Centre, a voluntary organisation, signposts individuals to the debt advice that they need. In the past, the centre received funding for a part-time or full-time caseworker, but it is finding it increasingly difficult to provide the kind of one-to-one advice mentioned earlier, which is so useful for residents. Can the Minister give any advice on how to help organisations of that nature so that constituents can be signposted to, and given, one-to-one advice?

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that constituency case and highlighting the important work that that organisation does for his constituents. I cannot comment from the Dispatch Box on individual funding decisions, but he underlines the importance of tailoring to local need. Although there may be a national priority to ensure that people are provided with debt advice, individual local debt advice agencies will need to tailor their services to the needs of their communities. He is an excellent advocate for his constituents in that regard.

Alongside the debt advice services that the debate has focused on, it is important, as I was saying, that individuals can access the financial services that they need. That is why the Government announced in December our intention to develop a financial inclusion strategy that will aim to further tackle barriers to individual and household ability to access affordable and appropriate financial products and services. The strategy will be supported by a committee that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury convened for the first time in December, which will consider the problem of debt.

I will turn my attention briefly to the work that the Government are doing to support vulnerable individuals and businesses repaying debt to the public sector. The Government debt management function centre, based in the Treasury, convenes the debt fairness group—a collaboration with the debt advice sector that identifies opportunities to continuously improve public sector debt recovery processes. The functional centre’s work includes debt management toolkits to support public sector bodies dealing with those facing physical and mental health challenges, and to help them identify and support the 8.7 million adults in the UK who have experienced economic abuse.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow once again for raising this important matter. I have no doubt that she will continue to be a champion on the issues that we have discussed. The Government remain committed to providing accessible debt advice and promoting financial inclusion. We are committed to ensuring that everyone has the support they need to manage their finances effectively and build a more secure future for themselves and their family.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 January 2025

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Impact of Conflict on Women and Girls

1.30 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of conflict on women and girls.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. There are many things that we disagree on in the House, but I hope we will find some clear areas of agreement in this debate. I hope we agree that the impact of conflict on women and girls is undeniable and unacceptable; that women are not only victims but survivors, combatants, leaders and human rights defenders, and their role in preventing and resolving conflict and in peacebuilding is key; and that the UK has a crucial role to play in this area.

I am sure that Members will want to focus on specific geographical areas. I will focus on the overall situation, as well as on two specific conflicts in Sudan and Afghanistan. First, let me set out the situation globally. It only takes turning on the news or scrolling on social media to see that conflict is raging all around us, from Gaza to Sudan to Ukraine. There are many other conflicts that we barely speak about any more, such as that in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected by conflict. According to the UN, in 2023 an estimated 612 million women and girls lived within 50 km of a conflict—an increase of 41% since 2015. That number is more than the population of the United States of America and Brazil combined.

The impact of conflict takes multiple forms, from sexual violence to girls losing years of education. Women are dying because of the impact of war. The proportion of women killed in armed conflicts doubled in 2023, compared to the previous year. Sexual violence in conflict has also risen dramatically, with UN-verified cases soaring by 50%—and those are only the ones we know about. Half of those displaced because of persecution, conflict and violence are women and girls who are forced to live far from home or in refugee camps, where often they are still not safe.

Those are some of the most direct impacts, but there are so many more impacts on women's health, education and freedoms. Women and girls are more likely to go hungry in conflict, and attacks on health facilities impact women and girls' access to sexual and reproductive health care. As Plan International has highlighted, the impact on girls is devastating. Girls schools have been deliberately targeted to stop them going to school, and of the 119 million girls who are out of school, more than a quarter are in conflict or crisis-affected countries.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on her excellent speech.

One of the consequences of war and conflict is disruption to education. The educational void is catastrophic, not just for girls themselves but for their families, communities and nations, too. A lack of education for girls also undermines peacebuilding. Studies show that educated women are key to rebuilding post-conflict societies, participating in governance, and preventing the resurgence of violence. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK must champion the protection of education in conflict zones and hold Governments and militias to account when they attack schools or use them for military purposes?

Alice Macdonald: I do agree. Like the previous Government, this Government have done a lot on girls' education, as did former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who continues to do so. There is not only an impact on girls' present; it is an attack on their future and on the future of us all.

We have seen the rolling back of women's rights, and nowhere is this more evident than in Afghanistan, described as the worst women's rights crisis in the world. The Taliban are steadily erasing women and girls from public life and suppressing every single one of their rights. A female in Afghanistan cannot go to school, cannot go to the park and cannot travel or leave the house without a male chaperone. She cannot work for a non-governmental organisation, which will have a devastating impact on the delivery of aid; she cannot study midwifery or medicine; and over Christmas it was reported that the Taliban have banned windows to stop women even being seen. This is gender apartheid.

I went to Afghanistan in 2011 and met many women who were determined to shape the future of their country. The politicians I met are no longer able to serve. The women who were working in domestic abuse refuges are not working any more—indeed, those shelters are shut. Those women are still fighting for the future of their country; it is their voices and demands that we must listen to, and we must act. That must include heeding their calls to recognise what is happening as gender apartheid, and as a crime under international law. That would mark a historic step towards ending this abhorrent discrimination and send an important message to Afghan women and girls that we stand with them.

The international community and the UK must also make it clear that we will not normalise relationships with the Taliban unless they end their war on women. I know the Minister cares passionately about this issue. Will she tell us what specifically the Government are doing, and whether they will support the calls to recognise what is happening as gender apartheid and pursue it through the UN so that it is treated as a war crime?

We can all do our part. Like others present, I joined many Members of Parliament in signing a letter, organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), to the England and Wales Cricket Board, asking it to speak out and boycott the match against Afghanistan—because all action matters.

I turn now to Sudan, where an estimated 6.9 million people are currently at risk of gender-based violence; where 75% of girls are not in school; where there is

[Alice Macdonald]

evidence of mass and systemic rape; and where women are reportedly committing suicide out of fear of that rape. Evidence shows that women and girls from ethnic minority groups are being deliberately targeted. The accounts are horrific. I read one from a 35-year-old Nuba woman who described how six Rapid Support Forces fighters stormed into her family compound. She said:

“My husband and my son tried to defend me, so one of the RSF fighters shot and killed them. Then they kept raping me, all six of them”.

Sudan has been described as the world’s forgotten conflict. As the UK is the penholder on Sudan in the United Nations, will the Minister set out what we can do now to support women in Sudan and change the situation so that it is no longer the world’s forgotten conflict? Does she agree that the United Nations and the African Union should urgently deploy a mission to protect civilians in Sudan that is mandated and resourced to address sexual violence? Does she think UN member states should bolster support for the UN fact-finding mission, as the Secretary-General has urged, to help to pave the way forward towards meaningful accountability?

Let me turn to Gaza; I know that more Members will speak about the situation in the middle east. As I said in the Chamber recently, there are 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza right now who cannot access the care that they need. Imagine giving birth in the hell that is Gaza right now. If the ban on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East goes ahead at the end of this month, that will have a devastating impact on everybody, including women and girls, so I hope the Minister will update us on what we are doing to push harder on that front.

Many people may ask why we in the UK should care about this. Why should we care about what is happening to women in other parts of the world? Well, it is the right thing to do, as was set out by the previous Government in their national action plan on women, peace and security. It is also the smart thing to do, because empowered and engaged women mean more secure and prosperous societies. When women’s rights are rolled back anywhere, they are rolled back everywhere.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this vital debate. As she knows, the ongoing climate crisis is making more regions of the world uninhabitable, fuelling conflicts that disproportionately affect women and girls. In humanitarian conflicts, up to 70% of women and girls experience gender-based violence, and we must empower them by elevating their voices and leadership in times of crisis. Does my hon. Friend agree that robust systems must be in place to provide the vital support necessary for women and girls in these times of crisis?

Alice Macdonald: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution and for raising that important point about climate change, which has a very detrimental impact on women and girls everywhere, and particularly in conflict situations. Indeed, it is a driver of conflict, as we see when it comes to, for example, resource scarcity. I welcome that point and agree that it must be a key part of these conversations.

Let me turn to the action needed. I will focus on three specific areas: international leadership, aid and peacebuilding. This year marks the 25th anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. It was hailed at the time as a landmark agreement and included really important measures on protecting women and girls in conflict and supporting their leadership and their role in peace processes.

This year is a golden opportunity to renew the UK’s leadership and, indeed, the international community’s leadership on this important agenda. It is also an opportunity to review the plan that the previous Government set out, because we know that, on many of its elements, we need to do much more. For example, we know that men who commit sexual violence and other atrocities against women and girls still have impunity, so will the Minister update us on what is happening to tackle sexual violence in conflict and hold perpetrators to account? The previous action plan did not include Sudan and the occupied Palestinian territories as focus countries; obviously the situation has changed fundamentally since then, so does the Minister think they should be included in the plan?

Secondly, we know that aid does not always reach women. Only 25% of women affected by conflict receive essential relief and recovery aid. The aid cuts under the previous Government had a devastating impact on women and girls. Will the Minister confirm that we will reverse the trends, including with a specific target for the percentage of official development assistance focused on gender equality, as organisations such as CARE have called for, and that we will invest in women-led and women-focused organisations? Will she also tell us that when we announce packages of humanitarian aid—I welcome the £50 million announced for Syria—we will also ensure that it reaches women and girls?

Finally, women’s participation is not “a nice to have” in any area that we are talking about, and certainly not when it comes to peace processes. Women’s participation is fundamental for effective peacebuilding, but women are still not adequately involved in such processes. Yet we know that when women participate in peace processes, it works. Their participation increases the probability of an agreement lasting more than 15 years by 35%. We have seen women play a really important role in many peace processes, from Libya to Liberia to Colombia.

The UK must work actively to promote the fundamentals of the women, peace and security agenda: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery. Women are not victims and women must not be voiceless. The progress that has been made on this agenda would not have happened without the courage and perseverance of women. We must be hopeful for change; in the words of Plan International’s report, still we dream. Indeed, a survey by Women for Women International showed that, across 14 countries, 81% of women are hopeful that there will be change, and that their circumstances will improve in the next five years. But that will not happen without the international community acting.

As this debate progresses, I am sure that we all have in our minds different women and girls who are impacted by conflict, such the Yazidi women; the girls abducted by Boko Haram; the Israeli women slaughtered and raped on 7 October; the women and girls living in hell in Gaza right now, where nowhere and nobody is safe; the women of Ukraine; the women of Iran; and the women

of Syria who are hopeful for a better tomorrow. Let us resolve to do what we can as parliamentarians to tackle the scourge of violence against women and girls, wherever it is found and in whatever form it takes.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I remind all Members that if they want to contribute to the debate, they should bob or stand briefly, even if they have already notified the Chair that they want to speak.

1.42 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing today's important debate. Before I go further, I declare an interest, having previously been executive director of the International Rescue Committee in the UK, which is part of a global humanitarian agency that supports women in conflict and crisis around the world.

As we heard from my hon. Friend, women and girls are suffering disproportionately from rising conflict around the world. The number of women living in conflict zones has surged: in 2022 around 600 million women—that is more than one in seven of the world's women—lived in, or in close proximity to, an armed conflict. That is double the figure it was in the 1990s. As we have also heard, conflict impacts women in many specific ways, including increased sexual violence, the loss of livelihoods and worsening healthcare, resulting in higher death rates even from preventable causes. I want to share some examples from two particularly brutal ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Sudan, and then move on to solutions.

In Gaza, women are being impacted in so many ways, but let me talk about reproductive health in particular, having heard some very powerful testimony at the International Development Committee. Pregnant women living through that conflict are three times more likely to miscarry, and if they do carry their babies to full term, they are three times more likely to die in childbirth due to lack of access to appropriate antenatal and post-natal medical care, and lack of access to basic medicine, safe shelter and adequate nutrition.

Nebal Farsakh from the Palestine Red Crescent told us at the Committee evidence session:

“Almost 60,000 pregnant women in Gaza are lacking everything. They are malnourished, not able to receive the food they need and not even receiving the proper healthcare service they deserve. They are living in shelters, thousands of people are sharing one toilet and you cannot even imagine...how a pregnant woman has to endure such inhuman conditions”.

As well as that,

“because of the collapsing healthcare system, as a pregnant woman, you barely have the luxury of delivering your baby in a hospital.”

If pregnant women are “lucky enough” to, they cannot stay and

“many women have had c-sections without anaesthesia because it had run out.”

That is one of many “continuous struggles”, with

“hospitals lacking anaesthesia, painkillers and other basic medications and medical supplies.”

Israeli authorities have denied entry to many of those critical supplies, including anaesthesia supplies, oxygen cylinders, ventilators and other medicines. According to UNRWA, of the total—extremely limited—humanitarian supplies that have entered Gaza since October 2023, just 2% were medical supplies. On 4 November last year, the United Nations Population Fund announced that attacks on hospitals have forced the only functioning neonatal intensive care unit in northern Gaza to close. The denial of access to newborn and maternal healthcare and the removal of the conditions necessary to give birth safely represent a grave threat to the survival of pregnant women, and Palestinians more widely, in Gaza.

Let me also touch on the impact of the conflict in Sudan—mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North—which is having similarly grave consequences for women and girls. For example, reports of gender-based violence in Sudan have drastically surged, encompassing alarming incidents such as kidnapping, forced marriage, intimate partner violence, conflict-related sexual violence and child marriage. The UN has witnessed a staggering 288% increase in the number of survivors seeking case-management services for gender-based violence, and at least 6.7 million people in Sudan are at risk of gender-based violence. There are also cases of sexual exploitation driven by food insecurity and water scarcity, and there is severely limited access to essential post-rape care and support services for survivors, who are in desperate need of medical, psychological and mental health support.

Despite the horrific impacts of conflict on women that we have heard about, often it is women in conflict zones who lead the response. Women are often the first responders. In Gaza, women make up 70% of frontline healthcare workers and 60% of caregivers. We know that that can lead to improved healthcare outcomes. For example, in Niger and Burkina Faso local organisations are nearly twice as likely as international organisations to report increased GBV caseloads, which suggests that women are more likely to report violence to those local women's organisations. Women are also some of the chief advocates. For example, in Niger, when groups of women who were IDPs—internally displaced people—were excluded from receiving humanitarian aid, they lobbied district authorities to officially recognise their community, and in doing so secured services for people with disabilities and cash assistance for their community.

When I spent time with Syrian refugees in Jordan in my previous role at IRC, I met incredible Syrian refugee women who were there without partners, or had lost their partners in the war, and who had set up their own businesses on top of caring for their families; and not only doing that but pushing donors to change their approach to better support women refugees to be entrepreneurial and to earn a living alongside looking after their families. Women, showing such great leadership, are proving absolutely critical to building lasting peace in places where conflict is being brought to an end.

There is strong evidence to demonstrate that the involvement of women and girls in peacebuilding is key to achieving successful outcomes. Research shows that where women lead and participate in conflict prevention, response, recovery and peacebuilding, societies are more stable and peace is more durable. Women's participation in peace negotiations results in peace agreements being 35% more likely to last at least 15 years, while the

[*Laura Kyrke-Smith*]

participation of civil society, including women's organisations, in peace processes makes them 64% less likely to fail. Yet despite the huge volume of evidence showing that women are best placed to understand and meet the needs of their communities before, during and after conflicts, too often their voices are still ignored.

I will highlight two key solutions. I have been pleased to hear the Minister speak passionately about her commitment to gender equality and I know that she has hit the ground running to make that commitment and ambition a reality. I also welcome the Prime Minister's appointment of Lord Collins as the special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. I pay tribute to the many brilliant NGOs that are delivering important support for women in conflict and championing the rights of those women, including with funding from our Government. They are not only international NGOs such as IRC, Co-operative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Plan and Save the Children but, most importantly, women-led local groups like the International Committee for the Development of Peoples in Somalia and Right To Play in Pakistan and elsewhere. They are doing fantastic work, but there are two particular ways in which we can do more.

The first is funding. Of course, we must recognise that all Government budgets are limited, and that there are many competing priorities for those budgets, including for the global humanitarian and development budgets—that is just the reality that we are living in—but we can get our limited budgets working harder. We can expand the amount of multi-year funding available to organisations that support women and girls in conflict—that makes a real difference to their ability to plan and deliver their work effectively. We can ensure that funding is flexible to adapt to the evolving needs of women and girls at different stages of conflict and crisis. We can introduce measurable targets to increase the amount and quality of funding that goes to women-led organisations within a particular humanitarian budget. We can use our influence within the UN to reform the multilateral funding mechanisms that are absolutely crucial in some contexts where funding is otherwise very difficult to get in—such as the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs' country-based pooled funds. That would make it easier for women-led organisations to apply and succeed in receiving funding.

The second point I want to touch on is how we think about and categorise the issue of women and conflict in the first place. We must start thinking about women in conflict as central, not just to our development work but to our foreign policy. We have such a great track record and reputation to build on, and real, live opportunities to make progress, for example, through our work through as penholder on women, peace and security at the UN Security Council.

But it means much more if we encourage countries to adopt and adhere to international human rights treaties that cover the rights of women in conflict; it means increasing pressure on perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict and external parties that back those perpetrators through sanctions, where appropriate. It means using the UK's voice at the UN Security Council to continue shining a light on this issue and calling for accountability. It means fully supporting UN fact-finding missions so

that evidence is compiled and perpetrators are deterred through monitoring. Another example is to facilitate meaningful participation of diverse groups of survivor-led organisations and women's rights organisations in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes.

I look forward to our Government's continued progress on this important matter. I believe those two things—reforming the way we think about funding for women in conflict, and elevating women in conflict—are not just a development priority but a diplomatic one, and are the right places to start.

1.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure, Sir Jeremy, to serve under your chairship. I thank the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for leading the debate with passion and interest, and setting the scene so very well. These are always hard subjects to talk about. I find it incredibly difficult to comprehend the violence that is shown towards women and children. I find it unfathomable, but it happens across the world with a violence and brutality that shocks me—and, I know, everyone else here—to the core. Thank you for giving us a chance to participate in this debate.

This issue is not only a matter of human dignity. It also demands urgent action from Parliament and the international community, so it is good to be here to discuss it. It is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place; I look forward to her contribution. I know that the right hon. Lady has the same qualities of compassion and understands things with an honesty that we all try to express, in broken words, here and in the Chamber. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and I look forward to her contributions. She and I have been friends for many years and have participated in debates alongside each other, so I am confident that she will deliver as well today.

The Library has sent some very helpful stats. Some people say, "Stats are stats," but they can illustrate where the problems may be; some stats were shocking for me to read today and yesterday. Four out of every 10 people killed in conflict are women, which puts things in perspective; of the 117.5 million people displaced, half are women, and last year there was a 50% increase in sexual violence. I find it particularly difficult to read the papers whenever these stories are apparent, because I cannot fathom the horrors those women experience—I have had difficulty understanding it. I remember when the Yazidi ladies came here a long time ago—it must have been over 10 years ago, or thereabouts—and I met some of them. To tell the truth, I almost felt like I was intruding by listening to their stories, because what I probably did—unknowingly—was to make them relive all the horrors that they had been subjected to. But that is the world we live in.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on freedom of religion or belief, I particularly look at how conflict impacts women of different faiths. In the rest of my short speech today I will focus on that issue, and most importantly on how it impacts their lives daily, because it does—with a vengeance.

Such conflict, which includes the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, spans regions and affects women in particular. Some of the horrors of 7 October come to mind. Last year at Easter, I visited Israel, including

some camps where the people were brutalised and the women sexually abused. Some women were burned; their bodies were burnt to a cinder. I find such things incompatible with life; the life that I lead is certainly very different from the lives of the people who carry out such crimes.

Women almost always bear a disproportionate burden of the suffering in conflicts, as they often traverse the dangerous terrains of conflict zones to support their families. A critical perspective must not be overlooked when addressing the issue of unexploded ordnance, which has been left, for example, in the aftermath of war. The alarming reports of increased sexual exploitation and trafficking of Ukrainian refugee women, particularly young and vulnerable women, highlight the critical need for immediate targeted action.

When I was in Israel, I met some people involved in groups that addressed or tried to address the issue of sexual violence and attacks on women and children. I was made aware by some people in the delegation—they were similar to me, but from a different country—that children as young as eight and women as old as 80 had been sexually abused by some Russian soldiers. Not every Russian is a bad Russian, but the ones who carried out those actions need to be held accountable for their brutality, their violence and their depravity against young girls of eight years old—my goodness me—and 80-year-old pensioners. Of course, as a Christian I know that a day of judgment will come, and that those who carried out such actions will all be held accountable, but I would like to see their day of judgment come quicker, and in this world; that is what would happen if I had my way.

I remember visiting a refugee camp in Poland a couple of years ago. Along with some other members of the delegation, I noticed these guys—I would probably call them predatory males. Remember that the people who were in that camp were there just a matter of months after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. These guys were pushing trolleys around, supposedly collecting laundry and so on, but we noticed—not that we are smarter than anybody else; I am not smarter than anybody else, but I do take note of things that happen around me—that some of those men were not actually doing anything. They were just watching to see what the women and girls were doing. It was obvious to me that they were predatory. When we left the camp, we made sure that we told the police people in charge. Whatever those men were doing there, it certainly did not look like they were there to help anybody.

With reports from Germany indicating that only 14% of female refugees are employed, the risk of female refugees' falling prey to human traffickers has grown, and that situation has been exacerbated by a lack of adequate accommodation and economic support. A busy mind and a busy person cannot always be distracted by things that happen around them, so it is important to focus on that as well. In conflict zones worldwide, the experiences of women and girls are shaped by a convergence of vulnerabilities, gender, faith and socioeconomic status. Tragically, these intersecting identities often make women and girls the first and most enduring victims of violence, coercion and systematic discrimination.

One of the most harrowing manifestations of freedom of religion or belief violations in conflict settings is the targeted abduction, forced marriage and conversion of

women and girls from religious minority communities. In her introduction to this debate, the hon. Member for Norwich North mentioned Pakistan. I have been to Pakistan twice, primarily regarding the issue of freedom of religion or belief. I would love to say that the second time I went, two years after the first time, things had changed; but I did not see any change. If anything, I saw that the situation had got worse.

I am reminded of the case of a 13-year-old girl, which is two years younger than my eldest grandchild. Her name was Kavita Oad, a Hindu girl who was abducted and forcibly married. Her family, who were already financially marginalised, faced threats of violence and theft when they sought justice for their 13-year-old, in a country that seems to think it is okay to marry off a young Hindu, Christian or Sikh girl of 12, 13 or 14 to a predatory male who should never have any say on the issue.

Unfortunately that is not an isolated case, but part of a systematic campaign to erase the religious identity of minority communities. Courts often fail to protect those girls, framing their exploitation as consensual marriages—no, they are not. Their mums and dads do not want them to be married, but when they go to the police, the police either fail or are unwilling to act, and the courts of the land do not protect them. I know that the Minister knows those things—I am not saying anything she does not know—but they disturb me greatly, and we need some idea of what those countries are doing to stop them happening.

In conflict zones, sexual violence is wielded as a weapon to intimidate and destabilise entire communities. Women and girls are targeted not only because of their gender but because of their faith. For example, in Nigeria and Sudan, Christian girls and girls from ethnic religious minorities find themselves suppressed physically, in terms of their human rights, and through their faith—something that is incredibly difficult to comprehend.

Such acts of violence aim to extinguish the cultural and religious identity of persecuted groups. I visited Nigeria about two years ago and had the chance to speak to some of the displaced people. They were not just Christians; they were also Muslims, who also find themselves suppressed because of their religious beliefs. Again, that disturbs me greatly. I know the Minister knows these things, and I would be pleased if she were to give us some feedback on this issue. Women and girls often find themselves doubly marginalised in refugee camps or in settlements of internally displaced people, such as those we visited in Nigeria.

The hon. Member for Norwich North referred to Sudan, and the stories from there are impossible to finish. The other day I read about a mum who was asleep in the house, and three soldiers from a Sudanese terrorist group, or whoever they were, broke in and abused a young girl. The family all slept in another part of the house and did not even know about it until the next morning, when they found that their wee young girl of 13 or 14 had been abused by soldiers that night.

If Members have not read the stories from Sudan, they need to—they are unbelievable. What has happened in that country is one of the worst genocides that I have heard tell of across the world. Not only are people uprooted from their homes, but they face discrimination based on their faith, compounding their vulnerability. The trauma of forced conversions, violence and displacement

[*Jim Shannon*]

inflicts profound psychosocial harm on people, coupled with restricted access to education—the hon. Lady also referred to that—and economic opportunities. People need to have something to do. They need opportunity, because those experiences perpetuate cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement among minority groups.

There are pluses in this depressing and negative story, however, so I will highlight three things and perhaps the Minister could give me some feedback. The UK Government have initiated a preventing sexual violence in combat initiative, as they have done in many parts of the world, including Ethiopia, Iraq, Ukraine and Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. They need to be commended for that. We sit here and ask the Government to do things, so we should give them credit when things are done right and thank them for that.

We also need to ask how we can increase that and help more as the violence and sexual violence increase. May I say very gently that, as a Government, we need to match that with funding? Again, these are constructive comments for the Minister—they are not meant to be critical; that is not how I do things—but can the Government increase the aid available to specifically target women and children?

That last thing that I, and I think all of us, would love to see is for those who have carried out the horrible, depraved physical and sexual abuse of women and children to be held accountable. There are stories to tell—those women and those girls will tell their stories—and those who did it need to be accountable, so let us have that day of reckoning. As a Christian, I know that there will be a day of reckoning in the last days of this world, but in this case I would like to see a day of reckoning coming sooner.

To conclude, achieving gender equality and safeguarding FORB are not merely aspirational goals; they are moral imperatives. Let us commit to amplifying the voices of women and girls who have suffered in silence for far too long. I urge the Minister to work in conjunction with her counterparts to ensure that these issues are addressed and that more is done to protect women facing hardship. My job, and the job of us all here, is to be a voice for those who have no voice, and today, that is what we are doing.

2.6 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I apologise in advance, Sir Jeremy; I am slightly under the weather today and have got a bit of a sore throat, so this might not come out quite as I intended.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this important debate. Although we often focus on issues around conflict and violence, and what can be done to resolve them, we can sometimes miss the fact that conflict disproportionately affects women and girls. During times of conflict, existing inequalities are magnified and exaggerated, leading to further insecurity, homelessness and particularly violence and sexual violence against women and girls.

We have already heard from my hon. Friend about the current situation in Gaza, which, as we know, is unconscionable. It is estimated that almost 50 mothers and their children are killed every day. According to

World Health Organisation estimates, 183 women give birth every day and, as we have heard, many are enduring C-sections without anaesthesia or other medicines. Ironically, many of the supplies that could resolve that problem are probably sitting at the borders, in the convoys that we know have been sent by international agencies and Governments, including our own, and could be put to use. So desperate is the need that it is just outrageous that those supplies are not being allowed to reach the people who need them so badly.

In Myanmar, women have borne the brunt of the military oppression in that country and have been subjected to a rise in intimate partner violence and sexual violence, too. Some 3 million people have been displaced, which in turn puts women at further risk of violence and abuse, because they are separated from those who would normally, one would hope, help to defend them—their fathers and brothers, and their husbands and partners. At the same time in Myanmar, women are shut out of any discussion or high-level debate about making peace—I will return to that point a little later. I was pleased to read about the Minister's and the Government's ongoing commitment and work, through the preventing sexual violence and conflict initiative, which I understand remains a real priority for our Government. I hope the Minister will say a little about that at the end of the debate.

When it comes to peacebuilding—hopefully we will move to peacebuilding efforts eventually in some of these conflicts—women are often excluded from the efforts and discussions, which leads to further entrenched disenfranchisement. Women are often the people who hold together communities, and often have a deeper understanding of the whole-community needs in humanitarian emergencies in particular. As we know, in many traditions they still hold the major caring responsibilities and are very much integrated into their communities, but they are not well resourced or respected as international humanitarian actors. Our Government's commitment to take forward resolutions to these conflicts is very welcome, and it is what we would expect, but I hope the Minister can give us some sense of how women will be involved in that work as we go forward.

Women being affected by conflict is not a new phenomenon—it has probably been with us for the whole history of humankind—but now we know how wrong and unacceptable it is. Because of social media, television and all the other media channels that we have, we know for ourselves exactly what is going on. We cannot turn a blind eye to it. If we do not involve women in resolving conflict and in peacebuilding initiatives, we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past—something I suspect none of us would wish to do.

2.11 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) on securing this debate and hon. Members on both sides of the House on their fine speeches. I will touch on some of the same themes, not only because of the gravity of the topic, but because of the clarity of the problems and some of the solutions.

In 2023, over 600 million women and girls lived within 30 miles of a conflict. That figure is 40% higher than it was in 2015. The world is burning. Israel, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine, Iraq, Syria and the Congo—

that is just a short list I sketched out from the small number of speeches we have heard, but I could fill a 10-minute speech with a list of the areas around the world where violence is being inflicted against women and girls in conflict.

As many hon. Members throughout the House have said, it is women, girls and children who suffer disproportionately in conflict. Gender roles tend to become more extreme in conflict. Men go to fight—of course, that is a stereotype, but that is what we are talking about; these stereotypes become more entrenched—and women are often left at home looking after the children and defenceless because the men are fighting elsewhere. They therefore become a target and a way to inflict pain on not just those individual women and girls but the group at large. Sexual violence in conflict is a military strategy used by actors around the world to defeat or attempt to defeat their enemies. I will draw on a couple of examples and highlight one solution that costs nothing and that the British Government should push much harder on.

One of the gravest inflictions of violence on women and girls is happening currently in Ukraine. Earlier this week, I spoke in the main Chamber about the abduction and transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia. Rape and sexual violence are also used as systematic tools by Russian forces in Ukraine. Cases have been documented where Russian soldiers have been issued with Viagra to facilitate rape and sexual violence. The reports that we hear echo the advance of Russian forces across the country in 2022; they are so similar that we know that it is a tactic of war, rather than a few bad apples, as is so often claimed by the defenders of these heinous crimes.

In Ukraine, women ranging from 16 to 83 years old have reported being raped. This often happens during home incursions—a home will be searched by Russian troops and they will rape the occupants while doing so. One particularly sickening case was verified by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Russian soldiers entered a family home outside Kyiv in the initial stages of the invasion. They shot the family dog, before murdering the father. They then raped the mother for several hours, while her four-year-old hid under a blanket and watched. While they were raping the mother, they were drinking, then they passed out when they were finished, allowing the mother to escape with her four-year-old son.

While these crimes have been going on in a systematic fashion, the Russian state has also been destroying healthcare facilities in Ukraine, which obviously has a wide-ranging effect. When coupled with rape, it takes away the very treatment services that Ukrainian women rely on to offer some solace and care after the brutality and depravity of rape at the hands of a Russian soldier. These crimes of the Russian state are systematic. They are an attempt to break the Ukrainian spirit and resolve to resist.

I served several times in Afghanistan as a British officer and the tragedy that has befallen Afghanistan since 2021, when the Taliban took over, is immense. That tragedy particularly falls upon Afghan women. Women's rights have been decimated in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over—indeed, they no longer really exist in any meaningful sense. That has been extensively documented. Many Members have commented

on what has happened in Afghanistan to Afghan women's rights, so I will not go into it in great detail. I will mention one or two particularly extreme examples.

Before the Taliban took over, Afghanistan had a system of support for survivors of gender-based violence, of which there was certainly some. There were shelters, legal aid, medical services and psychological support, which offered a lifeline to thousands of women. Since the Taliban took over, the incidences of rape have increased and the shelters have also been targeted, looted and destroyed to the point at which they are non-existent. It is the same pattern that we see in Ukraine. It is not only the crimes; the services that are meant to offer comfort, solace and care after the event are destroyed. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Human Rights Commission, of course, are no longer extant in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

One particular egregious example in Afghanistan was reported by *The Guardian* newspaper. In July, a video was disseminated on social media of the Taliban raping a female human rights activist at gunpoint in a Taliban prison. We should ask ourselves why that video was filmed and disseminated. It was because women must be not just violated in Afghanistan but shamed and humiliated to make a point. It is particularly poignant, given the cultural history of Afghanistan, that if someone stands up for women's rights they will not only be violated but their family's name will be shamed through their violation on social media. These crimes are beyond depraved.

I have spoken of conflict and of post-conflict, if that is indeed what we can call what is happening in Afghanistan. I will now talk of peace, because it is only through peaceful, stable societies that women and girls—and boys and men—can be safe. Peace must be our policy; peace must be our goal. As many Members have already mentioned, it is a fact that if there is a peace agreement that women are involved in negotiating, that peace lasts longer. By definition, if that peace lasts longer it means that more women and girls—and boys and men—will be safe.

It must be the policy of the British Government not to urge but insist that where peace negotiations are happening under the auspices of the United Nations, the African Union, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe or any other body with which we are involved or affiliated, women must be fully represented in those negotiations. That is not just a moral but a deeply practical point, and it is the one thing we can do in an age of constricted Government budgets that is free and will have a definite, practical outcome. It is crucial that the UK insists that women are involved in negotiating peace agreements.

2.22 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this important debate. We know that conflict is on the rise across the world, and that with each conflict comes an increased level of vulnerability and violence for women and girls. Any discussion around conflict must therefore be conducted through a gendered lens, and today provides the opportunity for that. I thank my hon. Friend again for giving us the opportunity to shine a light on this ongoing issue.

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

Conflict has an array of impacts on women and girls, many of which have been covered by colleagues already. I will focus my remarks on one hugely important yet understudied problem: the impact of sexual violence in conflict on women and girls. Too often, sexual violence against women and girls is swept under the rug, and its victims are forgotten, ignored or denied. Today is an opportunity to recognise and acknowledge that it is real, it is a problem and we need to take it seriously across the world in order to end it. It is an area that I have campaigned on for a number of years, and I want to recognise how encouraging it is that so many new colleagues are in the Chamber today—the new colleagues are in the majority, which is great to see.

We have already heard today about the impact of violence on women and girls in so many countries, including Congo, Sudan, the middle east, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Myanmar, Ukraine, Iraq and probably many more that I have either missed or will be talked about following my remarks. I will focus on the terrible war in Israel and Gaza, the sexual violence against Israeli women and girls committed by Hamas on 7 October 2023, and the sexual violence against Palestinian women and girls since then.

As many of the victims on 7 October were murdered or died from their wounds, we may never have an exact picture of what happened in that murderous attack. What we do know is that Hamas's violence against Israeli women was a well-documented case of mass, organised sexual violence, not least because the perpetrators proudly filmed, advertised and celebrated their crimes. One account from a first responder at Kibbutz Be'eri reported "piles and piles" of dead women who were "completely naked" from the waist down as well as horrific sexual mutilation.

Rami Shmuel, an organiser of the Supernova music festival and a witness of the massacre, in which 360 people—mostly Israelis—were murdered, saw female victims with no clothes as he escaped. He said:

"Their legs were spread out and some of them were butchered."

Another Supernova survivor, Yoni Saadon, reported seeing

"eight or 10 of the fighters beating and raping"

one woman. She also said:

"When they finished they were laughing, and the last one shot her in the head."

These were not random acts, but a systematic effort that the women's rights campaigner Professor Ruth Halperin-Kaddari has characterised as a

"premeditated plan to use sexual violence as a weapon of war."

We must also take a moment to recognise that Hamas's sexual violence may even be ongoing. Around 100 Israelis—the figure may be just under that, according to last night's news—remain held hostage in Gaza, of whom we know 12 are women and girls. Reports have indicated and survivors have confirmed that both female and male hostages have been subjected to sexual assault in their 424 days in captivity.

Likewise, I remain gravely concerned about the sexual violence that Palestinian women and girls have endured and continue to endure in this ongoing conflict. Credible reports from UN experts highlight that Palestinian women and girls in detention have been subject to multiple forms of sexual assault, including being stripped naked

and searched by male Israeli officers. Photos of these vulnerable Palestinian women in degrading circumstances have also reportedly been taken and uploaded online by members of the Israeli army.

Reem Alsalem, the UN special rapporteur on violence against women and girls, argued that all those numbers are, in fact, likely to be even higher due to the secrecy with which the assaults take place and the stigma around reporting sexual violence and rape, which discourages women from speaking out—something that exists wherever they are in the world. Wherever the victims are, we as both parliamentarians and human beings should be saying, "If you are a victim of sexual violence, we believe you," but all too often they face scepticism and even outright denial.

The Israeli women and girls subjected to sexual violence on 7 October 2023 were met with deafening silence from many agencies and organisations founded to support victims. Many organisations initially ignored or minimised Hamas's crimes of sexual violence, or even doubted that they had even taken place. UN Women issued multiple statements following 7 October, none of which made reference to the sexual violence of that day. The UN special rapporteur on violence against women and girls blandly expressed concern about

"reports of sexual violence that may have occurred since 7 October committed by State and non-State actors against Israelis and Palestinians."

Worse, many supposed feminists dismissed discussion of Hamas's rape as colonial feminism and unverified accusations; the latter will be all too familiar to those victims brave enough to report their experiences, whether in conflict zones or non-conflict zones. We know that this is sadly all too true for most victims of sexual violence.

We know that sexual violence is perpetuated by stigma, silence, victim blaming and denial. All those prevent women and girls from getting the justice that they deserve. When we deny the reality of sexual violence, we perpetuate it, so it is incumbent on us all to ensure that we treat all victims of sexual violence with the respect and compassion that they deserve. Wherever you are and whoever you are, we believe you.

2.29 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this debate. I also thank the Minister—who I know feels very strongly about these issues, and has done for many years.

I will try and refrain from repeating anything that has been said by other hon. Members—there have been some fantastic speeches. I also say to anybody watching, that if they feel disturbed by this, there are support services that they can refer to. This is a difficult topic but it is important that we shine light on it. I know there is some detail here that can be triggering to some people.

The world is facing the highest number of conflicts since world war two, and women and girls are paying the price. Upholding the safety and dignity of women and girls, protecting them from torture and violence, is a human rights obligation, but it is one that the world—and we—often fall short of upholding. Rape in war is by no means a new phenomenon, but its escalation as a deliberate strategic and political tactic is now undeniable. That has

many consequences. There are the physical consequences, the unwanted pregnancies, the sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. There is also the brutality, and the psychological consequences, that come alongside these kinds of activities. In conflict areas, what makes it worse, is the disregard of international law, the arms proliferation, the increasing militarisation and the shrinking of civic space. It exacerbates conflict-related sexual violence, and it hinders safe reporting and response. It also leads to an increase in trafficking and exploitation.

Access to healthcare is just one of the ways gender violence is perpetrated, in some cases by the lack of care for those who have been physically damaged by rape, but also for those who have unwanted pregnancies as a result. Hospitals and other healthcare facilities should be a beacon of safety and healing for those that are injured in conflict, including survivors of sexual violence. But the destruction of health facilities—and the direct and indirect killing of healthcare workers—has severely hindered the provision of lifesaving medical assistance for survivors who need comprehensive medical care, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and psychological support, as well as avenues for reporting.

The message from the #MeToo movement was that crimes of sexual violence are compounded by cultures of stigma, silence, denial and victim blaming, which often prevent women from securing justice. Yet it often feels like this is ignored when women are in a war zone. Women and girls are just seen as inevitable collateral damage.

I would like to highlight a few cases: I will try not to repeat what has been said before by hon. Members. In Gaza, beyond the impact of the loss of hospitals and healthcare workers—which has been highlighted by my hon. Friends—women and children also bear the brunt of the lack of supplies in wartime. In Gaza, millions of women and children are suffering from the inability of aid agencies to cope with the demand for supplies or to deliver them to those in need.

At the moment, we estimate that 690,000 women and girls in Gaza require menstrual hygiene products. The stocks of hygiene kits have run out, and the price of those that are available is exorbitant. Women are having to choose between buying pads and buying food and water. So instead they are cutting up old sheets or old clothes to use as pads, thereby increasing their risk of infection and the stigma that those infections bring. There is also a risk because they have not changed their clothes in over 40 days.

In every humanitarian disaster, in every sense, women pay the biggest price. The UN is working with over 30 women-led organisations in Gaza to provide gender-based violence services, and last year, over 159,000 women and girls used those services in Gaza. If the ban on UNRWA comes in, I dread to think where those women and girls will go for support.

We have heard a lot about Afghanistan. Under the Taliban's apartheid of women, women and girls have been denied access to learning, employment and travel. They have been excluded from public spaces and banned from singing—I find that one the hardest to understand—although they may not want to sing. They have been banned from attending medical institutions and from seeing male doctors. Despite those restrictions, Afghan girls, many of whom were already in school when the Taliban returned to power in 2021, continue to dream,

but they have to attend underground schools or participate in local home schooling or remote learning, which puts them and their teachers at risk.

There have been other consequences. Child marriage has increased by 25%. I am not even talking about forced marriage, which is bad enough. Those children should not be forced into marriage and everything that comes with that. The risk of maternal mortality has surged by 50%.

As we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), rape was used as a weapon in Israel. I do not want to repeat what she said, but despite the fact that it has been well documented, even by the armed perpetrators, the majority of organisations still fail to acknowledge the sexual violence that took place on 7 October.

We have heard about the rapes that are happening in Ukraine. It is not just about the rapes, but the fear of rape. One Ukrainian victim of sexual violence said:

“I would have preferred to die.”

Rape has become cheaper than bullets as a means to terrorise a nation, and the aggressors know that. The psychological fear is passed on, not just from woman to woman but from women to girls. Civilian women who are not officers or soldiers are often targeted for rape and punishment to humiliate the soldiers on the frontline.

Time and again, women bear the brunt of war's brutality. They are consistently on the frontline as soldiers, fighters, doctors, nurses, volunteers, peace activists, carers for their communities and families, internally displaced people, refugees and, too often, victims and survivors. Women confront the increased sexual and gender-based violence and its perilous health conditions while being forced to make life or death decisions for themselves and their families. At the same time, women are often excluded from the decision-making processes, and their rights and needs remain unprotected and unmet.

This culture of silence continues even though the UN officially recognised gender-based violence in 1992. It is as recently as that; for some of us it does not feel very long ago, which shows our age. Since that recognition, little has changed for women in conflict areas. There is still too much silence from international organisations, alongside a lack of moral clarity in calling out sexual violence on a global scale. Justice and any hope of healing begin with recognition. If we are a rules-based society that believes in human rights, we cannot continue to see women and girls as inevitable collateral in a conflict. We are not just victims of violence or weapons of war.

We must work with authorities, especially security forces, to reinforce the message that sexual violence, like all war crimes, is prohibited and will be prosecuted. We have to draw a clear red line against these acts. Training, awareness raising and a prompt response from those in positions of leadership in military and police units is necessary to make this happen. We need a cultural shift from the normalisation of sexual violence and the emotional battery of women and girls in conflict; they must be seen as the true victims and survivors they are. We must put pressure on international authorities to take concerted action to make protection from sexual violence a central part of their peacekeeping efforts. Finally, the UK's contribution should be a long-term partnership with women and women-led organisations right around the world, so that we can support women in those countries to be part of a future free of gender-based violence.

2.40 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this debate on such an important topic and to all the colleagues who have spoken in this debate so eloquently and passionately. We have heard devastating statistics about the impact of conflict on women and girls. We have heard testimony about the importance of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Listening to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), I was reminded strongly of the words of Gisèle Pelicot: “Shame must change sides”. That is key to bear in mind.

During the speeches of other Members, I reflected on the fact that conflict-related violence on women and girls is not perpetrated only by soldiers in uniforms with guns. We know that, in the context of conflict and post-conflict, there is an increase in domestic violence against women and girls. The inequalities and the injustices are writ large through societies, and that is why this debate is so important.

This is an issue of personal interest and concern for me. Before I came to this place, I worked for many years in the field of international development, including in northern Uganda during a time of conflict, so I have been thinking of the women that I knew and worked alongside during that period. I have also worked with the ecumenical accompaniment programme in Palestine and Israel that works for peace in that conflict. I was thinking of the women in Gulu in northern Uganda who I used to work with from People’s Voice for Peace and the role that they played. They were local women supporting women in their communities who had been affected by sexual violence, displacement, theft, violence, and the complete loss of livelihoods and the lives of loved ones. That work was done by women within those communities to support their sisters to endure through extremely difficult conditions.

In thinking about the remarks that I wanted to make in this debate, I thought of those women. I thought of women in Gaza, in Israel, women in conflict all around the world, and refugee women who I know in the UK—the lucky ones who have escaped from situations like this. I thought of women I know from Iran and Ukraine who I hope would support the remarks that I am going to make and my requests of the Minister. It is so important that, when debating these topics, it is those women’s voices that we have at the centre of our thinking and our discussions.

I have four key asks and key lessons from reflecting on this topic. The first is—I think Members present agree on this—the UK Government must do everything to defend, to protect and to uphold the rights of women and girls in all our international interactions, as we should in all our domestic work, too. I am sure that is difficult and complicated diplomatically sometimes, but it must be absolutely at the forefront and explicit in all our work.

The second point I want to make, echoing the call of the hon. Member for Norwich North and others here today, is that we must reverse the cuts in UK aid. The cuts made under the previous Conservative Government were, in my view, shameful. It is incumbent on the new

Government to reverse those cuts as quickly as possible. I know from friends and colleagues how devastating they were.

I was interested to read prior to this debate a briefing from Women for Women International. In a very large-scale survey that it did, only 25% of women in conflict situations had received any aid at all. In Afghanistan, it was less than 10%. The quantity of aid really does matter. Aid is not the only solution to alleviating the impact of conflict on women on girls, but it is one thing that the UK can do.

My third point is that it is not just the quantity but the quality of aid. It is essential that the framing of the conflict response and the humanitarian response explicitly considers the needs and rights of women and girls. As the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central mentioned, women and girls have specific needs with regard to, in particular, sexual and reproductive health and protection against violence.

I am a big fan of the use of cash transfers in humanitarian aid. Again, bearing women’s rights in mind when distributing aid is crucial. Cash transfers can be one way to really empower women in a conflict response situation. We need to ensure that our aid programme gives long-term core funding to women’s rights organisations—women-led organisations. Having worked in the international development sector—I can see colleagues nodding; I am sure they will completely agree with this—I think that long-term funding for organisations that are working to address conflict is crucial. We all know, as Members of Parliament and as people who have worked in public services, the difficulty of doing things hand-to-mouth on a year-on-year basis. It is so important to have long-term core funding to build the capacity, particularly of women’s organisations—women-led organisations—to challenge the inequalities and injustices that they have faced often for decades in order to uplift their voices. That is my fourth and final point.

Conflict resolution is the only long-term way to get away from the disastrous stats that have been cited so far—indeed, not just the resolution of existing conflicts, but prevention of potential conflicts. Amplifying women’s voices and creating space for women’s voices and women’s participation, as the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) emphasised, is essential. Unless the voices of women and girls are heard and heeded in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, we will not be able to tackle the problems that we have been discussing today.

2.48 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) on securing this critical and timely debate, and also everyone who has contributed. It has been incredibly moving to hear the very personal accounts of what people have viewed and witnessed.

Hon. Members have spoken powerfully about the brutal rape of women in Ukraine and the abomination of the kidnap of children. We heard from my hon. Friend about the attempts by the Taliban to extinguish any and all joy from the life of Afghan women—in fact, to extinguish the women full stop. As we have heard, in war zones across the globe the existing inequalities that women and girls face on a daily basis in peacetime are magnified. They are making them more vulnerable to

violence, exploitation, displacement and insecurity. That vulnerability is not inevitable; it is the result of deep-seated gender inequalities that shape societies.

It is our responsibility to challenge and dismantle these structures, especially in times of crisis. Conflict amplifies the risks that women and girls endure. We know from organisations such as ActionAid and Plan International that wars lead to surges in intimate partner violence, limited access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and heightened caregiving burdens for women due to conscription and displacement. Again, these impacts are structural, not incidental, and they exacerbate inequalities that persist long after conflict ends.

Despite bearing the brunt of these hardships, women are often excluded from the processes that shape their futures. From humanitarian relief efforts to peacebuilding negotiations, women's voices are ignored, expertise undervalued, and leadership opportunities denied. That marginalisation is not only unjust but counterproductive. There are women-led local organisations that possess invaluable insights into the needs of their communities and are best positioned to deliver targeted and effective solutions, yet they are underfunded and under-represented in international efforts. These organisations ensure that humanitarian responses address the specific needs of women and girls, providing lifesaving supplies and essential services such as mental health support, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and psychosocial aids. By centring women's leadership, we can not only address immediate needs, but catalyse long-term equitable change.

We have heard some stark examples of the gendered impact of conflict on specific areas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) mentioned, rape was used as a tool of terrorism on October 7. That was compounded by so many people who knew better ignoring and downplaying those atrocities, adding yet another injustice to the women who suffered. In Gaza, nearly 50 mothers and their children are killed every single day according to UN Women. Displaced Palestinian women are facing extreme emotional tolls, increased risk of gender-based violence and lack of access to essential healthcare. I have three children. I cannot imagine waking up every morning with the same horrors unfolding every single day, unable to protect my children, give them shelter, water or food, and take care of their basic health needs. They have to play this out every single day and night.

[Mr CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) mentioned, the World Health Organisation reports that 183 women give birth daily in Gaza, with many undergoing caesareans without any anaesthesia due to restrictions in medical supplies. This place has also heard testimony from medical professionals volunteering in Gaza, who are operating under the most horrific conditions without the most basic medical supplies they need. We also heard about women in Myanmar who are facing brutal oppression, including sexual violence and intimate partner violence. The military targets women activists and peacebuilders, economic instability and food insecurity have led to a rise in early marriages, and the displacement of nearly 3 million people has left women and girls at heightened risk of abuse. Despite those challenges, women are systematically excluded from political and peace negotiation spaces.

Talking about those injustices and brutalities, and hearing about the horrors that are taking place all over the world, can really lead us to a place of despair, but we must have hope. We are not just bystanders watching; we have a part to play. The UK must take bold and consistent action to address those injustices. As a signatory to the grand bargain 2.0, the UK has committed to directing 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, including women's rights organisations, yet in 2021, only 0.2% of UK humanitarian funding went to those groups. That is not acceptable. We must consider ringfencing funds for women's rights organisations within our humanitarian spending.

A lot of what I wanted to say has been covered, but I will say that, in addressing those challenges, we need a coherent approach to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. All UK-funded programmes must incorporate gender analysis and centre the voices of women and girls at every single stage, from policy design to implementation and evaluation. It is not only a moral imperative but a strategic one. As hon. Members have said, evidence shows that when women are involved in peacebuilding, agreements are more durable, communities are more resilient and outcomes are more equitable. The UK Government must continue to be vocal and definitive in their support for international law and their condemnation of all violation and abuses, particularly those against women and children.

All of us across the House are incredibly privileged to have the opportunity to serve our constituents, but our collective power, influence and voice stretches far beyond these isles. None of us knows how long we will serve in this place, but each of us must make our time here count. We have to lead with integrity, compassion and determination to support, protect and amplify women's voices and their rights here and across the world.

2.57 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank everyone who has spoken today. I have been very moved by Members telling quite harrowing accounts of the way that women are affected by conflict around the world, some of which has brought back difficult memories of my previous life before being in this place, when I worked in conflict zones, predominantly with children and women. To echo my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan), I have found that I have reflected almost every day since coming here on whether I am having more impact being here than I did before. I note that five parties are represented here today, and I feel that there is a huge consensus. I certainly hope that beyond this room today there can be actions.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this really important debate, and I thank the Minister for being here. Until she appeared before the International Development Committee last week, I was a sceptic on the dual role of being both the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Minister for Development. I wondered whether it did not dilute the two roles, but the answer that she gave us has persuaded me that it is a very powerful thing to have her on the global stage. We all know how integral women and girls are to international development.

[*Sam Rushworth*]

Many Members have raised Afghanistan, and I reflected on a time a few years ago when I was a further education teacher and had an Afghan student. She was a remarkable young woman on an access course and her ambition was to go on to be a doctor, but during that period the Home Office was trying to deport her family back to Afghanistan because it was deemed a safe country. I remember spending time with her, and she tearfully explained to me that although she probably could live there, she would not be able to continue her studies—and she had this dream of going on to be a doctor. We were ultimately unsuccessful at keeping her in the country, and I do not know what has happened to her since, but this is an important point that we note for future policymaking in that area.

I will focus my remarks today on the role of women in upstream prevention, with examples of some really heroic women that I have been privileged to know. A couple of years ago, I was privileged to work with the previous Government's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief in organising the global ministerial conference—I was part of an effort to bring women and youth from countries where there is interfaith conflict to the UK.

One of those people was Sri Lankan peacebuilder Dishani Jayaweera. She founded the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. She told us a story from during the war when she met a man named Ulama, who had come to one of her workshops. She would run workshops that brought together people from different sides of the conflict to help build empathy and understanding. On the third day of the workshop, he took her hand and broke down crying; he confessed that he had been sent by an extremist group to spy on her organisation. However, as he spent time in the workshop he realised the value of its mission. He ended up becoming one of its most committed members, and went on to found a school for girls and start his own organisation.

Another such person is Badung Charity Audu, a Nigerian human rights activist. Charity witnessed severe violence in her community, including Muslim houses being burned to ashes around her. Some of her friends were murdered and, beginning at the age of five, she was repeatedly raped by relatives and close friends. Due to the high standing of her abusers within her community and faith group, she remained silent in her suffering. She faced constant verbal abuse and was often called “born by mistake” because she was born out of wedlock. She did not learn to read or write until she was nine years old, and was often bullied at school for being illiterate. Eventually, she found somebody she was able to confide in and open up to, and she talked to her foster parents about her experiences. Today, Charity works mentoring young girls overcoming the trauma of abuse and sexual violence in her country. She came here to Parliament and spoke eloquently about her work.

Another person is Khalidah, who is from Iraq, and her friend, Shno Qane Qader. Khalidah is a young Yazidi woman and Shno is a young Muslim woman; they work together to promote peace in their communities and there is powerful testimony of their work. Other examples include Ghadir Hana, an Israeli-Palestinian, and Surale Rosen, a Jewish Israeli: two women working

together for peace. We took them to Birmingham central mosque for a discussion on peace and the role of women in peace there. Ghadir was given a pretty hard time by some of the audience, who could not understand why she was appearing on a platform with her Jewish friend promoting peace in their community.

Another example of three outstanding women, who I, unfortunately, could not bring to the UK because we were not successful in getting visas for them to come to the conference, are three women in the Central African Republic. A few years ago, I was with them in Bangui. By chance it happened to be International Women's Day. Their names are Marie-Therese, Aicha Baba and Clarisse Manehou—a Catholic, a Protestant and a Muslim. They are three women who represent an interfaith platform and work together. There are three male faith leaders of that platform, who have also done remarkable work, and been nominated for all the Nobel prizes, as well as all the things one would expect, and have travelled the world, but we were not able to get visas for the women due to their poverty.

As I sat with those women and asked them about their experience and what I could do, two things stood out for me. One of them was that one woman said she was grateful for the work of the men in building peace, before adding: “But I was the one who faced down the barrel of a gun and stood between the militia and my community, and persuaded them to put down their weapons.”

Mike Martin: I would like to add another example to the hon. Gentleman's great list. As he knows, Somalia, Somaliland and the other Somali countries are organised by clan, and in Somali culture it is actually the women who broker peace between clans. When there are conflicts over grazing rights, it is the women who cross clan lines to broker peace.

Sam Rushworth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that example. Another example comes not from my own life but from Liberia, where women became so fed up of conflict that women on all sides decided to unite behind a woman—Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—for the presidency, while many men in the country voted along factional lines.

The experience I had with the women I mentioned will never leave me. I confess that I did not understand the currency I was using. I asked them whether they needed some lunch; I felt that we had been talking for a long time. I gave them what actually amounted to about \$100, thinking that I was giving them about \$10. They looked a bit overwhelmed. Afterwards, when they went off, my translator told me that they did not buy lunch; they came back hungry, because they said they could use that money better to benefit their community.

When I asked those women what would make the biggest difference for them, I was expecting them to make quite big financial demands. Instead, they said, “Could we have some sewing machines?” That was because, for many of them, their husbands had been killed, they had been raped, their homes had been burned and looted, and they no longer had sewing machines to make a living. For the sake of a few thousand dollars to provide sewing machines for those women, we could give them a livelihood, and that sum, frankly, is probably what we would spend on having a 4x4 on the road for a

day in one of those countries. To echo the point that the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) made about cash transfers, nothing is more important than getting cash to the women on the ground who know how to spend it to make a real difference in people's lives.

In conclusion, several Members have made outstanding recommendations, so I will not repeat them all, but I will emphasise the point about upstream prevention. The previous Government rightly established that there needs to be an atrocity prevention strategy within aid spending, but now we need to take that idea forward. Part of that process must involve looking at civil society and upstream funding, and the long-term support for the women's and young people's organisations that are doing such vital work in peacebuilding. We need to look at the quality of aid, not just the quantity.

I will close my remarks, because I am really conscious of time. Again, I simply make an appeal that we do not just hear words here today, but that words lead to action.

3.8 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I thank the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this incredibly important debate, in which there have been many insightful and inspiring comments.

We have heard today that women and girls disproportionately suffer the impact of the global rise in conflicts, forcing record numbers of them to flee their homes. That dramatically increases their vulnerability to sex trafficking, child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, for which they are often marginalised and stigmatised by their communities.

Conflict does not impact women through gender-based violence alone; it brings with it the loss of livelihoods, worsening healthcare and higher death rates. It also undermines women's ability to give birth safely and interrupts women's access to essential supplies, such as contraceptives.

We have also seen brazen assaults on civilians, aid workers and critical service delivery points, all of which constitute flagrant violations of international humanitarian law. Essential infrastructure, such as hospitals, displacement camps and safe spaces, has also been a casualty of war, and that has cut women and girls off from vital services and emergency assistance at a time when they are most at risk. Conflict therefore increases existing structural and gender inequalities and takes decades to undo. Time and again it is women and girls who bear the brunt of the increasing number of armed conflicts around the globe. The last year has offered devastating examples. I will only touch on the current crises in Sudan and Gaza, being brief because they have been covered so much already in this debate.

Nearly 70% of those killed in Gaza over a six-month period were women and children. That is, in itself, a terrible statistic and also a disproportionately high level compared with usual conflicts. Pregnant women living through the conflict in Gaza are three times more likely to miscarry, and if they do carry their babies to full term they are three times more likely to die in childbirth due to a lack of access to medical care and nutrition. We also know that women and girls, although their

nutritional needs are greater, eat less and last in these conflicts, which are already plagued by malnutrition and starvation, yet none of the UK's humanitarian funding for Gaza since October 2023 has been ringfenced for women's needs, women's rights and women-led organisations. That must change.

In Sudan, since the start of the conflict in April 2023, the number of people in need of sexual and reproductive health services has more than doubled, yet only 6.7% of the funding needed for gender-based violence prevention and response has been provided. Neither Palestine nor Sudan were included in the UK women, peace and security national action plan—I look forward to hearing why, in the Minister's response.

From Members in this debate, we have heard harrowing accounts of sexual violence in both Gaza and Sudan. I will make one addition. We hear about women in Sudan who have taken their own lives to escape rape by paramilitaries, or because of being raped, or who have experienced sexual violence to protect their children from being afflicted. That is the shocking nature of these conflicts. Through the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, the UK has been able to provide important support to survivors in Ukraine, providing expertise and material support to document sexual and gender-based violence, including through the atrocity crimes advisory group, but NGOs are unclear whether the lessons learned from that critical work are being applied to the conflicts in Sudan and Palestine. I should therefore be grateful if the Minister would confirm that the atrocity crimes advisory group has been dispatched to Sudan and Gaza. If it has not been, why not?

I would also like to hear from the Minister on the Government's plans to pick up the commitments that the previous Government made through the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, so that the UK can again demonstrate global leadership in tackling sexual violence in conflict. When we consider how vulnerable and targeted women are in these conflicts, not only does it offend our morals and consciences but, as hon. Members have said, it makes absolutely no rational sense. In Gaza, for instance, women make up 70% of frontline health workers and 60% of caregivers. As we have heard, women are important advocates in conflict-torn places and are critical to building lasting peace, with strong evidence to demonstrate that the involvement of women and girls in peacebuilding is key to ending conflict and building long-term, sustainable peace and stability. I endorse the eminently sensible and practical suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) to give women a seat at the table. Women must always have a seat at the table, and there are many women at those tables today.

In 2021, only 0.2% of UK humanitarian ODA went to frontline women's rights organisations and movements, so will the Minister commit to funding for women's rights organisations that is ringfenced within humanitarian spending? As a signatory to the UN Security Council resolution on women, peace and security, the UK must lead on this issue. The UK must be vocal, clear and more consistent in its support for international humanitarian law, and in its condemnation of all violations and abuses against all civilians, including women and girls.

I hope the Minister not only agrees with but acts on my last point, which is that—as the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) pointed out—

[*Monica Harding*]

increasing international development funding is the fundamental way that the UK Government can properly tackle the kind of gender-based inequality and sexual violence that we have discussed in this debate. Prioritising development funding before a conflict breaks out, and allowing programmes to tackle existing gender inequalities in peacetime, is a far more effective way of tackling the deep-rooted inequalities that women and girls often experience in those fragile states, and it can reduce some of the gendered impacts and violence when conflict breaks out.

Gender-based violence is not inevitable; it is rooted in existing inequalities. UK aid for programmes that include a gender equality objective nearly halved between 2019 and 2021, with a devastating impact on women and girls. Funding for programmes supporting women and girls desperately needs to be restored immediately, as does the humanitarian relief reserve fund, and health programmes, which have also been cut. All those programmes have been eroded in the years since UK ODA was cut from 0.7% of GNI to 0.58% by the previous Government, and cut further to 0.5% in this Government's Budget. It is no secret that the Liberal Democrats are pushing hard for the return to 0.7% of GNI, and remain perplexed as to why the Government insist on adopting the fiscal tests that they so vigorously opposed when in opposition. The point about 0.7% is that it is proportionate to a country's prosperity. Will the Government commit to reviewing their use of fiscal test, and their declared goal, which is to return to 0.7%?

In conclusion, women and girls generally do not start wars, and neither do they usually have the power to end them—but they suffer disproportionately from them. It is within our gift to empower women and girls, so let us commit to doing so.

3.16 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) on securing this debate. I believe she did so through the Backbench Business Committee, and I thank her for her endeavours. This has been a far-reaching debate with many excellent contributions. It has also been an excellent opportunity to highlight the plight of women and girls, listen to so many testimonies and personal experiences, share those stories, and often hear about things that, let us be honest, for most of us would be unimaginable.

We are deeply concerned about the impact that conflict has on women and girls. Reports of conflict-related sexual violence and its use as a weapon of war are particularly horrifying. We unequivocally condemn such abuses, and do not accept them as inevitable consequences of war. During our time in government, we were at the heart of the international response to CRSV. Since launching the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative—PSVI—in 2012, we continued to lead the world in addressing those crimes. In 2022 we hosted an international conference on the issue, and we launched a political declaration outlining a clear message that sexual violence must end and the steps that were required. That was backed up by £12.5 million in new funding. In 2023, we chaired a meeting of the international

alliance on preventing sexual violence in conflict. It was the first of its kind and brought diverse actors together to drive global action.

Given the leadership that we showed through PSVI, I am pleased to note that the Government put on record a re-commitment to the UK's support of the initiative. I also note Lord Collins's appointment as the Prime Minister's special representative. I would, however, like to ask what specific plans the Minister has to build on the work that we did through the PSVI. Can she assure colleagues that representations will be made to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about the value of this initiative ahead of the spending review?

Tackling the issues affecting women and girls in conflict is not just limited to ending sexual violence, as we must also raise the eyes of women and girls to a brighter future worldwide. As part of the work to advance gender equality and challenge discrimination, we launched the international women and girls strategy 2023-2030. That put women and girls at the heart of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's work, and our investment, together with partners, led to more girls in school, fewer girls forced into early marriage, and more women in high political office and leadership positions. We continued our support for the three Es—education, empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights, and ending violence. We made significant progress, and this Government have a lot to live up to.

What does the Minister plan to do to advance those commitments—in particular, on each of the three Es? One of them of course is ending violence, so I would like to touch on some of the specific conflicts that we are seeing around the world. Of course, there are many, and we have heard examples today, but let me mention Ukraine. In Ukraine, there is concerning evidence of conflict-related sexual violence being committed by Russian forces against Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war. Some Russian perpetrators have already been convicted for those crimes. There appears to be a pattern of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war. As part of our work on PSVI when in government, we helped to build investigatory capacity to support accountability in Ukraine. I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on the steps she has taken to build capacity in Ukraine to help ensure that Russian perpetrators are brought to justice.

We are seeing in Sudan a war, driven by a man-made power struggle, that has led to a humanitarian catastrophe. The reports of CRSV are dire, and I know we all want to see an alleviation of the crisis. In government, we took steps to support partners to care for and protect survivors, and we invested a great deal of energy in trying to bring about a cessation of hostilities. We continue to call for a cessation of violence and for greater access for humanitarian aid so that survivors can access support. What steps is the Minister taking to progress those aims, particularly when it comes to upholding the rights of women and girls?

The next context I would like to mention is Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Let us be clear: we utterly condemn all alleged and reported CRSV, and call for proper investigations and a survivor-centred approach. The 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas included horrific acts of violence against Israeli women and girls and other civilians, and we express serious concerns at

reports of sexual violence against the hostages still held in Hamas captivity. The hostages can and must be immediately and unconditionally released. Hamas should stop using civilians, including women and girls, as human shields.

Last year, my noble Friend Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, as Foreign Secretary, announced £4.25 million of UK aid to support the work of UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, which provides lifesaving support to vulnerable women and girls. That was expected to reach 111,500 women, which is about one in five adult women in Gaza. I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on the latest steps taken to build on that support.

Conflict-related sexual violence is a systemic and pervasive abuse that threatens the lives and wellbeing of women and girls. In government, we led the global conversation on this critical issue that affects millions and demands a united approach. I am proud that when we were in government, the UK reached more than 4 million people, including survivors, with vital support. Of course, there is more still to do, so I hope this Government will build on our work and strive for a future in which CRSV becomes a thing of the past. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

3.23 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): It is a real pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this incredibly important debate on the impact of conflict on women and girls. I was grateful to my hon. Friend for her very powerful speech, and we have heard so many incredibly powerful speeches today. I echo the comments by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that this is an issue on which we can and must come together, and certainly today we did come together across five parties, as was mentioned. I was really pleased to see that.

As so many have mentioned, this is an incredibly timely debate. Conflict today is at the highest level since world war two. Women and girls are affected disproportionately, and we have heard so many examples today. The number of UN-verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence increased by 50% in 2023, as was mentioned, and not a single peace agreement reached in 2023 included a women's representative or representative group as a signatory. There are not sufficient women at those tables. The UN Secretary-General's 2023 report highlighted that 172 human rights defenders who are women were subjected to reprisals for no other reason than that they engaged with the United Nations. Those are sobering and concerning statistics, and we heard many others.

It is 25 years since the UK played an important part in securing the landmark UN Security Council resolution 1325, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North. Thirty years have also passed since the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe met in Beijing to agree a central set of international norms on women's rights and gender equality. Those are two significant milestones that should provide an opportunity for us to celebrate hard-won gains, but overall we are going backwards internationally.

The new UK Government will continue to build on the ambition of the fifth UK women, peace and security national action plan; I am delighted to underline that to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). This Government are determined to work in partnership with others around the world, not least the civil society groups and women peacebuilders, who have key roles to play and are working on the frontline in their communities.

At the United Nations General Assembly last September, the Prime Minister gave a clear commitment to work together for peace, progress and equality. It is clear that women and girls must be at the heart of that work and at the heart of our development policy—I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North on that. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) that they also need to be at the heart of our work in relation to the climate crisis, and we ensured that was the case in our representation at COP.

Empowering women and girls is clearly vital. I was pleased to hear a number of Members refer to the role of my noble friend, Lord Collins, who has been appointed as the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. As the Minister for International Development and for Women and Equalities, I am determined that the UK does all it can to prevent and resolve conflict and empower women, who are vital to sustainable and inclusive outcomes from conflict situations. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) made that point powerfully in relation to Myanmar, and it was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan).

We are determined to ensure that women are involved in peacebuilding, not just because of the moral case but, as was spelled out by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin), because of the clear empirical case. When women are involved in peacebuilding in a genuine and significant way, those peace deals tend to stick far more than when they are cut out of the process. When I was in Addis Ababa, I was delighted to meet a number of incredible women from Sudan representing civil society; they must be part of that country's future and of the peaceful resolution of the appalling conflict there.

We believe that we can make a difference as the UK, in the same way that the incredible women mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) have made a difference—it was wonderful to hear what they had done. First, we must ensure that we listen to women's voices on the ground and amplify them. That is a core commitment of the new Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North asked about our approach to focus countries. That approach has been incredibly powerful to ensure that we are driving targeting. As the Minister for International Development, however, I am aware that conflict-related sexual violence is, disturbingly, becoming much more of a feature of conflicts around the world. We need to ensure we are flexible enough on this issue, and that is what I am determined to do as the new Minister.

We also need to ensure that there is participation in peace processes, and that it applies whether we are talking about formal or informal mechanisms. That includes, for example, in Nigeria and South Sudan. We also need to ensure that women's voices are raised when

[Anneliese Dodds]

it comes to the impact of conflict-related sexual violence. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North mentioned DRC. We have been supporting women subjected to CRSV there; their voices need to be heard on those appalling crimes.

Through the UK's £33 million partnership with the Equality Fund, we have supported more than 1,000 women's rights organisations, including in conflict settings. We need to ensure that those voices are heard when it comes to issues such as child marriage, which the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. Girls in South Sudan and Zambia told me about their concerns about early marriage and pregnancy. The new Government are determined to ensure that their voices are heard.

Secondly, we need to ensure that the needs of women and girls are prioritised in the current crises. When I was in South Sudan, I witnessed at first hand the desperate situation of women and girls affected by that conflict. In a debate in the main Chamber, we went through what the Government are doing in Sudan. The UK has been taking action in relation to women and on the appalling atrocities we have seen—the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) said she is very concerned about that—and working intensively with other countries. We secured the renewal of the UN fact-finding mission on Sudan. I was pleased that other African countries supported that—that was incredibly important. Of course, it was awful that Russia vetoed the UN Security Council resolution on Sudan, which we submitted jointly with Sierra Leone. We will keep pushing on this issue, and we will ensure that in the provision of aid we act against sexual violence and support survivors. That has been the case with the UK's support for refugees based in Chad, and we will continue to focus on that.

On Syria, we have underlined the importance of an inclusive transitional process to protect the rights of all Syrians, including women and girls, and prevent further instability. Through the Global Survivors Fund, we have provided medical, psychosocial, legal and financial support to more than 800 Syrian survivors of sexual violence in Turkey.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills rightly mentioned the UNFPA. We are absolutely continuing to support its incredibly important mission.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her excellent response. Some of the stories that have come out of Syria since the Assads lost power have been to do with Christians, including those on the frontline. Christian religious views have been targeted—for example, Christmas trees have been burned. Has the Government had a chance to talk to the authorities about their role in protecting those of a Christian faith and other ethnic faiths in Syria, and particularly women, who are often at the forefront of what is taking place?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. The UK Government have raised it at an official level. It is incredibly important that the future process includes different religious and ethnic groups and women. That point has definitely been made. The voices of Syrians who have been through so much must be heard.

When I was in Jordan, I met Syrian refugees—women who had fled from Syria into Jordan. I also met a number of girls being supported by the UK to access the education that they might not otherwise have had, and we are of course working with the Jordanian Government on that. It is clear that those women and girls have to be part of the future of their country. That is in line with the new Government's determination to support women's organisations, including those representing women with disabilities. We are being very thorough about that.

A number of Members talked about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Gaza was mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), for Glasgow West, for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) and for Bathgate and Linlithgow, and by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton. We are also deeply concerned about the healthcare situation in Gaza, including for women and girls, and indeed for men and boys. I have seen that for myself. When I was in Jordan, I saw medical supplies that should have been in Gaza but had not been allowed to pass in. The Government have repeatedly pushed the Israeli Government on that. We have raised this continuously, bilaterally and multilaterally. There must be access for all the humanitarian supplies that are needed, and that must include medical supplies.

UK aid has been going to support women, particularly around sanitation, menstruation and pregnancy. I have discussed this directly with bodies such as UK-Med and others. It is appalling to see the deeply concerning reports about the treatment of Palestinian detainees. Detainees must be treated in line with international law, there must be access for the ICRC, and reports of sexual violence must be investigated.

The impact of conflict-related sexual violence on Israelis was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Gateshead South and for Milton Keynes Central, and others. I know that this issue is causing incredible pain and anguish to the families of hostages, having spoken with some of them in Tel Aviv. They are deeply concerned, understandably, about the situation for their family members. That is yet another reason why the hostages must be released, we must have a ceasefire, and we must see that surge of aid into Gaza.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North asked some questions about Afghanistan. As the Foreign Secretary has said, the Taliban's further oppression of women through its so-called vice and virtue law is appalling. Many Members rightly raised the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan during the debate. My hon. Friend asked specifically about gender apartheid. We are aware of calls for the inclusion of gender apartheid as a new crime against humanity, and we are actively considering the legal and policy questions raised by the proposed new crime.

My hon. Friend asked for more details about what we are doing; well, we continue to condemn the Taliban's action against women and girls, and did so most recently in a December G7+ joint statement. We have already said that as a new Government we support the initiative to hold the Taliban to account for their violations of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, or CEDAW. I am pleased that I can report today that we will formally join the list of countries that have announced their political support for the initiative. I hope Members will welcome that.

The Government are committed to preventing conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls, particularly in instances of trafficking. In relation to Ukraine, we heard some really disturbing details during the debate. We provided up to £10.7 million to support projects aimed at building Ukraine's capacity for the domestic investigation and prosecution of war crimes, including conflict-related sexual violence. On the issue of capacity, which was raised by the shadow Minister, a member of the PSVI team of experts has been deployed to Ukraine to support Ukrainian authorities in the investigation and prosecution of conflict-related sexual violence in a survivor-centred manner. It is really important to have that expert input, which we are supporting.

On the broader of issue of preventing sexual violence in conflict, in November, Lord Collins visited Colombia in his first official engagement as the Prime Minister's special representative. He led the UK's delegation to the high-level meeting of the international alliance on PSVI. I was pleased to hear the shadow Minister talk about the initiative from 2023. We very much support that agenda and are determined to enhance it. She asked about our plans to do so; when Lord Collins was in Bogotá, he called for greater international action in response to the increased rates of conflict-related sexual violence around the world. To respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury, that includes determination to use sanctions where necessary against the perpetrators of these vile crimes.

We know that all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, are preventable. That is why I am pleased that we have committed a further £18 million to the UN trust fund to end violence against women, as well as providing training on sexual exploitation and abuse for more than 2,000 peacekeeping personnel in the last financial year, through the British peace support team in Africa. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central, who is not in her place—

Emily Darlington: I am back now.

Anneliese Dodds: Oh, she has come back—excellent. She was right to raise that matter.

This has been a challenging afternoon for many because we have also had a debate on violence against women and girls in the Chamber, so I know that many have been shuttling between the two. I will briefly also mention that, during the 16 days of activism against violence against women, I announced three new partnerships with women's rights organisations in Kenya and South Africa to develop new preventive strategies.

Our commitment to halve violence against women and girls within a decade and our work with international partners to empower women globally are critical. We have talked today about how an unprecedented profusion of conflict is having a devastating impact for so many women and girls around the world, so I underscore this Government's unwavering commitment to changing that, and to ensuring that, to reuse the quote rightly mentioned by the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns), "Shame must change sides". It should be the perpetrators who are feeling that shame, who are feeling

the accountability and, above all, who are deterred from that behaviour in the first place. We are determined to work in partnership with Members across this House, with key international and multilateral partners, with civil society and, most importantly, with women and girls affected on the ground.

3.41 pm

Alice Macdonald: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I thank all Members who have spoken so powerfully today on this subject. As the Minister noted, two debates on male violence against women and girls have been happening at the same time, and many of us would have liked to speak in them both. Although the contexts are obviously different, many of the themes will be the same—the oppression of women, systematic discrimination, and the need for leadership and determination.

I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their thorough responses to many of the questions we have raised. We see so much consensus on both sides of the House. We have covered a wide range of subjects and geographies—we have gone all around the world—and we have still not covered all the contexts in which women and girls are suffering. We have heard about many statistics and many stories, but importantly we have focused on the solutions; we can spend a lot of time in debates talking about the context without focusing on what we actually need to do. We have heard of the horrors of the direct and indirect impacts of conflict, the horrors of rape and murder, and the horrible realities of daily life for so many women and girls.

At the beginning of the debate I said that I hoped we could find consensus, and I think we have found it on many areas—on the targeting of aid, on the need to involve women in peace processes and on the need for determination and focused leadership. As the head of UN Women said:

"Women continue to pay the price of the wars of men".

We need to be clear that we are speaking about male violence.

I want to finish by putting front and centre the women and girls who are in conflict zones and who are fighting so hard for their rights, and simply to survive, because it is them we must listen to. I will finish with the words of one of them, Leymah Gbowee, a Nobel laureate and a woman who fought so hard for peace in Liberia. She said:

"You can never leave footprints that last if you are always walking on tiptoe."

We have heard today that we are not walking on tiptoe on this subject. We will be working at full throttle, with determination, focus and leadership, so that finally, maybe one day, women and girls are not suffering from violence anywhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of conflict on women and girls.

3.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

NORTHERN IRELAND

Thursday 9 January 2025

Independent Review of the Windsor Framework

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Irregular Migration and Organised Immigration Crime: Sanctions

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Today I am updating the House on my plans to use sanctions to tackle irregular migration and organised immigration crime.

People smuggling is a challenge to global security. Criminal networks are making huge profits exploiting vulnerable people by facilitating irregular migratory movements, including dangerous sea crossings across Europe.

As Foreign Secretary, I will ensure the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office uses every tool at its disposal to tackle the challenges posed by irregular migration as part of the Government's wider effort to secure our borders.

I am therefore pleased to inform the House that the FCDO will develop legislation for a new sanctions regime targeting irregular migration and organised immigration crime. This shows further UK innovation in mobilising sanctions to tackle evolving threats that matter at home and abroad. The sanctions regime will allow the Government to take further robust action against the people smuggling gangs and their enablers.

The FCDO is also working to deliver more returns arrangements, and more projects and programmes to tackle irregular migration at source.

In this way, the FCDO will use the widest possible toolkit to smash the people smuggling gangs and tackle the challenges posed by irregular migration to deliver the Government's plan for change.

[HCWS357]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): On 10 December, the Northern Ireland Assembly held a vote on the continued application of articles 5 to 10 of the Windsor framework. On 12 December, the Speaker of the Assembly formally wrote to me confirming that the motion passed with a majority of the elected Members voting in favour, but not with cross-community support.

As set out in schedule 6A to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, this obliges me to commission an independent review into the functioning of the framework, in accordance with paragraphs 7 to 9 of the unilateral declaration of October 2019. I have today commissioned the right hon. Lord Murphy of Torfaen to conduct this review.

Lord Murphy previously served in government as Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Secretary of State for Wales. In his many years of public service, he has shown a deep understanding of the bonds between the nations of the United Kingdom, and an appreciation of the operation of all three strands of the Good Friday agreement, to which the Government are committed. This experience and knowledge, and the high regard in which he is held across communities in Northern Ireland, will be valuable as he undertakes the review.

Lord Murphy will work to provide me with a report of the review's conclusions, no later than six months from today, on the functioning of the Windsor framework and its implications for social, economic and political life in Northern Ireland, and on the UK internal market, including any recommendations. I have today placed a copy of the review's terms of reference in the Library of the House.

Following receipt of the review's report, I shall lay a copy of it before Parliament and respond to its recommendations in accordance with my duties under the law.

[HCWS358]

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