

**Monday
17 March 2025**

**Volume 764
No. 108**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 17 March 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 764

THIRTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 17 March 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disability Living Allowance

1. **Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of recent trends in levels of disability living allowance cases that have been incorrectly reduced to a lower rate without an explanation. [903193]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): There should be no benefit decisions without explanation. Claim decisions should always be set out with the reasons. If a decision is unclear, or if the reasons for it are unclear, a further detailed verbal or written explanation can be requested and will be provided.

Will Stone: Will the Minister please outline how this Government will support young disabled people to have a positive engagement with the benefit system alongside work?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to press for improvements. We want to change how we think about jobcentres and the benefit system. Our youth work coaches talk a lot to disabled young people and are very keen to help more. Our reforms are making that possible, by giving better help and support, and by opening up new opportunities for disabled young people up and down the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My staff member, alongside me, does benefit applications, appeals and tribunals at least five days a week. She overturns 75% of applications in favour of the applicant, which tells me that there is something wrong with the system. I am worried sick for my constituents who suffer from mental and physical issues because of our 30-year conflict. There must be a system that protects my constituents and the people we all represent.

Sir Stephen Timms: Again, the hon. Gentleman is right to call for improvements. We want to see improvements in assessments, and he is probably well aware that we will shortly be publishing a Green Paper with proposals for reform to the health and disability benefit system. We will have something to say about this in that document.

NEET Young People

2. **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in the Portsmouth North constituency. [903194]

5. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in the Cramlington and Killingworth constituency. [903197]

11. **Chris Curtis** (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Milton Keynes. [903204]

21. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Derby. [903216]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I want to begin by saying that there has understandably been a lot of speculation about the Government's social security reforms. I assure the House and, most importantly, the public that we will be coming forward with our proposals imminently to ensure that there is trust and fairness in the social security system and that it is there for people who need it now and in the years to come.

Almost 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training. That is terrible for their living standards, their future job prospects and their health. That is why our new youth guarantee will ensure that every young person is earning or learning. Our trailblazers, backed by £45 million of additional funding, will lead the way and will start in eight areas next month.

Amanda Martin: Each of those 1 million people is a real person, and I was contacted by a young man in my constituency who studied an early years education T-level and wanted to enter a desperately understaffed profession but has been struggling ever since to access a starter job. Being out of work while young can have a scarring effect that impacts people's job prospects for a lifetime. Will the Secretary of State work to identify people at risk of becoming NEET and ensure that my constituents are supported to find meaningful work?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Her constituent deserves to fulfil his potential and live his hopes and dreams, like everybody else. We will be working hard with the Department for Education to identify those young people who are at risk of becoming NEET, to ensure that we put in place the skills training they need to get the jobs of the future and fulfil their potential, as they deserve.

Emma Foody: I suspect there might be quite a spike in the number of Geordies not in work today, given the cup final at the weekend.

I recently visited Azure, a charity in my constituency that provides learning and work opportunities, especially for young people with learning disabilities, and heard about the incredible work it does to provide young people with hands-on experience in a hospitality-based learning environment. Will the Secretary of State detail what more the Government can do to support charities such as Azure to provide these vital opportunities?

Liz Kendall: I congratulate Azure on its brilliant work. I believe that charities and voluntary organisations have an essential role in getting people on the pathway to work and success. I know from the supported internship programmes that have been run in my constituency, including through my local hospital, that young people with learning difficulties can, with the right support, get those jobs and get that work. That is what this Government want to deliver.

Chris Curtis: I am increasingly concerned by the rising number of young people in Milton Keynes who are out of work due to mental health issues, which I think is a key factor behind the nearly 12% increase in young people claiming unemployment benefits in Milton Keynes

since 2024. Can the Secretary of State outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that these young people have the support and opportunities they need to continue to improve their health, secure stable employment and live independently with better living standards?

Liz Kendall: I share my hon. Friend's concerns about the number of young people not in work due to mental health conditions, which has increased by over 25% in the last year alone. The number of young people who are economically inactive due to poor mental health now stands at 270,000. That is why we are focusing on early intervention, providing mental health support in every school and recruiting an extra 8,500 more mental health staff, and from April we will be launching our youth guarantee and trailblazers to ensure that every young person is earning or learning.

Baggy Shanker: The Derby Promise recognises that children and young people are the future of Derby by bringing together businesses and organisations across our great city to give children meaningful, aspirational experiences, whether at iconic factories, or cultural or sports venues. We know, however, that children already face limits on their future career aspirations by the age of seven. Will the Minister outline what work her Department is undertaking to support children in Derby and across the UK from an early age to raise their future career aspirations? Will she also agree to visit Derby to see the Derby Promise in action?

Liz Kendall: I or one of my team will definitely visit the Derby Promise. I share my hon. Friend's concern that young people are ruling out future careers at a young age. I met with the Careers and Enterprise Company on Friday, and they told me that children are ruling out careers by their gender at age seven and by their class by age nine. For the Labour party, that is not good enough. I hope the Derby Promise will be involved in the youth guarantee in the east midlands, led by the mayor, Claire Ward, because we have to unlock the potential of every young person if they and this country are to succeed.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Like young people in Portsmouth North, in Cramlington and Killingworth, and in Derby South, young people in Glastonbury and Somerton face barriers to their employment, education and training due to poor public transport infrastructure. Research has shown, however, that a 1% improvement in public transport time could support a 1% reduction in employment deprivation. What steps is the Minister taking, alongside Cabinet colleagues, to remove barriers to employment, education and training in rural areas?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady makes a really important point, and it is one that mayors and local leaders raise with us regularly, as well as families who are struggling and children and young people in poverty. That is why we believe it is so important to put mayors and local leaders in the driving seat of change, so that they can link up transport, skills and job opportunities, as part of our plans. My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment and I have been working closely with local leaders to ensure that happens, because if people have to get work, the transport must be in place.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Minister for Social Security and Disability was kind enough to come to the launch of the “What comes after education?” report by National Star and the Together Trust. One key finding of that report is that young people with disabilities face particular problems when trying to access work. The system is set up against them and workplaces are set up not to work for them, yet many of them want to do whatever they can to find meaningful employment. When Ministers are making decisions about upcoming welfare changes, I hope that report will be on their desks and that it will be properly considered.

Liz Kendall: Absolutely, and the hon. Gentleman will indeed be hearing more about our plans, which will include proper employment support to help people on a pathway to success. We also have our “Keep Britain Working” review, led by the former boss of John Lewis, Charlie Mayfield, which is looking precisely at what more employers can do, with support from Government, to create healthier, more inclusive workplaces and to guarantee that disabled people who can work have the same rights and choices to work as everybody else?

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Much like the constituencies that have been mentioned, my young people in Chichester are struggling to find work and that is no more apparent than for those with learning difficulties, so will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Together Our Community, or TOC, which provides work experience for young people with learning disabilities aged 18 to 35 to show that they do have something to offer the workforce? TOC is about to open its own café and centre for these young people. Will the Secretary of State outline what support is available for such charities and join me at its opening next month?

Liz Kendall: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating TOC; it sounds like it is doing fantastic work. On Friday, I was talking to the headteacher of a special needs school near my constituency, who was saying we absolutely have to ensure that work experience, careers advice and working with voluntary groups are all part of the package of support we put in place. If possible, I or one of my colleagues will certainly come and see the work that TOC is doing, because charities and voluntary groups are absolutely critical to this Government’s plans.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Back in the autumn, the right hon. Lady said “we will not allow young people not to be in education, employment or training.”

How is it possible then that since Labour has been in office there are 100,000 more young people in exactly that situation?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady had 14 years to solve the problem and the Conservatives’ record is clear: nearly 1 million young people not in education, employment or training, which is one in eight of all our young people; and the number of young people with mental health concerns who are out of work has now reached 270,000. That is the legacy of 14 years of Conservative government, and it is a legacy that this Government are determined to change.

Helen Whately: I asked about what has happened “since” the right hon. Lady’s party has been in government: it is her Chancellor’s tax on jobs and economic mismanagement that are costing young people opportunities. Instead of taxing jobs, Labour should have been ready with a plan for welfare reform at the time of the Budget. They have spent nine months trying to cobble one together and still we wait. Why did the right hon. Lady not make any plans in opposition, and does she regret that?

Liz Kendall: Conservative Members had no plan. Even their own former Chancellor admitted that the numbers were made up. The only thing they put forward were proposals on the work capability assessment, which have recently been ruled illegal by the courts. They had no plan, but they had a clear record: leaving people behind, writing them off and putting them on the scrapheap. This Labour Government will turn that around and get people, and our country, on the pathway to success.

Two-child Benefit Cap

3. **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the potential merits of removing the two-child benefit cap. [903195]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): The two-child benefit cap was introduced by the Conservative party 10 years ago. Its period in office saw child poverty rise to over 4 million and one in three of our children arriving at primary school not ready to learn. As soon as the Secretary of State and I were appointed, we got to work to establish our child poverty taskforce, as promised in Labour’s manifesto, and those efforts are ongoing.

Mr Joshua Reynolds: A *BMJ* study found that people in food poverty have diets with worse health outcomes including more fat, sugar and salt, so what conversations has the Minister had with the Health Secretary about how lifting the two-child benefit cap could improve diet and reduce costs for the NHS?

Alison McGovern: The Health Secretary and I talked about child poverty many times as we sat on the Opposition Benches watching the situation for our kids get worse and worse every year. The Member makes a very serious and important point about the wide-ranging consequences of poverty and, if I may, I would encourage him to submit the evidence he mentioned to the child poverty taskforce so that we can take full account of it.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): One in two children in my constituency live in poverty. There is a lot of speculation swirling around the excellent child poverty taskforce, which I applaud the Government for establishing, including that the cap could be lifted for under-fives, which would affect fewer than 20,000 households compared with the 440,000 households which currently are affected by the two-child benefit cap. Can the Minister reassure the House and the country that the child poverty taskforce is looking to support all children in poverty, whatever decisions it comes up with, and not just a small segment of them?

Alison McGovern: Yes, I can. All children matter. We are taking account of a considerable range of different policy options, carefully working through the impact that they would have, but all the children in this country matter.

Employment Rights Bill: Employment Rates

4. **Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): Whether she has had discussions with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade on the potential impact of the Employment Rights Bill on employment rates. [903196]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): I meet regularly with Business and Trade Ministers. We are committed to working with businesses to ensure that policy is pro-employer and pro-worker. Boosting wages will increase workforce participation, helping employers fill vacancies and supporting us to reach our ambition of 80% employment.

Paul Holmes: With many Labour Members claiming that they care about young people being employed, has the Minister's Department made assessments about the employment impact of the decision to introduce minimum guaranteed hours for students and young people who rely on the flexibility of being able to pick and choose their work hours, particularly those who are working in the hospitality sector, which is being decimated by this Government?

Alison McGovern: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the ban on exploitative zero-hours contracts, but if somebody wants a flexible hours contract, then that is a good thing, and nothing in the changes prevents that. In fact, since I have been at the DWP, I have found that employers have not had sufficient contact from jobcentres and only one in six employers think about using them. When getting young people a proper range of choices and jobs through the jobcentre, not nearly enough work has been done to serve employers better. That is what a real growth agenda looks like from DWP.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Lá Fhéile Pádraig Sona Duit—a happy St Patrick's day to you, Mr Speaker, and all your team.

The disability employment gap stands at 30% and countless disabled workers end up out of work because their employers refuse to make simple changes that would help them to do their jobs. Does the Minister agree that the default right to flexible working in Labour's Employment Rights Bill will help many disabled workers to keep the jobs they love? What else can the Minister's Department do to help more disabled people to find and keep work?

Alison McGovern: May I first say how great it is to hear the beautiful language of Irish spoken in this Chamber?

With the increase in conditions that can be variable over time, the flexible working right will help people. The Minister for Social Security and Disability and I are working closely with disabled people's organisations, charities and others to think about how we can build those pathways into work as we change jobcentres and improve employment support, ensuring that raising disability employment rates is at the heart of those changes.

Benefit Reforms: Disabled People

6. **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to ensure that disabled people are adequately financially supported in her planned reforms to benefit entitlements. [903198]

15. **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): What steps she is taking through the benefits system to support disabled people. [903208]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We will be reforming the current broken system of health and disability benefits. We will bring forward a Green Paper with proper plans very soon, setting out how we will help disabled people who can work to do so, while fully supporting the most severely disabled as well.

Mr Brash: Work is good for us: it is good for our physical and mental health, and for our general wellbeing. When someone can work, it is essential that they are given all the support to do so. That said, it is also imperative that those who are sick, vulnerable or disabled are always protected. Does the Minister agree that striking the balance between supporting those who can work and protecting those who cannot work must be central to any welfare reform?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That balance will be at the heart of the Green Paper that we are bringing forward. We will deliver proper employment support for disabled people, which has been taken away since 2010. We will deal with the incentives to inactivity that the current system presents. Of course, there will always be people who are unable to work through disability or ill health, and we are committed to fully supporting them too.

Liz Jarvis: My constituents in Eastleigh who support and help to care for disabled family members are desperately concerned about any potential cuts to benefits, including personal independent payment. They include Laura, whose son is registered blind, and Debbie, who helps to care for her disabled daughter and is herself disabled. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that disability benefits for people who are unable to work will not be cut?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am concerned about the level of anxiety and speculation that has been around over recent weeks. I am sad that that has happened and that people have been concerned, but the current welfare system is failing the very people it is supposed to help—the people it is there for. Our aim is to make the system sustainable so that it will be there for people now and in the future. When the hon. Lady sees the proposals, I think she will see how we will deliver on that commitment.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that there will be an analysis alongside the Green Paper on the impacts it will have on poverty, employment and health?

Sir Stephen Timms: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we will produce a full impact assessment in due course.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): When I was a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions, working with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on reducing welfare dependency, getting 1,000 more people into work each and every day, and delivering record numbers of people into work, the Labour party opposed us every step of the way. Can I take it that the Government's recent conversion to reducing the benefit bill is only about conning the Office for Budget Responsibility into thinking that they will balance the books after their disastrous Budget, rather than because they really believe in it?

Sir Stephen Timms: I remember extremely well when the right hon. Lady was a Minister in the Department—it was very striking how the disability employment gap, which had been falling up until 2010, suddenly stopped falling and plateaued from that moment on. We will deliver a decisive shift to early intervention, helping people to stay in work, and renew fairness and trust in the system. We will provide personalised support so that those who can work can get the jobs that they want.

Employment Incentives

7. **Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the adequacy of incentives to seek employment. [903200]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): The introduction of universal credit and the policy choices of the last Conservative Government seem to have had some effect on people's propensity to be in work. In January, the Department for Work and Pensions published data showing that of the increase in the incapacity benefits caseload since the 2018 universal credit roll-out, 30% of the rise in claims could be explained by foreseeable demographic change and the effect of the structural alterations to the benefit. That leaves 70% of the increase that we do not have data to explain, but the Office for Budget Responsibility and others have drawn attention to the structure of social security and the changes over the past decade. On publishing the analysis I just mentioned, I told the House that the previous Conservative Government took decisions on social security that

“segregated people away from work and forgot about them.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 366.]

I stand by those comments.

Lincoln Jopp: The people of Spelthorne are very hard-working and do not mind their taxes being paid for a safety net for the most vulnerable in our society, but they really do get annoyed when they see their taxes going to people who are scamming the benefits system. What assessment have any of the Ministers on the Front Bench made of so-called sickfluencer sites—social media platforms where people are shown how to game the benefits system? Have any of them looked at those sites? Are they a good or bad thing?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill is going through the House at the moment. The issue

that he has raised is at the forefront of the attention of the Minister for Transformation, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), who will take every step he can to deal with issues in that area.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday I visited Stansted airport, a huge employer for my constituency, and found out about the important work it is doing with the DWP and the jobcentre to get long-term unemployed people back into work. What work is the Department doing with organisations such as Stansted airport to promote good practice, such as that at Stansted and Working Minds in my constituency?

Alison McGovern: Through my hon. Friend, I give my thanks to everybody at Harlow jobcentre, because it sounds like they have their shoulders to the wheel in getting job opportunities for people who need them. When we arrived in the Department, we uncovered that there was not nearly a good enough relationship between the Department and employers. That is why we put a new strategy in place to do the basics well: there is a single point of contact and we are making sure that there is on-the-job training that is tailored to specific employers. We will be doing more to promote change in that area, but I thank everyone in Harlow for the efforts they are making.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): There continue to be unacceptable delays in processing Access to Work applications, both for my constituents in Torbay and across the country. This leads to fears among disabled people that job offers will be withdrawn by their would-be employers. What reassurance can the Minister give the Chamber that the Government have plans afoot to tackle that backlog?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Member makes an important point. We had a manifesto commitment to try to tackle the backlog. We have put more staff in place to deal with that backlog, but we have more to do, because it is important that disabled people are able to take up jobs that are offered to them. We need to make sure that that is a scheme that works.

Pension Credit Uptake

8. **Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD):** What steps her Department is taking to help increase uptake of pension credit. [903201]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): This Government have been running the biggest ever pension credit take-up campaign. In the latest stage, we are now writing to all pensioners who make a new housing benefit claim and who appear to be entitled to pension credit, directly targeting them and encouraging them to apply.

Vikki Slade: The rate of take-up for pension credit has traditionally been between 60% and 65%. If that rate were uplifted, it could take 400,000 people out of income poverty. In Dorset, the number of over-65s has increased by about 20% over the past decade. People say

that their biggest concern is the paperwork they have to complete. The applications contain up to 225 questions purely for pension credit, and many pensioners would easily be able to claim for things like the carer addition through a slight tweak in the paperwork. What is the Department doing to simplify and combine those applications to make life easier for pensioners?

Torsten Bell: We are already doing a lot to simplify the process; it now takes 16 minutes on average to complete an online form, and 90% of people apply online or over the phone. However, the hon. Lady is completely right to highlight the fact that we must do more, including by simplifying the form. We continue to keep that under review, and I am always interested in ideas about how we can go further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): When the Government scrapped universal entitlement to the winter fuel payment, they said that all 880,000 people eligible for it would get it through pension credit. We now know that that did not happen; they have got fewer than 120,000 new pensioners enrolled. More than three quarters of a million of the poorest pensioners have missed out on vital support this winter, so will the Minister tell us whether that was the plan all along—to save money at the expense of the poorest pensioners—or will he admit that he has completely failed in his duty towards the poorest elderly people in our society?

Torsten Bell: The lesson I have learned is from the last Government, who put up pensioner poverty year after year—it increased by 300,000 over the course of the last Government. This Government have run a pension credit take-up campaign that has seen an 81% increase in applications since July compared with the same period last year, and 46,000 more awards compared with that period. That is what a Government doing their job looks like.

Danny Kruger: That is 45,000 more awards than in the same period last year, but 880,000 people are eligible—that is a pathetic achievement, and the Government have spent millions of pounds on advertising this. We still have thousands of people waiting for their winter fuel payment, and the winter is over, so it is a little late for the Government's next advertising plan. The fact is that we still do not know who has missed out, what the waiting time for those payments was, and what the effects have been on pensioner poverty or on hospital admissions, which have increased significantly for pensioners. Given the scandalous failure of their pension credit campaign, will the Government release all available data on the impact of the winter fuel payment cut?

Torsten Bell: We have already released significant data on that and, as I say, data was released just weeks ago showing the unparalleled success of the campaign to drive up pension credit take-up. Now we are concentrating on increasing support for pensioners right across the board, because the biggest disgrace of the last Government was where they left the health service that our older generations rely on. We are turning that around, day after day.

Jobcentres: Impact on Economic Growth

9. **Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of jobcentres on economic growth. [903202]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): Supporting everyone to find good, meaningful work and helping them to progress is vital for economic growth. That includes disabled people who want to work and contribute, but who are let down by the current system. Jobcentres have a key role to play in that, and through creating a new jobs and careers service, we will help more people get into work and get on at work, supporting our ambition for an 80% employment rate.

Andrew Lewin: I am fortunate in my community that we have an above average number of 18 to 24-year-olds, but when I was talking to the manager of the Hatfield jobcentre just last week, they said that the single biggest barrier to young people getting into work is their mental health, which a number of colleagues have spoken about in the Chamber today. Can the Minister say a little more about our objective of helping young people into work? Does he agree that the only way we will succeed in growing the economy is by helping those people overcome the barriers with their mental health?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is correct to highlight the importance of tackling economic inactivity in order to drive up economic growth. This Government understand the negative effects that unemployment can have on mental health, particularly among young people, which can impact future prospects. The youth guarantee will help address barriers faced by young people to ensure that they can access quality training opportunities and apprenticeships or help to find work, boosting their confidence and giving them the very best chance of success in the workplace.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): A few weeks ago, I visited Salisbury jobcentre and I met Kirstie Reakes and George Thornley, who are helping me organise a jobs fair on Thursday 8 May. They could not have been more helpful. Their encyclopaedic knowledge of the local jobs market and businesses was impressive. Will the Minister congratulate them and thank them for the help they are giving me with the jobs fair in Salisbury Guildhall on 8 May? Will he also reflect on what incentives jobcentres could have to reach out to businesses and deepen their knowledge of local labour markets?

Andrew Western: The right hon. Gentleman is correct to raise the issue of jobcentres reaching out to local employers. We know that we have a significant issue with whether the jobcentre is the vehicle of choice to advertise local job opportunities. That is a long-standing issue that we are keen to address. I am delighted to congratulate his local jobcentre on the work it is doing to promote the jobs fair.

Unemployment Trends

10. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment she has made of recent trends in levels of unemployment. [903203]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): Official unemployment currently sits at 4.4%, which is clearly much lower than the historic high of 11.9% in June 1984. However, today's official unemployment level masks the legacy of the Conservatives' recent period in office, which saw the number of people off sick rise to nearly 3 million, concentrated in places with employment rates well below the national average, creating a vicious circle where people are forced to leave the place they love for the chance of a career, and where those who are left do worse and worse. That is why, as part of our "Get Britain Working" reforms, we are building a new jobs and careers service that will be locally tailored and will help everyone find access to support to get a good, meaningful job and to progress in work.

Mr Holden: Compared with this time last year, almost 500 more people are on the claimant count in Basildon and Billericay. Almost 100 of those are under 25. How many more will have to be made unemployed before Labour Ministers listen to charities, GPs, supermarkets, manufacturers and care providers? They visited me in my constituency and said that Labour needs to think again about its catastrophic national insurance rise which, before it even hits in April, is already costing the jobs of my constituents.

Alison McGovern: We have a significant reform plan to make sure that we tailor jobcentre support towards the needs of employers, because there is still a significant number of vacancies out there that young people should be making the most of to start their career and progress in life. That is why we have a new employer strategy, so that the Department for Work and Pensions can serve businesses properly.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): Disabled people often face additional barriers when trying to get back into work. Does the Minister acknowledge that rather than freezing or cutting their benefits, we will need to invest in those people to help them back into work and to sustain them there?

Alison McGovern: Yes, I do agree. We see potential in every single person in the country, and many of those who have been written off and left on the scrapheap deserve a much better pathway back into work.

Welfare Fraud: Serious and Organised Crime

12. **Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab):** What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle fraud in the welfare system by serious and organised criminal gangs. [903205]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Department works collaboratively with other Departments and with law enforcement agencies on investigations of benefit fraud carried out by organised criminal gangs. New powers in the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which was mentioned earlier by the Minister for Employment, will strengthen our ability to tackle organised crime by modernising and enhancing our investigation powers, granting DWP officials powers of search and seizure, and ensuring that those who defraud the public sector face appropriate consequences.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I welcome the new powers in the fraud Bill, and note the huge increase in pension credit fraud in recent years. Can the Minister explain how capital fraud and fraud in which recipients stay out of the country for longer than the rules require, which together account for 50% of all pension credit fraud, will be targeted under the new rules?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The eligibility verification measure in the new Bill will do just that, providing a crucial data feed to help us identify fraud that relates to pension credit as well as to universal credit and employment and support allowance. This will flag up claimants who are potentially in breach of eligibility under capital and abroad criteria, so that we can start to lower the unacceptable level of fraud and protect the public purse.

Pensions Triple Lock: North Durham

13. **Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab):** What assessment she has made of the impact of the pensions triple-lock on pensioners in North Durham constituency. [903206]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): Our commitment to the triple lock throughout this Parliament means that spending on the state pension is set to rise by £31 billion a year. Individuals are set to see increases of up to £1,900 a year, benefiting 21,000 pensioners in North Durham and 12 million people in Britain as a whole.

Luke Akehurst: I welcome the fact that the Government are not only protecting the triple lock for every pensioner in the country but tackling the biggest problems for pensioners by uprating pension credit by more than the rate of inflation, encouraging a higher take-up of pension credit and substantially increasing funding for our NHS. Can the Minister tell me how many pensioners in North Durham currently claim pension credit, and how many are entitled to it but do not claim it and could benefit from this increase?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of the 4.1% increase in pension credit that will take place in just a few weeks' time, and I can tell him that about 3,000 people are claiming pension credit in North Durham. He is also right to mention the more than £25 billion that the Government are investing in the NHS. The unacceptable state of the health service is the biggest betrayal of older generations by the Conservative party, and we are going to change that.

Unemployment: Stoke-on-Trent

14. **Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps her Department is taking to help reduce levels of unemployment in Stoke-on-Trent. [903207]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): In the year to September 2024, 4.7% of working-age people were unemployed in Stoke-on-Trent, but as I said earlier, that often masks bigger problems relating to economic inactivity, frequently caused by ill health. We propose to join up work, health and skills support, and to ensure

that local areas throughout England have “Get Britain Working” plans so that every part of the country has a plan to grow.

Gareth Snell: It is clear that the Government are making a serious attempt to remove the barriers preventing people with mental health conditions from entering work. May I issue an invitation to the Minister, and commend to her the work of the combined healthcare trust in Stoke-on-Trent and its peer support mentors? These are people who have overcome mental health challenges and now work with other people struggling with their own mental health to build confidence and opportunity. Whatever plan the Government introduce, work of this kind should be central to it, and I think that if they came to see it, they would be very impressed.

Alison McGovern: I would love to come to Stoke—*[Interruption.]* There are so many football-related jokes that I could make at this point, but I will not trouble the House. I would love to come to Stoke, and not just on a wet Tuesday night.

My hon. Friend makes the case for exactly the strategy that underpins our reform, which is to join up health and work support. I have seen in my own constituency the power of peer mentors for mental health conditions, and I would love to come and see the brilliant work that my hon. Friend has described.

Supporting Disabled People into Work

16. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the welfare system in supporting disabled people into work. [903209]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Many disabled people want to work but were written off and failed by the last Government. Our work aspirations survey of health and disability claimants found that a third wanted to work at some point in the future if their health improved or the right job was available, and 200,000 said that they would work now if they got the right support. This Government will ensure that disabled people who can work have the same rights and chances to work as everybody else, because that principle of equality is what this Labour Government are for.

David Williams: Christopher, a resident of Talke in my constituency, was badly let down by a flawed PIP assessment—one that lacked basic humanity and empathy. With reports of welfare reforms in the media, he is now deeply worried about what the future holds. What steps will be taken to ensure that people like Christopher are treated with fairness and dignity, and given the support that they need?

Liz Kendall: I say to my hon. Friend and his constituent that treating people with dignity and respect is absolutely at the heart of this Government’s plans. Having been a constituency MP for 14 long years under the Conservatives, I know that there will always be people who cannot work because of the severity of their disability or illness, but I also meet—day in, day out—disabled people who are denied the chance to work, for many different reasons. That is what we want to put right, to ensure that the social security system is there for those who need it, and not just now but for years to come.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): As the Secretary of State looks at reform, is she considering the PIP reassessment process? For people whose conditions will not get any better, would it not be sensible to relieve them of the burden of that reassessment process unless they wish to be reassessed? That would be less distressing for them, it would save money in the system, and it would allow people who do need reassessment to be reassessed faster.

Liz Kendall: I agree with a lot of what the right hon. Gentleman says. Patience is never my greatest virtue, but I ask him and the House to be patient and to look at the full proposals, which we will put forward imminently.

Supporting Care Leavers into Employment

18. **Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support care leavers into employment. [903211]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Department supports care leavers aged 16 to 24 through an extensive range of interventions to help them into employment. For example, care leavers who start an apprenticeship are signposted to a £3,000 bursary from their training provider, and they can still receive universal credit if they are on a low income. More broadly, under the new youth guarantee, all young people aged 18 to 21 in England, including care leavers, will have access to support to enter employment, education or training opportunities.

Josh MacAlister: Some 39% of care-experienced young people are not in education, employment or training—three times the average rate—and that is costing the UK over £145 million a year in lost tax revenue alone. We cannot achieve the ambition of getting Britain working unless we unlock the potential of this amazing group of young people. Do Ministers agree that we need to take bold, imaginative action to radically improve the number going into work?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct to highlight those statistics. The number of care leavers not in education, employment or training is absolutely unacceptable, and he will be stunned to hear that I am in full agreement with him.

Topical Questions

T1. [903218] **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): This week is Sign Language Week, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disability will be speaking in the Backbench Business debate to mark Sign Language Week on Thursday.

This week is also Neurodiversity Celebration Week. Neurodivergent people face particular barriers to employment, with less than one in three in work. Everyone deserves the chance to fulfil their potential, so we recently launched a new independent panel to advise us on these issues. The experts on the panel, including neurodivergent people themselves, will present their recommendations to us later this year, and I very much look forward to their findings.

Jessica Toale: Last week I visited the Crumbs project in my constituency. Crumbs provides training for people with disabilities and mental health conditions to get the professional skills they need to go into the hospitality industry, and the personal skills they need to live independently, and 90% of its trainees move into employment. Given the Secretary of State's commitment to bringing people with long-term health conditions and disabilities back into work, what more support can she give to successful programmes such as Crumbs?

Liz Kendall: I welcome the work that Crumbs is doing in my hon. Friend's constituency. I want to ensure not only that we overhaul our jobcentres, have a new youth guarantee, and join up work, health and skills support through our "Get Britain Working" plan; but, crucially, that our jobcentres and others work closely with organisations such as Crumbs, because only by working together will we get the right support to help people on the pathway to work and to success.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We heard yesterday that the Cabinet had not yet seen the welfare plan that the right hon. Lady is apparently due to announce tomorrow. Given all the media briefings, the apprehension of disabled people and the growing number of people not working, none of us would want to see that delayed. Can she assure us that she has got collective agreement so that she can announce her plan here in this Chamber tomorrow?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady will have to show a little patience. She talks about plans, but we have seen her and the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), making claims in various newspapers about their plan—but there never was a plan. The former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), actually admitted that during the election when he said that the numbers had already been scored. The only thing that the previous Government ever put forward was ruled illegal by the courts. They had 14 years to put this right; this Government will act.

Helen Whately: I listened hard to the right hon. Lady's answer but, given everything I heard, I still do not think she has the support of Cabinet colleagues, with less than 24 hours to go. It was a no.

There is never a good time for millions of people to be out of work, but as the world gets more dangerous we can afford neither the benefits bill nor the waste of human potential. Given the opposition of the right hon. Lady's party to welfare reform, can she assure me that her planned reforms will grasp the nettle and bring the benefits bill down?

Liz Kendall: That from a member of a Government who left one in 10 working-age people on a sickness and disability benefit, one in eight young people not in education, employment or training, and 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness. That was terrible for them—for their life chances, incomes and health—and terrible for taxpayers who are paying for an ever-spiralling bill for the cost of failure. Unlike the Conservative Government, who wrote people off and

then blamed them to get a cheap headline, we will take decisive action, get people into work and get this country on a pathway to success.

T2. [903219] **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): The number of young people not in education, training or work is disproportionately high in areas such as Hartlepool—something the Conservative party did nothing about in 14 years. How will the Secretary of State ensure that opportunity for young people reaches every part of our country?

Liz Kendall: We will never get this country growing again unless we provide good jobs, hope and opportunity in every part of the country, including my hon. Friend's constituency. He knows that his region has one of the highest levels of people not in education, employment or training. Our youth guarantee will ensure that every young person is earning or learning, and I look forward to working with him to deliver that on the ground.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Will the Secretary of State confirm that those people in receipt of disability benefits who profoundly cannot work will not face a cut in their benefits?

Liz Kendall: I say to the hon. Gentleman, just as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disability has said, that we know there will always be people who cannot work because of the nature of their disability or health condition, and those people will be protected.

T3. [903220] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): For many people in Dartford, being given the opportunity to learn new skills would open the door to work, particularly with the prospect of new infrastructure projects such as the lower Thames crossing on the horizon. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that she is working with the Education Secretary to give all young people a route into good work?

Liz Kendall: Yes, we are not only working together closely to expand the number of apprenticeships for young people, but looking at changing the rules so that they do not always have to have the basic GCSE maths and English to get a new foundation apprenticeships. I think we need to go further by working closely with schools. On Friday, in my own constituency, I visited a school that is looking closely at the risk factors for becoming NEET—not in education, employment or training—which is where we really need to take action.

T4. [903221] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Secretary of State co-chairs the child poverty taskforce. Will she confirm that its brief will be very wide-ranging, including looking at children in poverty in dispersed rural communities such as mine, but also taking practical steps to tackle poverty among migrant children whose parents have no recourse to public funds?

Liz Kendall: Absolutely. The child poverty strategy is looking widely at how we can: increase people's incomes, including through work; reduce costs; ensure families

are more financially resilient, looking at issues like debt and savings; and give all children the best start in life, no matter their background or where they live.

T5. [903222] **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Will the Minister provide an update on the JobsPlus pilot and what assessment has been given to its future roll-out, including widening it to include Suffolk Coastal?

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): JobsPlus pilots were launched in July 2024 and are helping to address employment barriers for the residents of 10 social housing communities. We plan to publish our initial evaluation in the summer, which will help us to understand more about how this type of innovative community-led employment might support our vision to get Britain working. I look forward to working with all Members, especially my hon. Friend, on the next steps for this project.

T6. [903223] **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): There are many fantastic organisations across Bromsgrove and the villages, including Legacy Martial Arts, the Basement Project and the Scouts, which do fantastic work to support young people. The work done by the committed individuals behind those organisations bolsters the confidence, skills and mental health of young people. Will the Minister join me in thanking those organisations for the work they do across my constituency? Will she outline what support is available to those organisations to support them in the valuable work they do?

Alison McGovern: I absolutely join the hon. Member in thanking all the organisations he mentions. If he could link them up with his local jobcentre, we can help make the connection between young people who have suffered disadvantage and that really positive community support that is available for them in his constituency. That would be very helpful.

T8. [903225] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Nearly one in seven young people in the UK are not in education, employment or training. That is an 11-year high. Given that Slough is the youth capital of Britain, what are the Government doing to ensure that young people there have the opportunities to build the successful careers and futures that they so fully deserve?

Alison McGovern: As my hon. Friend mentions, there are important opportunities in Slough that the young people growing up there need to be able to take advantage of. That is why we launched our youth guarantee as part of our plan to get Britain working. It will be there for 18 to 21-year-olds. Again, I encourage my hon. Friend to work with his local jobcentre in Slough as we improve the support available for young people.

T7. [903224] **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent Sarah left an abusive relationship but, after she applied for maintenance, her ex-partner denied parentage, putting the children through DNA tests; delayed matters; claimed special expenses; and then declared nil earnings, despite having just bought a house with a mortgage—all accepted with no investigation. He is now being asked to pay back his arrears of thousands of pounds at £1 per month. What is being done to review

the burden of proof on income, to support parents and children who are being financially abused even after they have left relationships?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): As the hon. Lady may know, the Department recently consulted on a range of proposals for future improvements to the child maintenance service, such as how we can protect people from financial abuse and better support victims of domestic abuse. I am obviously not familiar with the specifics of the case she references, but I would be more than happy to follow up if she writes to me about it.

T9. [903226] **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): Pension credit claims, as we have heard, have increased by 64%, and I commend the Minister and the Department for making that happen, as well as Citizens Advice in Stroud and bureaux throughout the country. However, there are 800,000 people who earn just above that limit and live in poverty. I wonder whether, when a fiscal situation arises, the Government will review the cap, and indeed the gradient of this benefit.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight both the progress that has been made and the hard work of the voluntary sector, including citizens advice bureaux across the country. We must continue recent progress, and we shall certainly do so. I would like to highlight that our support for pensioners goes far wider, including the 4.1% increase to the state pension and to the level of pension credit, as my hon. Friend mentioned, in just a few weeks' time.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): At a constituency meeting last week, I was told that small businesses are starting to ask employees to go self-employed as they cannot otherwise keep roles open because of forthcoming national insurance contribution rises and extra employment laws. Will the Department watch out for this trend in its data, in case it was not the Government's intention to make workers less secure with these new taxes and more regulations?

Alison McGovern: Since we took office, we have published research, reports, data and other bits of information that the Department for Work and Pensions had previously been sitting on. The hon. Lady can rest assured that we monitor employment trends and are keen to ensure that the DWP is far more transparent about data than it has been.

T10. [903227] **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): My constituent Heidi recently moved off benefits and back into work, only to find she is earning less than when she was on benefits. Meanwhile, my constituent Tyrone is blind, autistic and has cerebral palsy, and, although he is an aspiring DJ, may struggle to find permanent work. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we take a balanced approach, supporting those who cannot work with protection, dignity and security while ensuring that those who can go back into work?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): My hon. Friend sets out exactly the balance that we need to strike with our plan: proper employment support on the one hand, which has not been available

in the past, and dealing with work disincentives in the current system on the other. When he sees the proposals shortly, I think he will welcome the measures we are planning.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Can the Minister reassure people who have had an amputation or have schizophrenia, terminal cancer or uncontrolled epilepsy that tomorrow's announcements will not mean a cut in their social security?

Sir Stephen Timms: As we have already made clear today, we are absolutely determined to protect those who need to be protected in the proposals we are bringing forward. I think the hon. Lady will welcome and be reassured by the proposals when she sees them.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): There are currently thousands of disabled children and adults across the country, including in Hyndburn and Haslingden, who cannot access their childhood tax funds. How is the Minister working to address this issue with the Ministry of Justice to help families to gain quick and easy access to these funds? Will he give further consideration to increasing the scope of the DWP appointee scheme to cover child tax funds and junior individual savings accounts up to £5,000?

Sir Stephen Timms: I welcome my hon. Friend's interest in this subject, which she and I have met to discuss. She is absolutely right: there should be no barriers to young people and their families accessing these funds. The Ministry of Justice has made some progress already. I do not think the answer will be altering the DWP appointee scheme, but there will be further progress to make things easier.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is the Minister's estimate for the number of pensioners who would qualify for pension credit but have not applied in North Durham?

Torsten Bell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. The Department for Work and Pensions does not produce data at a constituency level, but I will tell him the answer to his question at a national level: much lower than it was before this Government came into office.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Supporting people back into work is not only the right thing to do for the UK economy, but the fair and compassionate thing to do for people stuck in the welfare system. However, over the past few days, a significant number of people have contacted my constituency office with profound concerns about what they have heard and read in the press. Does the Minister agree that by removing the culture of fear and creating a nurturing environment, we can help people back into work and give them the support they need not just to survive but to thrive?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are determined to provide proper support, which existed in the past, but disappeared after 2010. We want to provide that support again because so many people would thrive if they had it. At the moment there

are 200,000 people out of work on health and disability grounds who would love to be in a job if they just had the support. We will provide it.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): For weeks, the Government's active trailing of welfare cuts has generated genuine fear. Disabled people in Brighton Pavilion are writing to me in terror. Will the Secretary of State apologise for this and reassure the public that benefit changes will not take place this calendar year or without parliamentary votes in this House?

Sir Stephen Timms: First, I recognise that there has been a good deal of anxiety, and I regret that. But there will not be long to wait. The proposals will soon become clear. The hon. Lady will welcome a great deal of the changes that we want to make.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As a human rights city, York believes that disabled people should be at the heart of all decision making. How have disabled people formed the Minister's views in making these changes? Have they been at the heart of the decision making?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is right. Our manifesto has a firm commitment that the views and voices of disabled people should be at the heart of everything that we do. Over the past week I have had discussions with a number of disabled people's fora. When we come forward with our proposals shortly, we will consult extensively with disabled people and their organisations about the right way forward.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The Government announced billions of cuts to the Department; then, over recent days, Ministers have made U-turn after U-turn, and in the media round over the weekend were spinning out of control. Is there anything meaningful left to announce from the Secretary of State's original welfare plans?

Liz Kendall: The Conservative party, which left a broken welfare system that is failing the people who depend on it and taxpayers, had 14 years to put it right. We know what their legacy is. Hon. Members will see the proposals soon, but we will not shy away from the decisions that we believe are right to give opportunities to people who can work, security for those who cannot, and to get the welfare bill on a sustainable footing.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Today's *Telegraph* has done a right hatchet job on the most socially deprived ward in my constituency. The people of the East Marsh are sick and tired of journalists taking a day trip to write their poverty porn stories about people who are proud and keen to play their part in society in every way that they can. They have sought to pit older people against younger people, highlighting the NEET record. The young people in that ward are as keen to work as anyone else, but they need the jobs to do it. What discussions is the Secretary of State having about that?

Liz Kendall: There will be no greater representative for her constituents than my hon. Friend, who rightly said that they want the right chances, choices and support to work, as anyone else does. That is why we are creating

good jobs in every part of the country through our modern industrial strategy. We are improving the quality of work and making work pay through our Employment Rights Bill. Our get Britain working plan will give the work, skills and—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is topical questions. I have a few Members still get in.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is right that the welfare system supports those with disabilities. However, does the Secretary of State agree that social media influencers who are teaching people to game the Motability system in order to get free vehicles is a disgrace? If so, what does she intend to do about it?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this issue falls under the umbrella of wider fraud. We inherited an appalling level of fraud in the welfare system under the previous Government. Our fraud Bill goes some way to tackling that, as part of a broader package of £8.6 billion—the largest ever package for tackling fraud.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Given that nearly half of families in poverty have a disabled member and that without PIP an additional 700,000 disabled households could be pushed into poverty,

I am concerned that the rumoured cuts will not help people into work but instead drive them further into destitution. What assurances can the Minister give me that the voices of disabled people have been heard and reflected on in the upcoming Green Paper?

Sir Stephen Timms: I give my hon. Friend a firm assurance that not only have we been listening, but we shall continue to listen once the proposals have been published.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I have previously urged the Secretary of State to liaise with the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland over its pitiful pursuit of benefit fraud. In the same vein, is the Minister aware that of the 39,000 new vehicles registered in Northern Ireland last year, 18,000 were under the Motability scheme? Is that not indicative of appalling abuse of that scheme? Will he raise with the Department for Communities what it is doing about that?

Sir Stephen Timms: The Motability scheme is highly valued by disabled people around the UK. If the hon. and learned Gentleman has examples of misuse of that scheme, I would very much like to see them, but it is a scheme that is greatly prized right across the House. I think he would discover that if he talked to other Members about it.

Sentencing Council Guidelines

3.41 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if she will make a statement on the Sentencing Council's publication of community and custodial sentences guidelines.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The Sentencing Council is independent of Parliament and Government. The council decides on its own priorities and workplan for producing guidelines.

The Sentencing Council consulted the previous Government on a revised version of the imposition guideline, which included new guidance on pre-sentence reports. That consultation ran from November 2023 to February 2024. The previous Government responded to the consultation on the guideline on 19 February 2024. The former sentencing Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who is now the shadow Transport Secretary, wrote to the chair of the Sentencing Council thanking him for the revisions to the guideline. In particular, he thanked the council for fuller guidance on the circumstances in which courts should request a pre-sentence report.

The Lord Chancellor was clear about her discontent with the guideline when it was published. It is our view that there should not be differential treatment before the law. The House will be pleased to hear that the Lord Chancellor met the chair of the Sentencing Council last week, and the discussion was constructive. It was agreed that the Lord Chancellor will set out her position more fully in writing, which the Sentencing Council will consider before the guideline is due to come into effect.

Robert Jenrick: In just 14 days, new two-tier sentencing rules will come into force. These sentencing rules will infect our ancient justice system with the virus of identity politics, dividing fellow citizens on the basis of their skin colour and religion. The rules will ride roughshod over the rule of law and destroy confidence in our criminal justice system. The stakes are high, but the Justice Secretary seems clueless—in fact, she is not even here. Has the Department conducted an assessment of the additional pre-sentence reports that will be required and the impact of that on the Probation Service, given that it is already working above capacity? Is it considering providing the Probation Service with additional resources to cope with the extra demand? Does it expect the additional pre-sentence reports to lead to further delays in our courts?

I ask these questions because not only do these new rules violate the most foundational principle of equality before the law, but they also create immense pressure on the criminal justice system. If the Justice Secretary wanted to stop two-tier justice, she would have supported my Bill on Friday. She would have used her powers of appointment to sack the individuals who drafted the rules. Time is running out, and so is confidence in the Sentencing Council. Frankly, the public are losing confidence in the Justice Secretary and her Ministers, too.

I cannot escape the conclusion that the Justice Secretary actually supports these two-tier sentencing rules. Why? Because she supported a group that called the criminal system institutionally racist. Her representatives walked through the two-tier guidance and approved it, and she

refuses to legislate to block the guidance coming into force or to take any sanction against the members of the Sentencing Council that drafted it. If there is one thing we know about Labour Governments, it is that they always end in tears. This time, it is a second-tier Justice Secretary pursuing two-tier justice, all to suck up to her boss, two-tier Keir.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: There is one thing that we know about Labour Governments: they always have to clear up the mess left by Conservative Governments. That is what the Lord Chancellor is doing at the moment. She is clearing up the mess left by the previous Government: the clogged-up the courts, the overflowing prisons and the overworked Probation Service.

Getting back to the facts of the case, the Lord Chancellor met the Sentencing Council last Thursday and had a constructive discussion. It was agreed that she will set out her position more fully in writing, which the Sentencing Council will then consider before the guidance is due to come into effect. This is serious government, not auditioning for government. The Conservatives were not only consulted; they welcomed these guidelines when they were in office. The former Minister for sentencing wrote a letter of welcome to the Sentencing Council setting this out on 19 February 2024. There is a process in place now that needs to be allowed to play out. We will not pre-empt that process.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Sentencing Council is—it should not need saying—a non-political body whose guidelines are carefully drafted and widely consulted on. These guidelines received positive responses from the Justice Committee under its previous Chair and from the previous Government. They do not require that a pre-sentence report is ordered, they do not limit who should be the subject of such a report and they do not tie the hands of the sentencer. Does my hon. Friend agree that by dragging the Sentencing Council into the political arena without good cause, the shadow Justice Secretary degrades both the Sentencing Council and himself?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee makes a good point about the way in which the shadow Justice Secretary conducts himself. The important thing is that the Lord Chancellor had a constructive meeting with the chair of the Sentencing Council and there is now a process in place to address this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I would like to think that all in this House believe in equality under the law, in sentencing matters and otherwise, but it is clear that two-tier justice has existed in our country, having been governed by two-tier Tories who thought they could get away with illegal No. 10 parties while the rest of us were told to stay at home; two-tier Tories such as the shadow Justice Secretary, who unlawfully approved a development for his donor; and two-tier Tories who have pummelled our prisons and crashed our courts, leaving victims to pay the price. Can the Minister tell us

[Josh Babarinde]

how he will reform sentencing in England and Wales to protect the victims and survivors so let down by the Conservatives?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member is perfectly right to underline the importance of equality before the law. He gives me the opportunity to give a plug to the independent review of sentencing being conducted by David Gauke with an independent panel, which will address the issues that he has raised.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if there is a two-tier justice system, it is not the one claimed by the Conservatives, but it is certainly one that was created by them—one where victims of crime are let down by delays, where working-class communities see justice delayed and denied, and where the reality remains that black and ethnic minority defendants are disproportionately sentenced? Does he agree that instead of playing political games with sentencing, we should focus on delivering real justice, ensuring that every decision made in our courts is based on evidence, not culture wars or headlines in right-wing rags?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is right to contrast the approach of the soundbites from the shadow Justice Secretary with the Justice Secretary's approach of rolling up her sleeves and getting on with the job of sorting out the mess left in our prisons, Probation Service and courts.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Just to be constructive for a moment and to try to get a bit of consensus, surely no one is suggesting that anybody in Parliament wants to restrict the power of judges and their traditional right to sentence people according to their own lights. All we are questioning is whether a quango like the Sentencing Council should try to stack the deck against certain groups. All we are saying is that judges should impose sentences irrespective of people's race, colour or whatever.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The Father of the House and my constituency neighbour brings a constructive note, and I agree with exactly what he says. We have an independent judiciary that we should let get on with the job.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): As a former magistrate, I have been personally involved in sentencing decisions and have relied on and can attest to the importance of pre-sentencing reports giving as much information about an offender as possible before deciding an appropriate sentence. Used properly, they can cut reoffending rates. Does the Minister agree that pre-sentencing reports should therefore be available for all offenders and that access should not be determined by an offender's ethnicity, culture or faith?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is exactly right that pre-sentence reports play an important role, and we ought to applaud the work that the Probation Service and others do in preparing those reports. She is exactly right to point to how effective they are in helping with sentencing.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Minister is right to stress the independence of the Sentencing Council, but would he accept that he cannot criticise the shadow Secretary of State for having a view on these draft guidelines when the Secretary of State herself did exactly that? I also ask him to consider in this debate the real purpose of a pre-sentence report. It is there to give more information about an offender, but it also enables a judge to impose a non-custodial sentence if they believe that is the appropriate course. It is hard for a sentencer to do that, unless someone has been assessed as suitable for a community penalty. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this debate, is it not important that the Sentencing Council makes clear that what is important in deciding whether to ask for a pre-sentence report is whether that extra information is needed and not anything else, including protected characteristics?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: That is exactly what the Lord Chancellor is saying.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that there is a fatal flaw in the case of the shadow Justice Secretary: his party worked for months to develop the very guidelines about which they now complain? Does the Minister further agree that rather than desperately scoring an own goal for his party, the right hon. Member should get behind this Government's reforms to clear up the mess left by the Conservatives?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: To be fair to the Conservatives, they did not work on the guidelines, but they were consulted on them, and they did respond to them in a positive way.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I note the comments by the chair of the Sentencing Council Lord Justice William Davis, who said that both Labour and Conservative Ministers, or their representatives, had known about the plans since 2022 and did not object. While I am disappointed that the Government are only acting reactively now, does the Minister not agree that the shadow Secretary of State has no shame and that it is hard to take his faux outrage seriously when this is just another audition for Tory leader?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Lady has said what everybody else in this House and outside it is thinking.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the Conservatives have some explaining to do, given that the Sentencing Council's consultation on the guidelines that recommended differing approaches for those from an ethnic minority background was undertaken during the previous Government, that the previous Government was a statutory consultee and that it was welcomed by the Government at the time?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The previous Government were fully involved in the consultation, and not only were they fully involved, but they welcomed it.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Coming to this fresh, as one without a legal background, it seems to me that there are matters here of very great importance that ought to be properly debated by this House.

Does the Minister agree that this is yet another classic example of where the much-vaunted separation of powers is likely to interfere with the process?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: This is the third consecutive week in which we have discussed this in the House. We discussed it in the Lord Chancellor's statement, we discussed it at Justice questions last week, and we are discussing it again today.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his response. It has already been mentioned that pre-sentencing reports are important for judges. However, does he agree that pre-sentencing reports should be available for all offenders, and that their availability should not be determined by an offender's ethnicity, culture or faith? Further to what the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) said, we also had a two-tier probation system under the last Government.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend's point.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Does the Sentencing Council understand that, with these guidelines, it is totally out of touch with the mood of the British people, totally out of touch with the mood of the Government, and totally out of touch with the mood of the House? And therefore, why will it not agree to delay these guidelines until they have been properly debated in this House?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: To be fair, the chair of the Sentencing Council met the Lord Chancellor last week, and it was a constructive meeting. He is awaiting a letter from the Lord Chancellor, which he promises the Sentencing Council will consider and respond to before 1 April.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): As a former local authority lead for youth justice, I saw at first hand how important pre-sentencing reports can be in shaping effective and progressive outcomes in justice. However, it cannot be right that access to them is determined by factors such as race and religion. I applaud the Justice team for making such a strong and robust response to the Sentencing Council's guidance so far. Can the Minister assure me that unlike the last Government, who were clearly asleep at the wheel during the consultation, we remain willing to take whatever action is needed to uphold this important principle?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I agree with my hon. Friend that the last Government appear to have been asleep at the wheel, rediscovering their mojo only once they were in opposition.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Last week, the Prime Minister announced that he is abolishing NHS England to make sure the NHS is brought back under democratic control. Will the Minister be lobbying the Prime Minister to abolish the Sentencing Council to make sure sentencing is brought back under democratic control?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank the former common sense Minister for her question—

Esther McVey: You wouldn't understand common sense.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: If the right hon. Lady stops gabbling and listens, I will attempt to answer her question.

I think the right hon. Lady is getting a little ahead of herself. There is a process in place, and there has been a constructive meeting with the Sentencing Council. A letter is being sent to the Sentencing Council, and the Sentencing Council will respond.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I do not believe the shadow Secretary of State believes that the law is currently applied equally and free of structural biases. But given the unfortunate politicisation of all this, does the Minister now back the chair of the Sentencing Council, who says that the state should not determine the sentence imposed on an individual offender and that sentencing guidelines of any kind—if they were to be dictated in any way by Ministers—would breach an important principle?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Certain things are a matter of policy, and they are for the Government and for Parliament. We have had a constructive meeting with the Sentencing Council, a letter is going to the Sentencing Council, and the Sentencing Council will respond. We totally respect the independence of our judiciary.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Just the other week, the Lord Chancellor made it clear that she does not agree with the direction in which the Sentencing Council is going, and I think we all hope that her meetings with the Sentencing Council will produce results. However, if they do not, will the Minister commit to working across parties? I think there is a real commitment on the Opposition Benches to work with him to bring forward emergency legislation, if that is required.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank the right hon. Member for the constructive tone of his question. I refer him to the point about our not wanting to get ahead of ourselves. We need to allow the process to go forward, and to respect the Sentencing Council's role in it; we will address things when we need to address them.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): We are in the bizarre position where the body that advises judges on how to judge may decide to go to court for a ruling on whether Ministers have the power to tell judges what to do. What preparation has the Minister's Department made for that possibility?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I am afraid that I am becoming a bit repetitive. There is a desire from Opposition Members to rush ahead, and I have great respect for that—*[Interruption.]* Well, you had 14 years, and what did you do in them? *[Interruption.]* Sorry, Mr Speaker, not you. Opposition Members are trying to rush ahead; we will take things steadily, at the right pace, with proper respect.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of great importance to the Lord Chancellor, she is reduced to asking the Sentencing Council to change its mind. The former Minister for common sense is right. There is a lesson here for all parliamentarians about the way we delegate powers to quangos that then come up with solutions that we clearly find repulsive.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: There was a constructive meeting. If the right hon. Member had been in it, I do not think he would have seen it as somebody “asking”. There was a constructive exchange of views, and there is a proper process in place, which I am confident will come up with the right answer.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): It is obviously ridiculous that the Justice Secretary is on her knees before a quango, asking it to respect the principle of equality before the law, but this is not the only example. The Judicial College’s equal treatment handbook says:

“to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently.”

Will the Minister condemn that logic and say, “No, we must not treat defendants differently because of their race or religion”?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The Government do not believe that there should be differential treatment before the law. The Lord Chancellor has been very clear about that. The “Equal Treatment Bench Book”, to which the hon. Member alludes, is written by and for the judges. Ministers have no involvement whatsoever in its content.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree with me and many of my hon. Friends that policy decisions by unelected non-departmental bodies such as the Sentencing Council are eroding public confidence in our democratic institutions? Will he commit to scrapping such bodies, so that policy is always made by Ministers, who are directly accountable to this House?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Policy decisions should always be made by this House; the hon. Member is absolutely correct about that. The background to where we are today is that the Sentencing Council consulted the Government of the day, members of whom are now on the Opposition Benches. The members of that Government were asleep at the wheel. Now it is down to this Government, yet again, to pick up the pieces they left for us and sort out their mess.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): My constituents are confused about the Justice Secretary’s position. She says she believes that these sentencing guidelines are wrong in principle, and that they amount to differential treatment before the law, but she is in government; she has the power and the tools at her disposal to stop this and change it. Why has she not done so?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I have tried to explain this, and I will explain it once more. The Justice Secretary, the Lord Chancellor, has been extremely clear that she believes in equality before the law, and she is not happy with the guidelines. That is why she wrote as soon as they were published, unlike Conservative Members, who had sight of them earlier in the consultation. They went further than ignoring them; they responded to them in a very positive way.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know you like to think that in order to keep talking a bit—[*Interruption.*] One of us is going to sit down; it is not going to be me, Minister. There are other things to do and points of order to follow.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is an honourable man, and I have to ask a question on behalf of the victims, if he does not mind. He will understand that any reform of sentencing must have victims at its heart. For most victims, their concern is not the ethnicity of the perpetrator, but the severity of the crime and the lasting impact on their life. Many victims today will feel that the sentencing guidelines play politics with justice. How can victims be assured that justice will mean time served for crimes committed, and will not be based on ethnicity? Justice is blind, and so must sentencing be.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to learn that I agree with him. The victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), is sitting next to me; we take victims very seriously. That is why there is a victims’ representative on the sentencing review panel. We need to make sure that victims are at the centre of whatever we do. I have met too many victims already in this role, and every time I meet them, it is very difficult—a little difficult for me, but hugely difficult for them, because they live this.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): It seems like every week we are back here, dealing with culture wars—

Mr Speaker: Order. Is that a reflection on me granting the urgent question? I am beginning to feel that it is aimed at me. We have this urgent question today because I thought it was appropriate, not because we have it every week. Right, let’s have somebody else.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Judging by the lack of action, it appears that the Justice Secretary is comfortable with changes that she has described as two-tier coming into effect in just two weeks. We have heard that she is unhappy; if she really is, can the Minister tell the House and the country what the Secretary of State is doing, other than holding cordial and cosy meetings, to prevent two-tier justice?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The Lord Chancellor has made her position clear. She immediately met the Sentencing Council, and she is writing to it again to set out her concerns, and the Sentencing Council has committed to responding to them quickly.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Minister complains about having to explain the Government’s position, but why can he not just explain to us why the Secretary of State has not fixed this issue yet? It seems that there has been a meeting, but she has not even written a letter in the last three weeks explaining what she wants to happen. That is why I thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question again. The Minister has not actually fixed the problem that we are all talking about.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The consultation was held under the previous Government, who not only expressed no concern, but welcomed what the Sentencing Council was doing. Immediately on seeing the guidelines as drafted, the Lord Chancellor acted to sort out the mess left by the Conservative party.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Minister says that the situation is completely clear, so I feel like a bit of an idiot for asking for more clarification, but I will anyway. Pre-sentencing reports are allowed to take in further background on the lives of offenders from an “ethnic minority, cultural minority, and/or faith minority community”. What is the definition of a cultural minority, and are our veterans considered a cultural minority?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member reads out a phrase that was welcomed by the previous Government, but that the Lord Chancellor is objecting to and talking to the Sentencing Council about.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): On Wednesday, I challenged the Prime Minister directly on two-tier justice, and gave him the opportunity to confirm that he would back the shadow Justice Secretary’s Bill to stop this in its tracks. In his attempts to scramble out of giving that commitment, he said something which has been repeated today: that the previous Government were consulted on and welcomed the guidance. However, the Sentencing Council has already put in writing that the wording is different and so would lead to a materially different outcome. The Government failed to take the opportunity that the shadow Justice Secretary presented them with to block this change. Was the Prime Minister right in what he said, or is the Sentencing Council right? They cannot both be.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The letter the previous Government wrote to the Sentencing Council during the consultation is clear. The previous Government were not just consulted; they welcomed the guidance. The initial version of the guidance included reference to specific cohorts of offenders, including ethnic minorities.

Robert Jenrick: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his response to the urgent question, the Minister has repeatedly told the House that the previous Government approved the guidelines. In particular, he besmirched the name of the former sentencing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon). What the Minister said to the House today was wrong. On page 4, paragraph 4, of the Sentencing Council’s letter of 10 March to the Justice Secretary, it made it perfectly clear that the guidelines published under this Government were materially different from those considered by the prior Government. In fact, the Minister’s official was present at the meeting of the Sentencing Council at which this version of the guidelines was signed off. Will he take the opportunity to correct the record? I am afraid that he has misled the House not once, not twice, but on numerous occasions today, and that is quite wrong.

Mr Speaker: Order. Nobody misleads the House; the right hon. Gentleman means “inadvertently” misled the House.

Robert Jenrick: I do hope it was inadvertent, Mr Speaker.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not believe that I inadvertently misled the House.

G7

4.11 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, I shall make a statement about last week’s meeting of G7 Foreign Ministers. We met at a pivotal moment. Some Members of this House may have doubted that we could find common ground, and some of our global competitors may have hoped that we would fail, but after 36 hours of talks, we were united. Britain united with our allies to make our citizens more secure. National security is a foundation of this Government’s plan for change, and we are leading from the front.

The overriding priority was, of course, Ukraine. Last week in Jeddah, the United States and Ukraine reached a common position. A ceasefire offer is now on the table, and American weapons and intelligence are flowing once again. This demonstrated what this House has always known to be true: under President Zelensky’s leadership, Ukraine is serious about peace, sincere in its efforts to pursue a just and lasting end to this appalling war, and unrelenting in its determination to ensure that Ukraine remains democratic, free, strong and prosperous.

At the G7, the UK and our allies were united in our unwavering support for Ukraine’s defence of its freedoms; united in support for Ukraine’s pursuit for peace; and united on what is required to make that happen. Now it is Putin who stands in the spotlight, Putin who must answer, and Putin who must choose. Are you serious, Mr Putin, about peace? Will you stop the fighting, or will you drag your feet and play games, and pay lip service to a ceasefire while still pummelling Ukraine? My warning to Mr Putin is this: if you are serious, prove it, with a full and unconditional ceasefire now.

On whether Putin will deliver, I must tell the House that I see no sign yet that he will. The G7 meeting helped us ready the tools to get Russia to negotiate seriously. We are not waiting for the Kremlin. If it rejects a ceasefire, we have more cards that we can play. We can all see the impact that the G7’s unprecedented sanctions have had on Russia’s faltering economy—social spending is down, and inflation and interest rates are sky high. There can be no let-up in our efforts. In Canada, we discussed where we can go further to target Russia’s energy and defence sectors, further squeeze its oil revenues and use frozen Russian assets.

At the same time, we will keep up our support to Ukraine; Europeans clearly need to shoulder our share of this responsibility. We in the UK are stepping up on drones, munitions and training, sending more than 400 different capabilities to Ukraine and training more than 50,000 recruits. We have also announced the biggest increase in UK defence spending since the end of the cold war. We are urging our allies to do the same so that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position now and in any peace that follows. Tomorrow, I will be hosting EU High Representative Kallas—the first such visit since we left the European Union. In this moment, Ukraine’s friends should be working hand in glove, and that requires a new era in UK-EU security co-operation.

Finally, we are taking steps to ensure that Russia does not come back for more. We know the history—Budapest, Minsk and paper promises betrayed by Putin. Together with France, we are establishing a coalition willing to deter Russia from invading again. To be credible, it will

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need US support, but Britain and our allies recognise that we need to step up, and this Government are leading the effort on multiple fronts. In the past week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister convened the biggest gathering yet of those willing to play their part in ensuring Ukraine's future security. That followed my visit to Canada and the trip of the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), to Paris. This week, military planners from allies will gather for further discussions in the UK, which will be co-chaired with France.

Ukraine was our top priority, but our unity extended beyond Ukraine. The G7 united in support for the fragile ceasefire in Gaza, the release of all hostages and unhindered humanitarian aid into Gaza. Let me be clear to this House about what I said to the G7: Hamas must release the hostages. For Israel to be secure, these terrorists can have no role in Gaza's future, but the complete blocking of aid in Gaza is appalling and unacceptable. Humanitarian aid should never be used as a political tool, and we urge the Israeli Government to change course. The G7 also discussed the Arab reconstruction plan for Gaza—an important signal on which we should build.

The G7 also united behind an inclusive political transition in Syria. Stability in Syria bolsters UK security at home and abroad. We condemned the recent violence in Syria's coastal regions and called for those responsible to be held accountable, and we were united in increasing the pressure on Iran. Tehran is producing highly enriched uranium at a rate that makes a mockery of the limits set in the joint comprehensive plan of action. Iran can never be allowed to develop or acquire a nuclear weapon. President Trump has written to the Supreme Leader, and this weekend the United States has responded strongly to the Houthi resumption of unacceptable attacks on international shipping. Iran must now change course, de-escalate and choose diplomacy.

The G7 also kept the spotlight on the conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We denounced the atrocities in Sudan. The warring parties must protect civilians, cease hostilities and ensure unhindered humanitarian access. There was strong support for the conference that I will host on Sudan next month, which is an important opportunity to get a political process moving. We also condemned the Rwanda-backed offensive in the eastern DRC, which is a flagrant breach of the DRC's territorial integrity. The M23 and Rwanda Defence Force must withdraw. All parties should support African-led mediation processes.

The G7 also reiterated our call for the restoration of Venezuelan democracy and reaffirmed our strong support for Guyana's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As the G7 met, Armenia and Azerbaijan concluded negotiations on an historic peace agreement. We warmly welcome that achievement and encourage both sides to move to signature as soon as possible.

It was a pleasure to be back in Canada. It is a proud, sovereign nation, in which I have family who I have visited since childhood, and with which we share a long history and a royal family. Its new leader, Prime Minister Carney, is in London today, and I am sure that the whole House will congratulate him on his appointment.

[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] My fellow G7 Ministers and I received a warm welcome to Quebec, home of my good friend Minister Mélanie Joly. We united behind a new Canadian-led initiative on maritime security, an example of Canada's strong leadership. With growing threats from the Red sea to the South China sea—trade routes on which growth and all our economies rely—a strong collective response from the G7 matters to us all.

Fifty years ago, a small group of western leaders met just outside Paris—the origins of the G7. They did not agree on everything; they were from different political sides, with three from the left and three from the right. It was a time of upheaval, with war in the middle east, an oil crisis, a recession, and the Bretton Woods system falling away. Many, then as now, were pessimistic about the ability of democracies to navigate the turbulence, but that generation rose to the challenge. With the G7, they tried something different—its format allowed leaders to be honest with each other, and so find common ground. Today, we must rise to these new challenges. In that same spirit of honesty and common purpose, Britain and our partners are stronger when we stand together. We are standing together right now.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.21 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement.

In the light of the vast global challenges that we are all witnessing, there is much ground to cover in this statement. First, we continue to support Ukraine in this fight, and to support the freedoms and values it is defending—democracy, liberty, and the rule of law. It is very welcome that US military aid and intelligence sharing has resumed, and it is vital that the US and Ukraine continue to work together in the face of this appalling conflict. What discussions did the Foreign Secretary hold with US counterparts about the impact of the suspension of intelligence and military support, and what is his assessment of its consequences?

While we await further details of the proposed 30-day ceasefire, Russia's response shows exactly why the Euro-Atlantic community must be resolute in the face of Putin's aggression, and that Putin will seek to pursue long-held strategic objectives that he has not achieved on the battlefield through hypothetical negotiations. That means that we must be robust: Britain must apply maximum pressure on the Kremlin, boost defence production, and maintain our support for Ukraine's battlefield efforts. We must also use our convening role to work with allies who have other types of equipment that could plug capability gaps and to broker extra support packages.

In the G7 Foreign Ministers' statement, there is a commitment to use

"extraordinary revenues stemming from immobilized Russian Sovereign Assets".

Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether this means that the UK will go further than the £2.26 billion loan already announced off the back of the profits from sanctioned assets, and can he give an update on when proceeds from the sale of Chelsea football club will be in the hands of those most in need?

Over the weekend, we heard the Prime Minister say that his planning for his potential peacekeeping initiative is now moving into an “operational phase”. Is the Foreign Secretary able to explain what this means in practice, especially for our armed forces? What planning is under way? What will our contribution to peacekeeping consist of? Over what timeframe would deployment be launched, and how will our armed forces be supported? Which allies in this coalition of the willing have expressed interest, what will they offer, and what discussions are under way with the US on deterrence and security guarantees to ensure that an invasion like this can never happen again?

Turning to the middle east, we are absolutely united on the position that the Iran-backed terrorists Hamas can have no role in Gaza’s future, but what have the Government done to pursue an end to that brutal regime, and what discussions has the Foreign Secretary held with middle eastern counterparts on their proposed plan for the future of Gaza? Now is the time for maximum pressure on Hamas from the international community. They must release every single hostage. Is the UK directly involved in discussions to drive action in a positive direction?

On Syria, was there discussion about the ongoing status of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as a proscribed terrorist group? Following the Government’s lifting of 24 sanctions on entities linked to the deposed Assad regime, does the recent violence change the Government’s assessment of the merits of lifting these kinds of sanctions?

We understand from the BBC that the UK did not directly participate in the US airstrikes on Houthi targets at the weekend, but that our armed forces provided routine refuelling support to the US. Can the Foreign Secretary share with the House what the precise nature of the UK support was, particularly given that the UK conducted multiple joint airstrikes with the US last year against Houthi militant targets to degrade their ability to threaten freedom of navigation? Can he explain why on this occasion it was decided that we would not deploy our own strike capabilities? Does he assess that there has been an increase in threats to freedom of navigation in the Red sea and to British vessels and personnel? If so, what is the Government’s overall approach to this threat and to the Houthis? Are hard power options still on the table, as they were last year? Will the Government ramp up sanctions and pressure on the Houthis and importantly on Iran, the malign force in the region that continues to back them? What steps are the Government taking to interdict weapons flowing from Iran to the Houthis? What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with his American counterparts on the US approach to Iran more broadly, and where does the UK fit into that?

The G7 statement also made reference to the range of challenges posed by China. Our key partners are alert to the threat China poses, but this Government seem oblivious to it. As China threatens global security and our national interests and puts bounties on the heads of Hongkongers living here, we have seen the Energy Secretary following the kowtowing of the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary to the Chinese Communist party, and the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, who are responsible for national security, are now the cheerleaders for the Chinese super-embassy planning application. Will the Foreign Secretary disclose in full all contacts

and communications between his Department, Downing Street, the Chinese authority and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about this matter? Does he recognise the anxiety that this planning application is causing to the groups threatened by China? Will he accept that the threats and risks mean that China must join Iran on the enhanced tiers of the foreign influence registration scheme?

Finally, was the Chagos surrender deal discussed with the Foreign Secretary’s US counterparts? Will he commit to present a draft treaty to the House before it is signed? How can he justify handing over billions of pounds of British taxpayers’ money to Mauritius, instead of defending our sovereignty?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful in particular for the cross-party nature of what the Secretary of State for the Opposition said—I am sorry, Mr Speaker; I am a little jetlagged. I got off a plane at 6 am, and I hope the House will forgive me. I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the manner of her remarks, particularly on Ukraine. There were a number of questions, which I will seek to deal with.

The right hon. Lady is right that Zelensky has made it absolutely clear that he is committed to peace. She asked me about the US decision on a pause in military aid and intelligence aid. I am pleased to say that our assessment is that that pause, as she will know, was for a short period, not an extended period. It therefore has not had a material effect, but we were pleased to see that aid resume. We were pleased to see what flowed from Jeddah: the United States, European allies and President Zelensky and Ukraine absolutely square with the need for that ceasefire. It is for Putin to accept unconditionally that ceasefire: the ball is in his court. I was pleased to be able to discuss these matters with Secretary Rubio over the course of the three days at the G7, and with Vice-President Vance yesterday morning at his residence in Washington.

The right hon. Lady rightly asks about Russian assets. Let me make it clear that Russia must pay for the damage it is causing Ukraine. I am delighted that the first £752 million of the UK’s £2.26 billion loan—to be repaid by the profits generated on Russian sanctioned assets—has been paid, but she knows that there is rightfully a discussion about moving from freezing to seizing. If we were to move in that direction, it would be important for there to be unanimity among the G7, and a way forward within the European Union for the most exposed countries. As the right hon. Lady would expect, we are discussing those very issues apace.

The right hon. Lady asked about UK troops on the ground. At stake is not only the future of Ukraine, but the collective security of our continent and, therefore, Britain’s direct national interest. That is why the Prime Minister has said that Europe needs to step up, and the UK is, of course, prepared to consider committing British troops on the ground; but there must be a US backstop. There will be a further meeting in London this week to continue to get into the operational detail.

The Prime Minister and I are pleased, alongside the Defence Secretary, that the coalition of the willing is growing. It is right that we consider carefully what would be required on the ground, but the right hon. Lady will know, too, that the exercise of monitoring what is put in place is very important. No doubt she, like me, will have seen the operation that was run by the

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OSCE. I saw it in January 2022, just before the fighting began in the February. That would not be adequate this time round, so, rightly and properly, we must get into the granular detail of what would be required—as the European family, of course, but also involving nations such as Canada. I received a commitment from Minister Mélanie Joly that Canada was willing to step up to be part of that coalition, but there will be others in that coalition of the willing, and we will look at these issues in detail over the coming days.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the situation in Gaza and the middle east. Let me make it absolutely clear that we were all united in saying that there could be no role for Hamas. We welcome the work that has been done by the Arab Quint as a direction of travel. The United Kingdom wants to continue to work with the Quint on strengthening that proposal, particularly on the security guarantees that the Israelis would rightfully need—their assurance that 7 October can never, ever happen again.

The right hon. Lady raised the situation in Syria. The awful clashes during the weekend of 8 and 9 March led to the deaths of more than 1,000 people. We condemned the violence at the time, and the Minister for the Middle East, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), updated the House on 10 March. It is critical for the interim Administration in Syria to respect and protect all Syria's minorities, which is why it was heartening to see the agreement last week between the interim Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces, particularly in north-east Syria. This was obviously a topic of much discussion.

The right hon. Lady rightly mentioned the strikes by the US. Since 19 November 2023, the Houthis have targeted international commercial shipping in the Red sea and the gulf of Aden and attacked British and American warships. That cannot go unchecked. It is totally unacceptable, and it must be dealt with. We do not, of course, comment on other nations' military operations, but I can confirm that, while we did not take part in the strikes over the weekend, we are in close touch with our US friends on the need to act in respect of the Houthis and what they are doing in the Red sea.

The right hon. Lady talked about the Government's approach to China. I can assure her that there will not be seven different approaches to China from this Government, which is what we experienced under the last Government, who were ping-ponging about over the course of those 14 years. As for the calamity of a United Kingdom Prime Minister having a beer with the leader of the Chinese Communist party, I can give her a guarantee that that will not happen under this Government. Quite properly, as the right hon. Lady knows, I and the Home Secretary made representations to the planning process about the security issues that must be kept in mind as the proper procedures are followed for China's application. She also knows that we, too, have concerns about our embassy in China and its proper operation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am so pleased to see the Foreign Secretary continuing to lead our allies in support of Ukraine, and equally

pleased to see that he has expressed his support for moving from freezing to seizing Russian assets—we have £18 billion-worth of them held in the UK. However, if we are serious about doing that, we need to start getting on with it. What moves is his Department making—for example, putting legislation on the books to allow us to seize those assets when the right time comes? I am glad to hear that there are discussions on that, but has pressure been put on our G7 and EU allies, who still sit on the remaining £300 billion-worth of assets, which perhaps need to be seized at this stage? Has he considered putting forward a UN General Assembly resolution to provide the legal basis for co-ordinated asset seizures?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question and, of course, for her leadership of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I reassure her that we continue to work closely with our allies on this issue, including through the lengthy discussions that we had at the G7, but let me emphasise that it is important in this particular area that any way forward involves a pooling of that exercise. I do not believe that it would be right for the UK to act unilaterally in this instance; therefore, this is a multilateral endeavour and discussion. She is right to emphasise that we should work at pace, and I reassure her that we are doing so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Like him, I will focus on Ukraine.

Last week, President Zelensky announced his willingness to accept an immediate ceasefire. In response, Vladimir Putin intensified his attacks on Ukraine. This gives the lie to Putin's cheap talk about agreeing with the idea of a ceasefire. His goals remain the same: to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty and turn it into a satellite state of Russia.

The only way to achieve a just and lasting peace is by strengthening Ukraine in the face of Putin's brutality, so I was slightly alarmed to hear the Foreign Secretary say that we can seize Russian assets only if we progress by unanimity. If the US refuses to seize Russian assets, will the Foreign Secretary take a lead with European partners so that the support can flow? Can he also say what is stopping him unlocking the £2.5 billion generated from the sale of Chelsea football club, which is held here in the UK and should have already been used to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine?

The Foreign Secretary referred to the work that Ministers have been doing to build a coalition of the willing to support any final peace agreement in Ukraine, which my party strongly supports, but can he be more specific? What levels of support have other countries committed, and what progress has he made in securing a backstop security guarantee from the United States?

The Liberal Democrats have warned repeatedly that Donald Trump's actions are emboldening Putin. Last month, Trump said that Russia should rejoin the G7 if a peace settlement is agreed. That would be unjust and wrong. Did the Foreign Secretary make it clear to his G7 counterparts that the UK would oppose Russia rejoining the G7?

Given that Donald Trump is not a reliable ally, the Liberal Democrats have argued that the UK must lead in Europe to reduce the continent's reliance on the

United States. We support the creation of a pan-European rearmament bank so that Europe's defences can be rapidly rebuilt, yet last week we saw proposals from the European Commission for EU structures that could leave the UK out. Will the Foreign Secretary use his meeting with High Representative Kallas tomorrow to make sure that the UK plays a full part in European efforts, to the benefit of our security and our defence industry?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for continuing the cross-party unity. He is usually pretty on top of the details, but I just say to him that it is not the United States that has raised consistent concerns about sovereign assets. It is not the United States in this instance that is more exposed than others; it is actually in Europe. Belgian colleagues have found themselves more exposed, and German colleagues have previously been resistant on this issue, but there is of course a change of Administration coming in Germany, so we will see what their assessment is.

On those funds from Abramovich, which of course we want to use, I just say—and I should have said this to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel)—that we inherited this matter from the last Government. In two and a half years, no progress was made. I am frustrated with that lack of progress, and I am doing everything I can to reach a resolution. If we do not, I will have to consider all the tools available to Government. However, what I want at this stage is to be able to act quickly, given that the hon. Gentleman knows, I know and we all know that Ukraine needs those funds now. Therefore, working with other colleagues and Mr Abramovich's lawyers, we urge action now.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that there was no discussion of Russia joining the G7—no discussion whatsoever. The G7 is a family of democratic nations committed to the rule of law. Russia under Putin has put itself way outside that club and that necessary partnership. I see no basis at the moment on which Russia could enter the G7, and indeed there would be other candidates way ahead of Russia were that to be the case.

I am delighted that the Lib Dems have a proposal for a rearmament bank, but I would just say to them that Ursula von der Leyen got there before them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. To ensure that all colleagues can get in, questions will have to be short, and if the answers continue to be long, there will be some disappointed Back Benchers.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's strong statement that blockading all aid into Gaza, including UK aid, is "appalling and unacceptable". What discussions did he have with G7 colleagues about what can be done about this provocative action during Ramadan, and what consequences are there for what people are saying is a breach of international law?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right: this is a breach of international law. Israel, quite rightly, must defend its own security, but we find the lack of aid—and it has now been 15 days since aid got into Gaza—unacceptable,

hugely alarming and very worrying. We urge Israel to get back to the number of trucks we were seeing going in—way beyond 600—so that Palestinians can get the necessary humanitarian support they need at this time.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and all his hard work in travelling all around the world trying to make us all safer. He mentioned the OSCE, and while the previous model in Ukraine may not be fit for the future, I hope he recognises the important role that the OSCE will play in future elections in Ukraine, perhaps with a new model alongside a security force.

May I bring the Foreign Secretary's attention to the joint statement from Canada? It highlights that "Iran is the principal source of regional instability", and some would argue of global instability and insecurity. In his statement today, he said:

"Tehran is producing highly enriched uranium at a rate that makes a mockery of the limits set in the joint comprehensive plan of action."

If Israel, with or without US support, takes direct action to make the world a safer place and to stop Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, will the UK Government support that action?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of Iran's desire to have nuclear capability. We stand in the way of that. Working with the Germans and the French, we are determined to use all diplomatic efforts to bring about a conclusion to that desire. I of course discussed that with Secretary of State Rubio, alongside my French and German counterparts, at the G7. But we also discussed maximum pressure, and we discussed that nothing is off the table as we discuss these issues with Iran. We are running out of time to reach a resolution to this issue.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's uncompromising message to Vladimir Putin. I wonder whether he would add to that a clear message that there can be no peace while tens of thousands of Ukrainian children, who have been stolen from their parents and scattered across Russia, are not returned? Does he share my concern at reports that Yale University's humanitarian research lab has been defunded by Elon Musk while it was tracking hundreds of those abducted children? Will he work with international allies to ensure that that data is not lost and that it contributes to getting those children back to their anguished families?

Mr Lammy: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his question about the horrors of what the Russian regime has done to those children. He will be pleased to know, as will the whole House, that we have, through our official development assistance budget, supported efforts to retrieve and work alongside those children. I was so pleased to spend time, alongside Madam Zelensky, with some of those children on my last visit to Ukraine, but also on a previous visit. We keep the issue absolutely in our sights. It cannot be a negotiating tool in any future discussions with Mr Putin.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs rightly set out,

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very well and in detail, the broad range of challenges that were discussed at the G7. One area he touched on was the threat of the Houthis, who of course are being supported by al-Shabaab in Somalia. The Republic of Somaliland is the only democratic country in the area that is valiantly trying to fight the terrorist threats. Will he commit to his Department working with the Government of the Republic of Somaliland to deal with the threats it faces, and which we also face?

Mr Lammy: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that that, too, was raised in discussions with G7 colleagues. He is absolutely right: al-Shabaab is a deep concern, and the terrorism that emanates from its activities is something that we closely monitor and work on with partners. Yes, of course I can give him that assurance.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Happy St Patrick's day to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. And happy birthday to my dad, who is no doubt watching—he likes to keep an eye on me. [Interruption.] A lot of time in front of the TV.

The Secretary of State will know that there are a number of Sudanese British people in Newcastle-under-Lyme, as I have raised some of their cases with him. They remain devastated by what they see on television and in the media about what their family members are going through, so I thank him and his team for the support they have given me and my constituents so far. In advance of the conference to which he has just referred, may I urge him to engage with the African Union, the Commonwealth and the Arab League to ensure that the political process to which he referred in his statement is fit for purpose?

Mr Lammy: I wish my hon. Friend's father all good wishes on his birthday, and I thank my hon. Friend for the way he has continued to raise in the Chamber these issues of conflict in Africa. He will be pleased to know that I met the African Union at the G20 a few weeks ago. We will work with it for the conference on 15 April. We expect it to attend alongside other African nations. It is hugely important that we make some breakthrough, not just on the humanitarian side but on the political side, to bring this conflict to an end.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary is clearly a busy man, so I understand why we have not seen him since the Prime Minister announced a 40% cut to the overseas development budget on 25 February. Can I ask him now, then, whether the consequences of slashing overseas aid were discussed at the G7, and how he explained to our partners that withdrawing lifesaving aid to the poorest people on the planet, thereby making them even more dependent on Russia and China, would, in the long run, make us all safer and more secure?

Mr Lammy: May I just say to the hon. Gentleman that he is, occasionally, wrong? [Laughter.] Very occasionally. The Prime Minister made a statement about defence spending, which was applauded right across the European families, and certainly in the United States. It was essential. He came back the following week and made another statement on leading efforts within Europe, and I was sitting right next to him. I will just say to the hon. Gentleman that he needs to get his eyes tested.

On development aid, which is an important issue, we have not made an ideological decision. We do not want cliff edges. It is important that the hon. Gentleman knows that foreign policy, diplomatic efforts, development efforts and, of course, hard power are part of a family of tools. He should never forget that war in Ukraine has cost the African continent \$7 billion. That is why it is right that we develop our defences and continue to spend aid in Ukraine.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), must have been reading my notes earlier. I will raise the same issue again, though, because I do not believe we can say enough about the 19,546 children stolen from Ukraine. The humanitarian research lab at Yale University, which has just had its funding cut by the United States, was not only trying to reunite those children with their families, but documenting some of the war crimes taking place. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about how we will ensure that that work is not lost, and will he also say what we are doing to support the families reunited with children who will be so severely traumatised?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I want to reassure her that the UK continues to track Russia's deportation of Ukrainian children, which is a clear violation of international law. I met Madam Zelensky in Kyiv back in February on this issue. The UK was very pleased to see another group of children returned via Qatari mediation in September 2024. We consistently raise awareness of child deportations in our comms and across multilateral forums such as the OSCE. Of course, we are ensuring that in any changes that we make to development spend, our commitments to humanitarian efforts are made to Ukraine. This is an area where my hon. Friend could expect to see the UK continue to fund support.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is good to hear that the G7 believes that Iran should not be allowed to build a nuclear bomb, which is a statement of the obvious. It is also good to hear that President Trump has sent a strongly worded letter to the Supreme Leader. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the JCPOA was dead in the water the minute that President Trump pulled out in 2018? He talks of what we might do now, and says that nothing is off the table—would the Foreign Secretary confirm that that includes military action?

Mr Lammy: I must let Mr Trump speak for himself when he says that nothing is off the table in dealing with Iran. I am pleased that, in working alongside the Americans, they recognise the important role that we, the French and the Germans play. And that maximum pressure is essential. We have made it clear to the Iranians that that snapback and the sanctions that would follow, squeezing the Iranian economy at a time when everyone accepts that Iran is weak, is not what they want. They need to get serious about their nuclear ambitions. We will work on all tracks. The right hon. Gentleman will have read, as I have, that military endeavour is an option—one that our Israeli colleagues remind us about on a pretty regular basis.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and thank him for the leadership that he has shown over the past few weeks, in particular on Ukraine. He mentioned his discussions with his Canadian counterpart; following the G7 meeting that he attended, can he share what further progress he has made in building the much needed coalition of the willing in order to guarantee Ukraine's security?

Mr Lammy: A number of nations are stepping up and coming forward alongside the United Kingdom and France, and Canada is one of them. I do not want to give a running commentary because there are further meetings this week. My hon. Friend will understand that, when talking about committing troops, different countries have different requirements for going to their own Parliaments and speaking to their own nations about these matters. It is right that I leave them to do that and do not make announcements from the Dispatch Box.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): On 25 February, the Foreign Secretary told me in this Chamber that he was minded to
 "move from freezing assets to seizing assets."—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 626.]

I note that he has used that phrase again this afternoon. Given the increasingly mercurial nature of our American allies' support of Ukraine, what progress has been made? What is the Foreign Secretary's best estimate of when our Ukrainian friends will be able to benefit from those frozen assets?

Mr Lammy: I understand why the hon. Lady raises her question. As I said to the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), this is not an issue where the US is a blocker. There are nations within Europe that are more exposed than others. As I said to the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), it is best that we act multilaterally. That is the issue, but we are working at pace.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): It was a big weekend for the Foreign Secretary in Canada representing our country, and a big weekend for the Royal Navy in Plymouth. The Foreign Secretary alluded to increased co-operation with our EU NATO allies in defence activity. In Plymouth this weekend the deputy French ambassador was down to unveil Ariadne—a new capability that the French and British Navies now hold. It is an unmanned, uncrewed, completely autonomous end-to-end, 12-metre-long underwater mine countermeasure vessel—a remarkable feat of technology. Will he join me in celebrating this feat of co-operation?

Mr Lammy: First, I thank my hon. Friend for his service. He will be pleased that maritime security was such a big discussion point at the G7, and I thank Canada for that. We are a great maritime nation working with our colleagues, and I assure him that there will be more on this issue in the strategic defence review, which is to follow.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. It seems to me that Putin views the failure to seize the frozen assets as a sign of western weakness. If there are some reluctant countries, given that the Prime Minister is rightly leading

a coalition of the willing, would he and the Government lead a coalition of the willing nations who will seize those frozen assets?

Mr Lammy: As right across Europe we see a cost of living crisis, it is right and proper that we pool our efforts, and that respective Treasury Departments and Finance Ministers are satisfied that seizing those assets would not have a detrimental effect on the global economy. Those necessary discussions are being held. The hon. Gentleman knows my emphasis, but I assure him that Europe is more united on these issues than Reform is currently.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. Last week, I hosted a Westminster Hall debate on the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Was the Foreign Secretary able to raise that matter at the G7 Foreign Ministers' meeting? Might he commit to a further meeting with MPs to discuss the UK's commitment to that fund?

Mr Lammy: We were able to discuss Gaza and to link that to a broader discussion on development spend and our commitment to Gaza. My hon. Friend will know that the United Kingdom supports the Palestinian Authority and the necessary reforms that they need to make. I assure him that I, or indeed the Minister for the Middle East, will meet and discuss these issues further.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary described the blocking of aid to Gaza in his statement as "appalling" and "unacceptable". Why does he not also confirm that it is illegal and in breach of international law, as is the continued bombardment of Gaza and the bombardment of the west bank? When will the British Government finally say to Israel, "We will no longer supply weapons to you and we will no longer continue security co-operation while you continue to illegally occupy territory and commit war crimes in both Gaza and the west bank"?

Mr Lammy: I did say in my contribution that Israel is in breach of international humanitarian law. Of course, we have spoken to the Israelis about those concerns. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman will recall the decision that I made back in September to suspend arms sales, which was largely because of that breach.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Earlier today in Parliament, I chaired an event to remember the victims of the appalling chemical weapons attack at Halabja on 16 March 1988 carried out by the vicious Saddam Hussein regime. They thank the UK for our help and friendship over the years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that and current crises show the need for a strong UK? What I mean by that is: strong armed forces; strong diplomacy through our superb diplomats; soft power with the World Service and the British Council; and our alliances in Africa, in the Gulf and in Europe. Those are vital to preserve and protect the international rules-based system that we all rely on.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend put his remarks incredibly well. May I associate myself with his remarks about that appalling atrocity? I make it crystal clear that it is hugely important that the United Kingdom, as a P-5 member, continues to support our armed services and hard power, but our soft power, our diplomatic efforts

[Mr Lammy]

and our development spend—we will still be the sixth biggest development spender in the world—are hugely important.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Last spring, the UK joined the United States in conducting five combined joint naval and airstrikes against the Houthis. This weekend, the US conducted airstrikes without participation from the RAF except routine refuelling support. Why the change? What does that signal about British foreign policy? Does the Foreign Secretary consider that getting US involvement in a backstop in Ukraine is more challenging when the US has to operate alone against the Houthis?

Mr Lammy: The United Kingdom was involved to the extent of supporting US efforts on refuelling. I do not think that it would be right for me to comment on the detail of any military exercise, but I reassure the hon. Member that we continue to work closely with our friends in the United States. As he would expect, I was briefed on these issues alongside the Prime Minister and others.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his strong words, which are much appreciated. I welcome the reaffirmation of support for Ukraine contained in the statement as well as the continuation of support for a peaceful resolution in Israel and Gaza. However, peace cannot come at the price of appeasement of Russia or of the Hamas terrorist murderers that they are. How will the Secretary of State ensure that peace will have at its foundation respect rather than threat? What more can be done in the interim to ensure that children on both sides of the Israel-Gaza border and in Ukraine can have food, medicine, clothing and an education while these complex things are sorted out?

Mr Lammy: I am sure the whole House is hugely grateful for the humanity that the hon. Gentleman has shown once again on the issue of children on both sides of this conflict. It is horrendous, when one looks at the scenes of those hostages coming out, that among those

hooded young men with Kalashnikovs there are children. That cannot be right or proper, but at the same time, it cannot be right to starve children of the humanitarian aid and medical supplies that they need while we seek to deal with the problems of Hamas and getting those hostages out. I always hold up the prospect of a two-state solution as a way through this most complex and difficult challenge. I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman has made his remarks in the House today.

CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOLS BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 8 January 2025 (Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be taken in two days in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Consideration—

(a) shall be taken on each of those days in the order shown in the first column of the following Table, and

(b) shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second

column of the Table.

Proceedings	Time for conclusion of proceedings
<i>First day</i>	
New Clauses and new Schedules relating to the subject matter of, and amendments to, Part 1.	Five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order.
<i>Second day</i>	
New Clauses and new Schedules relating to the subject matter of, and amendments to, Part 2 and Part 3; remaining new Clauses and new Schedules; remaining proceedings on Consideration.	Five hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration on the second day.

(4) Proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken on the second day and shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration on the second day.—(Kate Dearden.)

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

[1ST ALLOCATED DAY]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Committee and the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 18

CORPORATE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

“(1) It is the duty of every relevant authority when exercising its functions—

- (a) to be alert to matters which adversely affect, or might adversely affect, the wellbeing of looked-after children and relevant young people;
- (b) to assess what services or support provided by the authority are or may be available for looked-after children and relevant young people;
- (c) to seek to provide opportunities for looked-after children and relevant young people to participate in activities designed to promote their wellbeing or enhance their employment prospects;
- (d) to take such action as the authority considers appropriate to help looked-after children and relevant young people—
 - (i) to make use of services, and access support, provided by the authority, and
 - (ii) to access opportunities provided by the authority in pursuance of paragraph (c).

(2) The duty imposed by subsection (1)—

- (a) applies to a relevant authority only so far as compliance with the duty—
 - (i) is consistent with the proper exercise of its functions, and
 - (ii) is reasonably practicable, and
- (b) does not apply as mentioned in section (Cases in which duty under section (Corporate parenting responsibilities) does not apply).

(3) “Relevant authority” means a person listed, or within a description listed, in Part 1 of Schedule (Relevant authorities).

(4) “Looked-after child” means a person aged under 18 who is—

- (a) looked after by a local authority for the purposes of the Children Act 1989, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (anaw 4) or the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, or
- (b) looked after by an authority for the purposes of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (S.I. 1995/755 (N.I. 2)).

(5) “Relevant young person” means a person who—

- (a) is aged 16 or over but under 25, and
- (b) was a looked-after child on their 16th birthday or at any subsequent time but is no longer a looked-after child.”—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This new clause, to be inserted in Part 1 of the Bill after clause 20, imposes a duty on relevant authorities in relation to the wellbeing and employment prospects of looked-after children and previously looked-after children, and in relation to services and support provided to such persons (a “corporate parenting duty”).

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government new clause 19—*Cases in which duty under section (Corporate parenting responsibilities) (1) does not apply.*

Government new clause 20—*Corporate parenting duty: collaborative working.*

Government new clause 21—*Duty to have regard to guidance.*

Government new clause 22—*Reports by Secretary of State.*

New clause 3—*National Care Offer—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 18 months of the passing of this Act, publish a document (the “National Care Offer”) which sets out the minimum standards of information that local authorities must publish under section 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (local offer for care leavers).

(2) Before publishing or revising the National Care Offer, the Secretary of State must consult with persons that appear to the Secretary of State to represent the interests of care leavers.

(3) Where a consultation under subsection (2) results in recommendations to be made to the National Care Offer, the Secretary of State must—

- (a) make the recommended changes or otherwise implement the recommendations; or
- (b) where not intending to make the recommended changes or otherwise implement the recommendations, publish a response to the consultation outlining the reasons for the Secretary of State’s decision and the action that will be taken instead.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to consult on and publish a draft National Care Offer, which sets minimum standards for local care offers, within 18 months of this Act coming into force.

New clause 4—*Health assessments to include mental health practitioner—*

“In regulation 7 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, after “practitioner” in paragraph (1) insert “and a registered mental health practitioner”.”

This new clause would make an assessment of the mental health of children in care a core part of the health assessment of those children by ensuring a mental health practitioner is involved in the assessment.

New clause 8—*Abolition of common law defence of reasonable punishment—*

“(1) The Children Act 2004 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 58 (Reasonable Punishment: England), omit subsections (1) to (4).

(3) After section 58, insert—

“58A *Abolition of common law defence of reasonable punishment*

- (1) The common law defence of reasonable punishment is abolished in relation to corporal punishment of a child taking place in England.
- (2) Corporal punishment of a child taking place in England cannot be justified in any civil or criminal proceedings on the ground that it constituted reasonable punishment.
- (3) Corporal punishment of a child taking place in England cannot be justified in any civil or criminal proceedings on the ground that it constituted acceptable conduct for the purposes of any other rule of the common law.
- (4) For the purposes of subsections (1) to (3) “corporal punishment” means any battery carried out as a punishment.
- (5) The Secretary of State may make regulations for transitory, transitional or saving provision in connection with the coming into force of this section.
- (6) The power to make regulations under subsection (5) is exercisable by statutory instrument.

58B Promotion of public awareness and reporting

- (1) The Secretary of State must take steps before the coming into force of section 58A to promote public awareness of the changes to the law to be made by that section.
- (2) The Secretary of State must, five years after its commencement, prepare a report on the effect of the changes to the law made by section 58A.
- (3) The Secretary of State must, as soon as practicable after preparing a report under this section—
 - (a) lay the report before Parliament, and
 - (b) publish the report.
- (4) The Secretary of State may make regulations for transitory, transitional or saving provision in connection with the coming into force of this section.
- (5) The power to make regulations under subsection (4) is exercisable by statutory instrument.”

This new clause would abolish the common law defence of reasonable punishment in relation to corporal (physical) punishment of a child taking place in England, amend certain provisions of the Children Act 2004 relating to corporal punishment of children and place a duty on the Secretary of State to report this change.

New clause 13—Review of adoption support offered by local authorities—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the passing of this Act, conduct a review of the adequacy and effectiveness of adoption support services provided by local authorities.

(2) The review must include services provided by adoption agencies which have been commissioned by local authorities.

(3) The review must consider in particular—

- (a) any updates required to existing regulations and guidance relating to adoption; and
- (b) the support needs of, and support services currently available or provided to—
 - (i) relevant parties in relation to birth family contact;
 - (ii) young adult adoptees in relation to their transition to adulthood; and
 - (iii) adult adoptees.

(4) Within six months of the completion of the review, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report on the findings and conclusions of the review.”

New clause 14—Notification when a child is placed into temporary accommodation—

“(1) This section applies where a local authority is exercising its duty under Section 189B of the Housing Act 1996 (Initial duty owed to all eligible persons who are homeless) to allocate temporary accommodation to a household which includes a child.

(2) A local authority must notify the following of the household's homelessness status—

- (a) the child's school, and
- (b) the child's registered GP practice.

(3) The Secretary of State must issue guidance to schools and GPs on how to safeguard and promote a child's welfare and wellbeing following receipt of a notification under subsection (2).

(4) A local authority must, before issuing a notification under subsection (2), request the consent of the household for the sharing of information relating to the household's homelessness status.

(5) Subsection (2) does not apply if the household has not consented to the local authority sharing information about it.”

This new clause would establish a notification system requiring local authorities to alert schools and GPs, when a child is placed into temporary accommodation. The notification can only occur when the child's parent or guardian consent to the sharing of this information.

New clause 15—Implementation of recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 6 months of the passing of this Act, take steps to implement the recommendations made in the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse listed below.

(2) The recommendations are—

- (a) the establishment of a single core data set on child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in England and Wales;
- (b) the establishment of Child Protection Authorities for England and Wales;
- (c) the creation of cabinet Ministers for Children in the UK and Welsh Governments;
- (d) the commissioning of regular public awareness campaigns on child sexual abuse;
- (e) the amendment of the Children Act 1989 to provide for court action where there is reasonable cause to believe that a child in the care of a local authority is experiencing or is at risk of experiencing significant harm;
- (f) the creation of registration systems for care staff in children's homes, young offender institutions and secure training centres;
- (g) greater use of the barred list in relation to persons recruiting individuals to work or volunteer with children on a frequent basis;
- (h) the improvement of compliance with statutory duties to notify the Disclosure and Barring Service of the suitability of individuals to work with children;
- (i) the extension of the powers of the Disclosure and Barring Service to provide enhanced certificates to people working with children overseas; and
- (j) the provision of specialist and accredited therapeutic support to child victims of sexual abuse.

(3) The Secretary of State must, after a period of six months has elapsed from the passing of this Act and at 12 monthly intervals thereafter, publish a report detailing the steps taken by the Government to implement each of the recommendations listed above.

(4) A report published under subsection (3) must include—

- (a) actions taken to meet, action or implement each of the recommendations;
- (b) details of any further action required to implement each of the recommendations or planned to supplement the recommendations;
- (c) consideration of any challenges to full or successful implementation of the recommendations, with proposals for addressing these challenges so as to facilitate implementation of the recommendations; and
- (d) where it has not been practicable to fully implement a recommendation—
 - (i) explanation of why implementation has not been possible;
 - (ii) a statement of the Government's intention to implement the recommendation; and
 - (iii) a timetable for implementation.”

New clause 25—Kinship care leave—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, by regulations, entitle an individual to be absent from work on care leave under this section where—

- (a) the individual is a kinship carer, and
- (b) the individual satisfies conditions specified in the regulations.

(2) Regulations made under subsection (1) must include provision for determining—

- (a) the extent of an individual's entitlement to leave under this section; and
- (b) when leave under this section may be taken.

(3) Provision under subsection (2)(a) must secure that—

- (a) where one individual is entitled to leave under this section, they are entitled to at least 52 weeks of leave; or
- (b) where more than one individual is entitled to leave under this section in respect of the same child, those individuals are entitled to share at least 52 weeks of leave between them.

(4) An employee is entitled to leave under this section only if the eligible kinship care arrangement is intended to last—

- (a) at least one year, and
- (b) until the child being cared for attains the age of 18.

(5) For the purposes of this section, a “kinship carer” has the meaning given in section 22I of the Children Act 1989, as inserted by section 5 of this Act.

(6) Regulations made under this section may make provision about how leave under this section is to be taken.”

New clause 26—Kinship care allowance—

“(1) A person is entitled to a kinship care allowance for any week in which that person is engaged as a kinship carer in England.

(2) For the purposes of this section, a “kinship carer” has the meaning given in section 22I of the Children Act 1989, as inserted by section 5 of this Act.

(3) A person is not entitled to an allowance under this section unless that person satisfies conditions prescribed in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(4) A person may claim an allowance under this section in respect of more than one child.

(5) Where two or more persons would be entitled for the same week to such an allowance in respect of the same child, only one allowance may be claimed on the behalf of—

- (a) the person jointly elected by those two for that purpose, or
- (b) in default of such an election, the person determined by, and at the discretion of, the Secretary of State.

(6) Regulations may prescribe the circumstances in which a person is or is not to be treated for the purposes of this section as engaged, or regularly and substantially engaged, in caring for a child under an eligible kinship care arrangement.

(7) An allowance under this section is payable at the weekly rate specified by the Secretary of State in regulations.

(8) Regulations under subsection (7) may specify—

- (a) different weekly rates for different ages of children being cared for, or
- (b) different weekly rates for different regions of England.

(9) Regulations under subsection (7) must specify a weekly rate that is no lower than the minimum weekly allowance for foster carers published by the Secretary of State pursuant to section 23 of the Care Standards Act 2000.”

New clause 27—Extension of pupil premium to children subject to a kinship care arrangement—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, for the financial year beginning 1 April 2026 and for each year thereafter, provide that an amount is payable from the pupil premium grant to schools and local authorities in respect of each registered pupil in England who is who is a child living in kinship care.

(2) The amount payable under subsection (1) must be equal to the amount that is payable for a pupil who is a looked after child.

(3) In this section—

“a child living in kinship care” is to be interpreted in the same manner as given in section 22I of the Children Act 1989, as inserted by section 5 of this Act.

“looked after child” has the same meaning as in the Children Act 1989;

“pupil premium grant” means the grant of that name paid to a school or a local authority by the Secretary of State under section 14 of the Education Act 2002 (power of Secretary of State and Senedd Cymru to give financial assistance for purposes related to education or children etc).”

New clause 28—Admissions arrangements relating to looked after children and children in kinship care—

“(1) For section 88B of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (admission arrangements relating to children looked after by local authority) substitute—

“88B Admissions arrangements relating to looked after children and children in kinship care

(1) Regulations may require the admission authorities for maintained schools in England to include in their admission arrangements provision relating to the admission of children who are—

- (a) looked after by a local authority in England, or
- (b) living in kinship care as may be prescribed.

(2) Regulations under subsection (1) may in particular include provision for securing that, subject to sections 86(3), 86B(2) and (4) and 87, such children are to be offered admission in preference to other children.

(3) In this section, “children who are living in kinship care” is to be interpreted in the same manner as given in section 22I of the Children Act 1989, as inserted by section 5 of this Act.”

New clause 29—Establishment of National Wellbeing Measurement Programme—

“(1) The Secretary of State must establish a national children and young people’s wellbeing measurement programme.

(2) A programme established under this section must—

- (a) conduct a national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in relevant schools in England;
- (b) support schools in the administration of the survey
- (c) make provision for parental and student consent to participation in the survey, ensuring that participation is voluntary and that results are handled confidentially; and
- (d) regularly publish the results of the survey and provide relevant data to participating schools, local authorities and other public bodies for the purposes of improving children and young people’s wellbeing.

(3) A programme established under this section must—

- (a) be developed and piloted within two years of the passing of this Act;
- (b) be fully implemented in England no later than the start of the academic year three years after the passing of this Act;
- (c) be reviewed as to its effectiveness by the Secretary of State every three years.

(4) Any review of the programme under subsection (3)(c) must be published and laid before Parliament.

(5) For the purposes of this section “relevant school” means—

- (a) an academy school,
- (b) an alternative provision Academy,
- (c) a maintained school,
- (d) a non-maintained special school,
- (e) an independent school, or
- (f) a pupil referral unit, other than where established in a hospital.”

This new clause would place a duty on the Secretary of State to introduce a national programme to regularly measure and report on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in schools.

New clause 30—Benefits of outdoor education to children’s wellbeing—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, conduct a review on the benefits of outdoor education to children’s wellbeing.

(2) A report on the review must be published within six months of the conclusion of the review.”

New clause 33—*National standards for children in need thresholds*—

(1) The Secretary of State must, within a year of the passing of this Act, conduct a review of the operation of section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (Provision of services for children in need, their families and others).

(2) The review must assess regional and national variation in the type, frequency, and duration of support provided to children through child in need plans.

(3) The recommendations of the review must include the setting of—

(a) metrics in the Department for Education's Children's Social Care Dashboard for assessing the progress of children with child in need plans, and

(b) national guidance for local authorities defining the thresholds of need that children and families must meet to be offered children in need support.

(4) The national guidance issued under section (2)(b) must include—

(a) national triggers for an automatic referral to children's social care, including when a primary care giver enters custody or inpatient mental health provision, and when a child is arrested,

(b) the Secretary of State's expectations on how often children should receive help,

(c) the Secretary of State's expectations on how frequently a child's support should be reviewed when they have a child in need plan, and

(d) any other matters that the Secretary of State deems appropriate."

The purpose of this new clause is to reduce regional variations in the type, frequency and duration of support that children receive through child in need plans.

New clause 35—*Extension of priority need status to under 25s*—

"(1) The Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 is amended as follows.

(2) In article (4), paragraph (1)(a), omit "twenty-one" and insert "twenty-five".

(3) In article (5), omit paragraph (1)."

This new clause would extend the priority need status under homelessness legislation to all care leavers up to the age of 25, regardless of vulnerability.

New clause 36—*Action to promote children's wellbeing in relation to mobile phones and social media*—

"(1) Within 12 months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must, for the purposes of promoting the wellbeing of children—

(a) direct the Chief Medical Officers of the United Kingdom ("the UK CMOs") to prepare and publish advice for parents and carers on the use of smartphones and social media use by children,

(b) publish a plan for research into the impact of use of social media on children's wellbeing, and

(c) require all schools in England to have a policy that prohibits the use and carrying of certain devices by pupils during the school day.

(2) Any advice published under subsection (1)(a) must have regard to—

(a) the paper published on 7 February 2019 entitled "United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers' commentary on 'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews'", and

(b) any scientific or other developments since the publication of that paper which appear to the UK CMOs to be relevant.

(3) Any policy implemented under subsection (1)(c)—

(a) may provide for exemptions from the policy, or for an alternative policy, for sixth form students, in so far as such exemptions or alternative policies do not negatively impact upon the wider policy;

(b) may provide for exemptions for medical devices;

(c) is to be implemented as the relevant school leader considers appropriate; and

(d) may, where implemented by a boarding school or residential school, include appropriate guidance for the use of certain devices during other periods which their pupils are on school premises, subject to such policies safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in accordance with relevant national standards.

(4) For the purposes of this section—

"certain devices" means mobile phones and other devices which provide similar functionality and whose main purpose is not the support of learning or study;

"the Chief Medical Officers of the United Kingdom" means the Chief Medical Officers for—

(a) England,

(b) Wales,

(c) Scotland, and

(d) Northern Ireland

"the school day" includes all time between the start of the first lesson period and the end of the final lesson period."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to take action to promote children's wellbeing in relation to mobile phones and social media by commissioning a report from the Chief Medical Officers and requiring schools to ban the use of mobile telephones during the school day.

New clause 37—*Cessation of Child Protection Plans*—

"Where proceedings are initiated or a care and supervision order is issued under section 31 of the Children Act 1989, any cessation of child protection plans for children under five years old must be signed off by the relevant Director of Children's Services or Head of Social Work Practice."

This new clause would mean that the relevant Director of Children's Services or Head of Social Work Practice must sign off any cessation of child protection plans for children under five years old once proceedings have been initiated or once a care and supervision order has been issued.

New clause 43—*Automatic enrolment for the Healthy Start scheme*—

"(1) The Secretary of State must, within 6 months of the passing of this Act, introduce a scheme to automatically enrol certain individuals for the purposes of the Healthy Start scheme.

(2) For the purposes of this section, "certain individuals" means people who are eligible for the Healthy Start scheme on the basis of having a child under the age of 4.

(3) The scheme must provide the means for individuals to opt out of enrolment for the Healthy Start scheme."

New clause 44—*Contact with siblings for children in care*—

"(1) The Children Act 1989 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 34(1), after paragraph (d) insert—

"(e) his siblings (whether of the whole or half blood)."

(3) In paragraph 15(1) of Schedule 2, after paragraph (c) insert—

"(d) his siblings (whether of the whole or half blood)."

This new clause would ensure that children in care are allowed reasonable contact with their siblings.

New clause 45—*Arrangements for remaining in a residential children's home after reaching adulthood*—

"(1) The Children Act 1989 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 23CZA (arrangements for certain former relevant children to live with former foster parents), at the end of subsection (2) insert – “or by which a person who is a former relevant child by virtue of section 23C(1)(b) continues to live at the residential children’s home at which they were resident when they were looked after.

(3) In paragraph 19BA in Part 2 of Schedule 2 (local authority support for looked after children)—

- (a) in sub-paragraph (1), after “parent” insert “or in a residential children’s home”;
- (b) in sub-paragraph (3)(b), after “parent” insert “or residential children’s home”.”

This new clause would extend the “staying put” arrangements that currently exist for young people placed with foster parents to those living in a residential children’s home.

New clause 46—Extension of the ban on unregulated accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds—

“(1) In the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010—

- (a) in Regulation 27A (Prohibition on placing a child under 16 in an unregulated setting), for “under 16” substitute “under 18”;
- (b) in Regulation 27B (Exception to the prohibition on placing a child under 16 in other arrangements), after paragraph (1), insert—

“(1A) The Secretary of State shall ensure that all accommodation provided to looked after children aged 16 and 17 meets the standards of regulated children’s homes or other regulated supported accommodation.””

(2) In section 22C of the Children Act 1989 (Ways in which looked after children are to be accommodated and maintained), after subsection (6) insert—

“(6A) A local authority must not place a looked after child aged 16 or 17 in unregulated accommodation that does not meet the requirements set out in regulations made under subsection (7).””

New clause 47—Requirement for minimum standards for accommodation provided to 16- and 17-year-olds in care—

“The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament regulations establishing national minimum standards for accommodation provided to 16- and 17-year-olds in care, ensuring—

- (a) access to appropriate levels of support and supervision;
- (b) safeguarding protections equivalent to those in regulated children’s homes; and
- (c) oversight by Ofsted or another appropriate regulatory body.”

New clause 50—Establishment of Child Protection Authority—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, establish a Child Protection Authority for England.

(2) The purpose of such an Authority will be to—

- (a) improve practice in child protection;
- (b) provide advice and make recommendations to the Government on child protection policy and reforms to improve child protection;
- (c) inspect institutions and settings at some times and in such ways as it considers necessary and appropriate to ensure compliance with child protection standards; and
- (d) monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse and other inquiries relating to the protection of children.

(3) The Authority must act with a view to—

- (a) safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children;

- (b) ensuring that institutions and settings fulfil their responsibilities in relation to child protection.”

This new clause would seek to fulfil the second recommendation of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in establishing a Child Protection Authority for England.

Amendment 176, in clause 1, page 1, line 7, leave out from start to “in” in line 8 and insert—

“When a local authority starts formal child protection proceedings.”

This amendment would require the offer of a family group decision making meeting when formal child protection proceedings are initiated or when a child protection plan is failing to protect the child, rather than before a local authority makes an application for a care and supervision order.

Amendment 177, in clause 1, page 1, line 10, at end insert—

“(1A) A family group decision-making meeting must be offered by the relevant local authority when a family is going through private law proceedings.”

This amendment seeks to reduce the conflict in private law proceedings by offering a family group decision making meeting, allow other family members to support the child as well as to identify where there are significant safeguarding risks to the child/children. It would strengthen the intention that mediation and reconciliation out of court are better for the child.

Amendment 178, in clause 1, page 2, line 7, at end insert—

“(5) A family group decision-making meeting must be chaired by a systemic family therapist or other similarly qualified professional.”

This amendment would require family group decision-making meetings to be chaired by a family therapist or other professional with equivalent qualifications. Particularly in cases involving domestic abuse, including coercion and control, it is essential that the FGDP has the expertise to manage this and protect the child/children.

Amendment 172, in clause 1, page 2, leave out lines 21 to 26 and insert—

“(8) The child in relation to whom the family group decision-making meeting is held should be supported to attend all or part of the meeting if they wish to do so, unless the local authority determines this not to be in the best interests of the child, in which instance efforts should be made to ensure their views are represented.

(9) In exercising functions under this section in relation to a child, the local authority must, so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with the child’s welfare—

(a) ascertain the child’s wishes and feelings; and

(b) give due consideration (having regard to the child’s age and understanding) to such wishes and feelings of the child as they have been able to ascertain.”

This amendment would require a local authority to ascertain a child’s wishes and feelings regarding all aspects of family group decision-making, to give those views due consideration, and to support the child to participate in family group decision-making meetings where appropriate.

Amendment 179, in clause 1, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

“(10) If a child is to be looked after by other family members as a result of the family group decision-making meeting, the local authority must make arrangements to ensure the safety and welfare of the child and prepare a child protection plan that reflects this.”

This amendment would ensure that if a child is going to be looked after by other family members, the local authority takes appropriate action, that is reflected in the child protection plan, to assure their safety and welfare.

Amendment 180, in clause 1, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

“(10) If the child is under the age of two, the family group decision-making conference must not delay the timetable for the making of permanent arrangements regarding the child’s care.”

This amendment is designed to ensure that the offer of a family group decision-making meeting does not unduly delay making permanent arrangements regarding the child's care

Government amendment 111.

Amendment 181, in clause 4, page 6, line 25, at end insert—

“(4A) Where the relevant person considers that the disclosure would be more detrimental to the child than not disclosing the information, this decision must be recorded.”

This amendment requires decisions made not to disclose information to be recorded.

Government amendment 112.

Amendment 182, in clause 4, page 6, line 37, at end insert—

“(6A) Where information is disclosed under this section, the recipient must consider the safety and welfare of others to whom the information may relate or involve and take steps to promote their safety and welfare, particularly in cases of domestic abuse or elder abuse.”

This amendment seeks to ensure that other vulnerable members of a household are not inadvertently put at risk by the sharing of information, and that safety plans are put in place where needed.

Government amendments 113 to 116.

Amendment 174, in clause 5, page 9, line 31, at end insert—

“(8) A kinship local offer published under subsection (5) must state when it will next be reviewed.

(9) Any review of a kinship local offer conducted by a local authority under subsection (7) must involve the participation of children and families.”

This amendment would ensure that kinship families are actively engaged in shaping the support available to them, and that local authorities are held accountable for delivering their obligations.

Amendment 183, in clause 5, page 9, line 31, at end insert—

“(8) In fulfilling its duties under subsection (7) a local authority must annually consult and collect feedback from children in kinship care and their carers about its kinship local offer.

(9) Feedback received under subsection (8) must be published annually.”

This amendment would require local authorities to consult children and carers when assessing their kinship care offer.

Amendment 184, in clause 7, page 12, line 8, at end insert—

“(3A) Where staying close support is provided, it must be provided with due regard to the wishes of the relevant person and a record must be kept of that person’s wishes.”

This amendment would require local authorities to take account of the wishes of the relevant young person when providing staying close support, and keep a record of those wishes.

Amendment 186, in clause 11, page 16, line 18, at end insert—

“(1AA) A child who is being looked after by a local authority in England and is under the age of 13 may not, whilst being kept in relevant accommodation in England, be deprived of their liberty in that accommodation unless this has been authorised by the Secretary of State.”

This amendment would ensure that deprivation of liberty orders could not be issued to children under the age of 13 unless expressly authorised by the Secretary of State, in line with provisions relating to children's homes.

Amendment 187, in clause 11, page 16, line 25, at end insert—

“(1C) The Secretary of State must review a deprivation of liberty order every 4 weeks to ensure that is appropriate for the order to remain in place.”

This amendment would require a review of deprivation of liberty orders to ensure that they remain appropriate for the relevant child.

Amendment 185, in clause 11, page 17, line 10, at end insert—

“(8A) After subsection (9) insert—

“(10) Where a child is kept in secure accommodation under this section, the relevant local authority has a duty to provide therapeutic treatment for the child.””

This amendment would place a duty on local authorities to provide therapeutic treatment for children subject to a deprivation of liberty order.

Government amendment 117.

Amendment 188, in clause 12, page 17, delete from line 21 to line 17 on page 21 and insert—

“23A Requirement for inspection

(1) The CIECSS may order an inspection of a parent undertaking, or any of its subsidiaries, if it has—

(a) a subsidiary undertaking which meets the requirements of subsection (2), or

(b) two or more subsidiary undertakings which meet the requirements of subsection (3).

(2) A subsidiary undertaking meets the requirements of this subsection if—

(a) the subsidiary undertaking is registered under this Part as carrying on two or more establishments or agencies for which the CIECSS is the registration authority, and

(b) the CIECSS reasonably suspects that there are grounds for cancelling the subsidiary undertaking’s registration in respect of two or more of those establishments or agencies.

(3) A subsidiary undertaking meets the requirements of this subsection if—

(a) the subsidiary undertaking is registered under this Part as carrying on one or more establishments or agencies for which the CIECSS is the registration authority, and

(b) the CIECSS reasonably suspects that there are grounds for cancelling the subsidiary undertaking’s registration in respect of one or more of those establishments or agencies.”

This amendment would require an inspection if the CIECSS believes that are reasons to cancel a children's home registration, rather than issue an improvement plan notice.

Amendment 189, in clause 12, page 18, line 6, at end insert—

“(3A) The CIECSS may require an unannounced visit by Regulation 44 visitor to a children’s home, if it reasonably suspects that there are administrative breaches or minor concerns about the quality of care being provided.

(3B) After Regulation 44 visitors have inspected the relevant children’s home or homes, the local authority may issue an improvement plan notice based on their findings.”

This amendment would rely on the use of Regulation 44 visitors to inform the content of an improvement plan notice where the CIECSS has concerns about minor or technical breaches.

Government amendment 118.

Amendment 171, in clause 15, page 29, line 18, at end insert—

“(c) independent schools with caring responsibilities and offering SEND provision.”

This amendment would include independent special schools within the profit cap provision.

Government amendments 119 to 131.

Government new schedule 1—*Relevant authorities.*

Stephen Morgan: I start by thanking all hon. and right hon. Members for their valuable contributions during the passage of the Bill to date, and in particular, members of the Public Bill Committee for providing substantial debate and scrutiny.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is a landmark Bill and a key piece of legislation that will enable us to deliver the Government's opportunity mission and our determination to break the link between people's background and their future success. It will protect children from abuse, it will stop vulnerable children falling through the cracks in services and it will deliver a core guarantee of high standards with space for innovation in every child's education. It will put in place a package of support to drive high and rising standards throughout education and throughout children's social care so that every child can achieve and thrive.

Reforming children's social care is critical to giving hundreds of thousands of children and young people the start in life that they deserve. Our approach to reform will break down barriers by shifting the focus of the children's social care system to early support to keep families together. We will ensure that children can remain with their families where appropriate, support more children to live with kinship carers or in fostering families and fix the broken care market to tackle profiteering and put children's needs first.

The previous Government bequeathed to us a bitter inheritance of not only child poverty across great swathes of our country, which affected one in three, or even one in two, of our young people, not just record numbers of children out of school or not turning up to school, not merely a children's social care system at breaking point, but—bitterest of all—a fiscal blackhole. That blackhole must be tackled to get this country's finances and future back on track, but it limits the speed at which we can deliver the ambition that all Labour Members have for a brighter future for Britain's children.

Let me speak to our Government amendments. New clauses 18 to 22 introduce corporate parenting duties for Departments and relevant public bodies. A previous Labour Prime Minister observed, following Tawney:

“What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish for all its children.”

That principle lies behind the change that these new clauses seek to bring today, as we ensure that across the public sector we recognise the moral and necessary obligation to do all we can to level the playing field for children in care and care leavers. This group of young people faces significant disadvantages. Twenty-six per cent. of the homeless population are care-experienced, and around a quarter of the adult prison population were in care as children. Care leavers aged 19 to 21 are over three times more likely not to be in education, employment or training than their peers.

New clause 18 introduces corporate parenting responsibilities for Departments and the relevant public bodies, referred to as “relevant authorities”, listed in new schedule 1. New corporate parents will need to be alert to the needs of children in care and care leavers and assess the services or support they provide that are available to them. They will also need to provide them with the opportunities to participate in activities designed to promote their wellbeing or enhance their employment prospects.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome what the Minister says. Last week, some of us had the opportunity to attend an event where Jamie Oliver was present. He is dyslexic, and he made a point that I think we need to recognise: those with dyslexia, autism and challenging educational behaviours also need to be helped. Will a section of the population that need help like this one also receive it?

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Member is a tireless champion for children and young people, and he regularly writes to me even though education is a devolved matter. I will say a bit more later about the support available for children with special educational needs and disabilities. He will know that SEND is at a crisis point, and this Government are absolutely committed to reforming the system and are working at pace to do so.

New clause 20 introduces a duty for new corporate parents and local authorities in England to work collaboratively with each other when it is in the best interests of children in care and care leavers when undertaking these duties. That is to avoid siloed working or duplication of efforts, addressing the challenges that children in care and care leavers face holistically in the same way that parents do when supporting their children.

New clause 21 introduces a duty for relevant authorities to have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State. The guidance will set out how the duty relates to different corporate parents and how that will continue to contribute to outcomes we seek for children in care and care leavers. We will develop that guidance in partnership with the sector and with the relevant authorities listed in new schedule 1.

New clause 22 introduces a duty on the Secretary of State to report on their corporate parenting activity every three years, bringing accountability to the new duty and allowing us to monitor progress and the impact of implementation. New schedule 1 provides a power for the Secretary of State to amend the list of corporate parents by affirmative regulations. The purpose is clear: where children in care and care leavers can be further supported by the addition of new public duties as corporate parents, or where we need to make changes to existing ones, they need not wait for fresh primary legislation. We shall have the power to act swiftly and powerfully in their interests. I am sure that hon. and right hon. Members across the House share the Government's ambition to drive a step change in the experiences and outcomes of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society and that they will support these new clauses.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Although not explicitly mentioned in the document, young carers are obviously a group of young people who may be vulnerable

[Chris Vince]

and, having spoken to the Department for Education, parts of the Bill will support young carers better. Will the Minister touch on that?

Stephen Morgan: Supporting young carers is a key priority for this Government. My hon. Friend is a real champion on these issues, and I am very happy to work with him to ensure that the views of young carers are heard in this place.

The Government have tabled amendments to the information sharing and consistent identifier duties in clause 4. The wider picture is that children are too often failed by inadequate or patchy information sharing, which is not good enough. The Bill enables us to make the change that children need, and the amendments will ensure that we get that right from the outset.

5.15 pm

These amendments will ensure that where those in scope engage others to provide services related to safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children, such as primary care providers, the duties will also extend to the providers of those services. This is not intended to cover providers engaged by those in scope for other purposes that may incidentally engage with the relevant functions—for example, IT service providers or interpreters—but do not independently hold information that is not already available to the agencies in scope. This will be clarified in statutory guidance.

The Government have also tabled amendments to clauses 4, 13 and 18 to ensure that the Bill's information sharing powers and duties contain standard provisions, where appropriate. These amendments are required to make it clear that data protection legislation will and must be complied with, to ensure that appropriate restrictions on the sharing of data—such as a duty of confidence—do not prevent the sharing of data, and to ensure drafting consistency across the Bill.

The Government have also tabled amendments that allow information about a provider's financial risk to be shared between the Department for Education and the Care Quality Commission. After 14 years of inaction, failing outcomes and soaring costs, it is long past time for the Government to make these changes to secure both higher capacity and more resilience among providers. Again, the amendments before us today will make sure we get those changes right. There are providers that operate both adult and children's social care services. Some of these are very large and may therefore be subject to both our new children's social care financial oversight scheme and the Care Quality Commission's market oversight scheme, which has been operating for many years in the adult social care market.

These amendments allow information to be shared between the Department for Education and the Care Quality Commission about a provider's financial risk, particularly in advance of either oversight scheme issuing advance warning to local authorities. This will help the Department to form an accurate, real-time assessment of financial risk.

The Government have also tabled amendments that will apply the relevant clauses to Wales, following the Welsh Government's agreement to their application.

Members of this House, especially those representing Welsh constituencies, will already know the difference it makes to have Labour Governments in both London and Cardiff, not only putting our children first but working together constructively and at pace to deliver the change that children in every part of the United Kingdom deserve. I pay tribute to Lynne Neagle MS, the Cabinet Secretary for Education in the Welsh Government, for her help in ensuring that children in Wales, as well as in England, will benefit from the new protections in this Bill.

The first group of amendments in this area will extend the application of the ill-treatment and wilful neglect offence in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 to children aged 16 and 17 in regulated establishments in Wales, as well as in England. The current gap in the legal framework means it is not possible to prosecute individuals for low-level abuse of 16 and 17-year-olds in regulated children's social care establishments or youth detention accommodation. The current offences in sections 20 and 21 apply to both England and Wales, and an amendment seeks to maintain that application in relation to the amended offence.

Secondly, an amendment will extend the application of deprivation of liberty orders to Wales, enabling Welsh local authorities to seek authorisation to deprive children of liberty in relevant accommodation in England. We recognise the importance of keeping children close to home, within their safe and loving communities, where this is possible and in the best interests of the child. However, in some circumstances, where it keeps a child safe from harm, a cross-border placement is the right option.

This amendment will ensure that, where a cross-border placement that deprives liberty is in the best interests of the child, the child can either be placed by Welsh local authorities in a secure children's home, as at present, or be deprived of their liberty in relevant accommodation in England that may better suit their needs. In both cases, the legislative consent motion process is engaged, as the measure applies to Wales and falls within the legislative competence of the Senedd Cymru. We are working closely with the Welsh Government on this. We continue to have conversations with the Scottish Government on extending the measure to local authorities in Scotland.

To conclude, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is a landmark piece of legislation, through which we are delivering the biggest overhaul to children's social care in a generation. Our actions will transform children's lives, keeping children safe and ensuring opportunity and better life chances for all children. I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have made efforts to improve the Bill for their scrutiny and for the debate so far.

I would also like to extend my thanks to all the individuals and organisations who contributed to the development of the Bill and submitted evidence, including the witnesses at the Bill Committee's oral evidence sessions. We will continue to work closely with those organisations throughout the passage of the Bill. I look forward to hearing further contributions and debate from Members this afternoon on the Bill, as we continue to work across the House and beyond to break down the barriers to opportunity and give every child the best start in life.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I want to concentrate today on our new clause 36, which would ban phones from our schools. The new clause would also write into law some of the content of the very good private Member's Bill drafted by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), because this does not need to be a party political issue.

When I was on the Science and Technology Committee back in 2018, I got us to do a report on screen time, social media and children's mental health. Back then, the evidence was already very concerning, but by now every alarm bell should be ringing. Over the last decade, there has been an explosion in mental health problems among young people all over the world, over the exact same period that smartphones and social media have become dominant in children's lives. The growth in mental health problems is focused almost entirely on young people, not older people. Children now get smartphones at a very early age. As the Education Committee pointed out in a good report last year, one in five of the UK's three and four-year-olds now has their own smartphone. By the end of primary school, four out of five kids have a smartphone.

There are many different ways in which smartphones and social media cause problems for children. They displace time in the real world with friends. US data, for example, shows that prior to 2012 children spent over two hours a day with friends, but that had halved by 2019. The proportion of children feeling lonely and isolated at school has exploded all over the developed world. But smartphones are not just a time sink; there is also the lack of sleep. Children are tired in school, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder has increased massively and concentration is impaired. This is a feature, not a bug. Apps are designed to be addictive and drip feed users dopamine.

At a recent school meeting that I organised in my constituency, I heard from local doctors about how excessive screen time is damaging eyesight and giving young kids the kind of back problems that one might expect from someone in late middle age. Eight out of 10 children are exposed to violent porn before the age of 18, many at a really young age. The average age at which kids see porn is now 13. The shift to a smartphone-based childhood is also leading children to be exposed to graphic violence, sextortion and self-harm encouragement, and is doing terrible things to girls' self-image. According to the Office for National Statistics, one in five children aged 10 to 15 says they have been bullied online, and 72% of that is happening during school time.

As well as being bad in their own right, these negative effects come together to damage education. Although a ban of phones in schools cannot fix everything, it is a vital first step and can make a big difference in itself. I spoke to one headteacher who said that when they went from a policy of phones not being out to a full, "start of the day to end of the day" ban, with phones being handed in, the number of detentions they had to hand out fell by 40%, and teacher recruitment and retention improved, too.

Chris Vince: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way; he should take this as a constructive intervention. As a former teacher, I know some of the challenges of

mobile phones—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), will remember when hers went off during my speech in a debate on financial education. Will the shadow Minister also consider those groups who may require a mobile phone—I have perhaps given him a hint as to what I was going to mention—in particular young carers, who obviously need contact with family and those cared for?

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Member has brilliantly anticipated a point I was going to make, and if he looks at the text of the amendment he will see it is carefully drafted exactly to allow carve-outs for those who need them, for example as health devices, so I hope he is reassured on that point.

Attempts by the tech industry to lobby, to muddy the water, to run interference and to sow confusion are unconvincing. The problems hitting our children all over the world are not just a coincidence; there is more and more evidence for a causal link. For example, Sapien Labs asked questions about adults' mental health and combined them into a mental health quotient score. They asked the same people when they first got a smartphone and the results were stark: the earlier someone gets a phone, the worse their mental health, particularly for girls. As with smoking, a powerful social gradient is also developing with smartphones and social media. That is going to widen gaps in school achievement unless something decisive is done.

Sadly, many people still do not know about the risks from smartphones but a growing number of parents do know and are worried about the problems with smartphones and social media, but we face a collective action problem: we worry that our kids will miss out if they are the only ones without them, and that is the problem that needs solving and Government need to be part of that. Across this country there has been an explosion of parent-powered campaign groups aiming to fight back including Smartphone Free Childhood, Safe Screens, Delay Smartphones and the new "Rage Against the Screen" campaign. Over the last year they have gained hundreds of thousands of members and together with the shadow Secretary of State and the Leader of the Opposition we met some of them this morning and I pay tribute to them for their work.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): When I visit schools across my constituency, I find that many have instituted policies banning mobile phones, or indeed are consulting on doing so. Sometimes there is a small degree of pushback from pupils, and sometimes indeed from parents, but does my hon. Friend agree that if the Government take up this amendment, it will make it clearer and easier for schools to ban these phones and produce a safe and nurturing environment for our pupils in school, and it would be easier to take this forward?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is completely correct, and I was going to come on to that very point.

The Children's Commissioner has said,

"I honestly think that we will look back in 20 years' time and be absolutely horrified by what we allowed our children to be exposed to", and she is right. The very first thing Government could do is implement a proper ban on phones in our schools. Parentkind recently said to me, "Effectively, we are

[Neil O'Brien]

allowing our kids to be fed digital drugs and we are even allowing the dealers into the schools." That has to change.

The last Government issued guidance; it was a good start, but it is not enough and is not working. While 90% of schools say they have some sort of policy or some sort of ban, a survey by Policy Exchange last year found that only one in 10 secondary schools has a full start-to-finish ban, the policy that works best. Lots of schools are still trying policies where kids have their phones on them but are not supposed to have them out. The effect is that the kids are distracted, the teachers have to stop lessons to tell them to put them away, and we get all of the issues about bullying and social media during break times and more.

As the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), a Labour Member, pointed out the other day, guidance introduced by the previous Government is not working. We still have students using phones during break time and during lessons and this causes significant problems. I have had many teachers say to me, "This takes up so much time. It's a huge distraction. It interferes with learning." That is right and we are now in the strange situation where Labour MPs and the Conservative party agree that the guidance has turned out not to be enough, but the Labour Front Bench is insisting that it is; we are through the looking glass.

Why do we need a full ban, not just guidance? Our general approach is of course to give autonomy to schools but, first, the guidance is not working. The Department for Education's own national behaviour survey published in April last year found that 35% of secondary school teachers reported mobile phones being used during lessons without permission, and the problem was more pronounced for older children: 46% of pupils in years 10 to 11 reported mobile phones being used when they should not have been during most or all lessons, and last month a survey by Parentkind found that nearly half of secondary school children say they see phones being used in class where they should not be every single day. So the idea that the guidance has done the trick and there is no longer a problem to solve is contradicted by the Department's and the Government's own data.

Secondly, we need to support schools and have their back. I know from speaking to teachers and school leaders that the pressures from a minority of parents to allow phones can be very severe. A minority of parents can be unreasonably determined that they must be able to contact their child directly at any minute of the day, but unfortunately that comes at a cost to everyone else's education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) pointed out, a national ban would make things much simpler. We, the politicians, should take the flack and take the heat off schools.

Thirdly, a full and full-on ban is needed as the start of a wider resetting of social norms about children and smartphones and social media. We need a proper ban so that kids' smartphones are put away for a whole day, including breaks. Breaks should be about physical activity, not just scrolling and scrolling. Schools should be the beachhead and the first place where we re-create the

smartphone-free childhood that most of us got to enjoy—seven hours in which we de-normalise being on the phone all the time for young people.

A ban on smartphones in schools will, of course, not solve all the problems overnight, but it is a vital first step. When I was a Health Minister, I wanted us to develop an equivalent of the five bits of fruit and veg a day campaign, or public health campaigns such as "Don't Die of Ignorance" or "Clunk Click Every Trip", which older Members might remember. We need to do some big things to reset the culture. The heavy exposure of our kids to addictive-by-design products from the tech industry is the smoking of our generation.

5.30 pm

The other day, the Education Secretary said that smartphones have "no place" in schools, yet today the Government are going to whip Labour MPs to vote against getting smartphones out of our schools. That is just silly. Having initially claimed that our proposal for a ban was a "gimmick", the Education Secretary now seems to be executing a very slow U-turn. However, when hon. Members look at the data on what smartphones and social media are doing to our kids, they will realise that we cannot wait for the Education Secretary to swallow her pride—we need to get on with it.

A pattern is emerging. At the start of the debates on the Bill, we and many in the education profession pointed out that the Bill would threaten to cut teacher pay, but the Education Secretary said that that was not true and we did not understand. However, she was later forced to produce pages and pages of amendments to her own Bill, and it turned out that it was not us who did not understand the legislation. Last summer, Michael Gove was being held up by the Secretary of State as the great Satan of education, but in her most recent speech, he has become a "great education reformer". Just weeks ago, banning smartphones from our schools was a "gimmick", but over the weekend we learned from the Secretary of State that they have "no place" in our schools. So the policy is a "gimmick", but they have "no place" in our schools, although they are going to vote against a ban today—I think we can all see where this is going. Tonight, Labour Members should swallow their pride, vote for our new clause and do the right thing for our children.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of new clauses 3 and 4, which both stand in my name.

The Education Committee was afforded little time to undertake scrutiny of this important Bill, but we worked hard to do so, refocusing our ongoing inquiry on children's social care to focus on part 1 of the Bill and holding an additional evidence session to look at part 2. I am grateful to all the witnesses who came to give us their evidence.

We have published a report for the Secretary of State setting out recommendations based on the evidence we received. Broadly, the Committee welcomes the scale of the Government's ambition as expressed in the Bill, which is a key plank of the Government's opportunity mission to break the link between young people's background and their future success. We join the Government in

wanting to see high and rising standards in our education and care systems to protect vulnerable children and ensure educational opportunity for every child.

We welcome the measures in the Bill to strengthen child protection, particularly the provisions to establish multi-agency child protection teams, including education in safeguarding arrangements and a single unique identifier for children, which has the potential to be genuinely transformative for the delivery of many of the services that support children and young people. We support the measures to improve the children's social care market through regional commissioning and a financial oversight scheme. Action to remove profiteering in the children's social care sector is long overdue.

The Committee welcomes the measures in the Bill that will enable more children to remain within their kinship network or, where a residential placement in kinship care is not possible, in contact with family and friends.

The Committee also made some recommendations on ways in which the Bill could be strengthened, based on the evidence we received. The amendments tabled in my name relate directly to our recommendations, and I will now turn to each recommendation that is relevant to part 1 of the Bill.

New clause 3 would require the Government to publish and consult on a draft national offer for care leavers within 18 months of the Bill coming into force. A national care offer would set minimum standards for local care offers and ensure greater consistency between local authority areas. A national offer would act as a floor, not a ceiling. It would not be designed to prevent innovation at a local level or to stop additional commitments being made by individual local authorities, but we believe that greater national consistency, driven by Government, would make a big difference.

The evidence of the unacceptably poor outcomes for care-experienced young people is shocking. Some 39% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, employment or training, compared with 13% of all young people in the same age group. Some 14% of young people with care experience go to university, compared with almost half of their peers, and care leavers are 38% more likely to drop out of university. A third of care leavers become homeless within two years of leaving care, and 25% of homeless people have been in care. Care leavers are hugely over-represented in the criminal justice system. These are young people whose corporate parent has been the state, and these statistics are clear evidence that for many of them, the state is not a very good parent.

I welcome the Government's amendment of the Bill to introduce additional corporate parenting responsibilities, but the Committee heard that there is significant disparity in the support that different local authorities offer to care leavers. We heard about the differences in support with bursaries to pay for university accommodation, access to wi-fi to be able to study and ringfenced apprenticeships for care leavers in local authorities.

In a powerful evidence session in which the Committee heard from young adults with recent experience of the care system, one witness told us that

“there needs to be a national offer for care leavers. The postcode lottery is profound”.

Another pointed to a lack of awareness of the needs of care-experienced people across the wider network of public services. She told us that

“when I had gone to the jobcentres they were very ill-prepared. They did not know any support for care leavers. There were certain grants I could have had to get back into education; they did not inform me, in fact, everything that I have done now is from me Googling it...or asking people. That should not be the case.”

A national care offer would be the foundation for building better, more consistent support for care leavers everywhere in the country. It would provide the Government with an effective mechanism for holding local authorities to account on the quality of their provision, making it much easier for care-experienced people to understand what support should be there for them and stopping the current disincentive to leave home to go to university because of uncertainty about the support when they get there. I urge the Government to support new clause 3.

New clause 4 would require health assessments of children in the care system to include assessment by a mental health practitioner. It would make assessing the mental health of children in care a core part of the health assessment of those children by ensuring that a mental health practitioner is involved. Children in care are significantly more likely to have experienced trauma and abuse than their peers, and they are consequently more likely to experience mental ill health. In 2021, 45% of children in care had a mental health disorder—rising to 72% among those in residential care—compared with 10% of all children aged five to 15.

The care-experienced young adults who gave powerful evidence to the Committee spoke strongly about the urgent need for better mental health support and suggested that local authorities are not always fulfilling their obligations to include emotional and mental health in their health assessments of children in care. One of our witnesses told us:

“Growing up it was only physical assessments; we did not have mental health check-ins at all...I think if my mental health was taken more seriously from a young age, if I had that person to check-in with me...I would probably be so much better. I would not have mental health problems growing up. I do think that mental health check-ins are equally as important—if not more important—as physical check-ins for children in care.”

Another witness said that

“looked-after children should get mandatory assessments, as with physical health. Also, if they are referred to CAMHS the waitlists are horrific right now...looked-after children should have fast tracks and there should be more funding for specialist teams.”

We heard very movingly from a witness who spoke about the need for more trauma-informed training for foster carers and other professionals working with children in care. She said:

“I feel a lot could be explained if they understood the experience of trauma. It will take time. It will not go away at night, and sometimes before it gets better it could get worse. No one talks about that. You will not be okay if you are going into care; there is a reason why you are there, and so it is important that the minute you go into care every child should have a mandatory assessment, physical and mental, and there should be that on-call support for them”.

It is the trauma that underlies the decision to take a child into care—the abuse, neglect, bereavement or exploitation—that often has the most profound impact on their lives. Our care system needs to place dealing with that trauma in a child-centred way at its heart.

[Helen Hayes]

Ensuring that mental health assessments are properly undertaken is an essential requirement of such a system, because mental health must be assessed before treatment and support can be provided. New clause 4 would help to deliver that badly needed refocusing of the system, and I urge the Government to support it.

I wish to make two further points. First, I support new clause 14, which stands in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). It would introduce a requirement to notify a child's school and GP when they are placed in temporary accommodation. As a constituency MP in south-east London, I see the horrific impact of poor-quality, unstable temporary accommodation on children in my constituency every week. Temporary accommodation is harming children, whether through the sleep deprivation of having to get up at 4 am to travel a long distance to their school, the lack of space to do homework, the fear and insecurity of sharing a kitchen and bathroom with strangers, the physical health impacts of living with damp and mould, or the impacts on gross motor development of being in a space that is too small to crawl or play in.

The impacts are profound, so it is completely right that there should be a statutory requirement to notify the public services that have the ability to help mitigate such impacts, and which have a responsibility for a child's health and wellbeing when that child is placed in temporary accommodation. The Government should be taking urgent action to reduce the number of people in temporary accommodation, especially families with children. However, in the short term, the new duty introduced by my hon. Friend's new clause would make a difference to the support those children receive.

Finally, at the same time as we are debating this Bill, the Government are preparing to announce reforms to the welfare system. I wish to emphasise the vital importance of considering the impact on children of any proposed reforms. Children do not get to choose the families into which they are born, but each one is equally deserving of economic security and access to the resources they need to thrive. It is not a justifiable outcome of changes to the welfare system to make life harder for the poorest children, or to increase child poverty by limiting the access to support that their parents receive. The Government must undertake and publish an assessment of the impact of their welfare reforms on children, and must ensure that children do not suffer as a result of any planned reforms.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure and a privilege to rise to speak on part 1 of the Bill, and in particular on the new clauses and amendments that stand in my name.

When the Bill had its Second Reading, I said that there was much in it that Liberal Democrat Members welcomed, alongside areas that we would seek to amend, probe and strengthen. Its progress in recent weeks has seen plenty of debate, discussion and opportunities to constructively strengthen the legislation, although the Government have failed to accept any amendments that

were not their own, despite the Minister's comments in his opening speech. I am grateful to colleagues from across the House who served on the Committee, in which we had some excellent debates. However, I was disappointed last week to see the sheer number of amendments tabled by the Government ahead of Report. I really hope that the Government do not make a habit of depriving Committees of their chance to properly scrutinise Bills, even if most of those measures are welcome and uncontroversial.

Turning to the new clauses and amendments that stand in my name, as the Minister knows, care—particularly kinship care—is a subject that is close to my heart and those of my Liberal Democrat colleagues. In Committee, we discussed a number of encouraging provisions that are included in the Bill, including those dealing with the definition of kinship care, setting out in law the support that kinship carers are eligible for, and providing additional educational support for children in kinship care.

However, what we agreed in Committee falls far short of the ambition that I heard the Secretary of State herself set out at a reception for kinship carers just a few months ago. At that reception, the Secretary of State—unusually for somebody in her position—called on campaigners and policymakers to keep pushing her. I believe that new clauses 25, 26, 27 and 28, which stand in my name, do just that. New clause 25 would ensure that kinship carers are entitled to paid employment leave; new clause 26 would put into statute an entitlement to an allowance on par with that of foster carers; new clause 27 would extend the pupil premium plus to all children in kinship care, based on the definition that is in the Bill; and new clause 28 would prioritise those same children for school admissions.

Kinship carers are unsung heroes, often stepping up at no notice to look after a child they are related to or know because that child's parents can no longer do so. Time and again, we hear from kinship carers that they want to do the right thing out of love for those family members, but financial and other barriers often stand in their way. One survey revealed that 45% of kinship carers give up work, and a similar proportion have to reduce their hours permanently, putting financial strain on the family. These carers are disproportionately women, and they are over-represented in the healthcare, education and social care sectors, so this issue simply exacerbates our workforce crisis in public services.

In Committee, the Minister pointed to the kinship financial allowance pilots, which ran in a tiny number of local authorities and involved a very small subset of kinship carers. That was not ambitious enough. We must go further and give kinship carers parity with foster carers. That will help save money in the short and long term.

5.45 pm

Amendment 171, in my name, would apply clause 15 to independent special schools. The clause ensures that there is the backstop of a profit cap on certain social care providers. As a Liberal, I recognise the importance of private, voluntary sector and state provision in this area, as in many other public services, but in this case, it is clear that we have a market that is simply not functioning, and there are providers shamelessly profiteering from the lack of specialist provision and leaving local authority finances crippled.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): In Surrey alone, spending on private special educational needs schools has risen from £48 million in 2018-19 to £74 million in 2021-22. These schools are often backed by private equity firms, and they are charging local authorities extortionate fees—on average double those in the state sector. They are draining public funds, but councils have no choice but to place children in these schools due to a lack of state provision. Does my hon. Friend agree that extending the profit cap to independent schools is essential to protect public finances and ensure fairer funding for children with special educational needs?

Munira Wilson: I had not shared my speech with my hon. Friend, but she has anticipated the next couple of points that I was about to make. I agree with her strongly. I preface my comments by saying that there are many independent special schools run by private or voluntary sector providers that do an excellent job and are certainly not profiteering in the way that I am about to set out. Clearly, however, that is not the case across the board, with some firms making upwards of 20% in profit on what they charge. We must challenge whether that is justified. The crisis in state special educational needs and disability provision and the lack of specialist places have led to a growth in private provision that is crippling local authority finances, as my hon. Friend just said.

In 2021-22, councils spent £1.3 billion on independent and non-maintained special schools—twice what they spent just six years previously. The average cost of one of those places was £56,710, which, as my hon. Friend said, was twice the average cost of a state-run special school place. Many of the companies running these schools are the very same private equity companies running the children's homes and fostering agencies that clause 15 is designed to deal with, so I am at a loss as to why the Government have not included independent special schools in the clause. I urge them to think again and accept our amendment.

My new clause 29 would impose a requirement on the Secretary of State to introduce a national wellbeing measurement programme for children and young people throughout England. I pay tribute to #BeeWell, Pro Bono Economics and the wider Our Wellbeing Our Voice coalition for their hard work in this area. As I have said several times during this Bill's progress, I am more than a little surprised to find so little about children's wellbeing in a Bill with this title. One in four children in the UK reports low wellbeing, and according to the programme for international student assessment data, our country is the lowest ranked in Europe on that head. Data on children's wellbeing and mental health is fragmented across the NHS, schools and local authorities. It is crucial that we collect data to understand the challenges that young people face and to develop solutions, and that we seek to understand the efficacy of those solutions through the use of robust wellbeing data.

I welcome the Conservatives' new clause 36 on wellbeing, phones and social media, both as a parent and as a parliamentarian. In this unprecedented digital age, we need to treat children's social media and phone addiction as a public health issue. We have long supported the last Government's guidance that schools should try to restrict mobile phone use during the school day, with—importantly—proper mitigations that teachers and heads can employ for young carers and those with medical

conditions who use their phones as medical devices, and in other local circumstances that teachers and heads are best placed to identify.

Jim Shannon: Is the hon. Lady aware of the pilot scheme introduced in Northern Ireland by the Education Minister, Paul Givan? In some schools, all the children's mobile phones are placed in pouches, so that they are never on show. This could make the Conservatives' proposal acceptable to all, and there is still provision for carers to keep their phones with them. Northern Ireland has shown what can be done with a pilot scheme, and it is great that the House is following our lead.

Munira Wilson: It is always an honour to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman, and it is great to hear about the pilot scheme in Northern Ireland. I have read that the Government in the Republic of Ireland have spent about €9 million on issuing those pouches to schools across the country. It would be useful and instructive for the UK Government to look at how that pilot goes, but I am not sure that we even need to wait for that. School leaders and parents are pressing us to go further now, and we must listen.

Putting the guidance into law will ensure that schools have the necessary support when they are challenged on their policies, and the resources to implement a mobile-free environment. A headteacher in my constituency told me that it would cost his school budget £20,000 to install lockers or issue the pouches described by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Children must be able to learn in an environment that is free from the distraction of phones and the threat of bullying. We have also seen a significant reduction in truancy in schools where restrictions have been robust.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): I welcome the hon. Lady's comments on the new clause, and also the cross-party support that demonstrates that this is a cross-party issue and is not about party allegiance. Does she agree that the data and the evidence promoted by specialists such as Jonathan Haidt show that problems with literacy, numeracy and focus among children have accelerated since the early 2010s, which coincides with their access to phones? When it comes to what this Government should be doing, it is an open-and-shut case.

Munira Wilson: The data in the book to which the right hon. and learned Lady has referred is alarming. Last week in Hampton, in my constituency, the Smartphone Free Childhood campaign organised a public meeting with local parents. It was pretty full, and the data shared there was also extremely alarming. I attended as both a parent and the local Member of Parliament, and I am afraid I came away feeling even less of a liberal than before I went in, and slightly more authoritarian. However, that was mainly because allowing our children to grow up with the freedom of being away from such a toxic environment is the right, liberal thing to do.

Let me say gently to the right hon. and learned Lady, and to those on both the Conservative and the Labour Benches, that being at school is only a small part of a child's life—it is only a small fraction of that child's time—and we need to look at much broader measures than restricting phone use in schools. It is disappointing that during the Committee stage of the Data (Use and Access) Bill, neither Labour nor Conservative Members

[Munira Wilson]

supported Liberal Democrat proposals to make the internet less addictive for children. After the Government decided to gut the “safer phones” Bill—the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), which had a great deal of cross-party support—a Liberal Democrat amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill offered Members an opportunity to protect young people from the doom-scrolling algorithms that are making such powerful changes to the way in which they live and interact. It is disappointing that Ministers did not seize that opportunity with both hands, and I hope they will think again as that Bill progresses through the House.

I welcome new clause 8, tabled by the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), which would abolish the common law defence of reasonable punishment. We need to ensure that all children are properly protected in law, so that they can grow up safe, happy and healthy. The Liberal Democrats have been calling for this for more than 20 years. We supported the law change in Scotland and Wales, and it is long overdue in England.

There is much in Part 1 of the Bill on which there is cross-party consensus. A number of amendments tabled by Members on both sides of the House seek to ensure that the Government go further in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of our children, which is surely one of the most important roles of Government. I hope that Ministers are in listening mode, and that even if they will not take on board some of the new clauses and amendments today, they will do so as the Bill progresses to the other place. After all, it is our duty to ensure that every child in the country not only survives, but thrives.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak about some very important amendments and new clauses, but also about a body of work that moves forward the country's protections and support for some of the most vulnerable people in society, which has not been done for a long time.

Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I had the privilege of being the children's lead for the local authority on which I served. Many Members here may be the grandparent or parent of a handful of kids, but as any local authority lead will know, we are a corporate parent to many hundreds. In that role, it is impossible not to be moved by the testimonies of the young people with whom we are working. They have often undergone real moments of trauma and difficulty that would knock any of us for six. In the face of that, their resilience and their determination to better themselves should inspire us all. As guardians of the country's collective obligation to young people in care, we owe it to them to fulfil our side of that corporate parenting role.

I am therefore extremely happy to see Government amendments 18 to 22, which widen the role of corporate parenting to other local stakeholders. As a local authority lead working with the care-experienced campaigner Terry Galloway, I was happy to take on some of that work locally. I worked with fantastic local stakeholders to broaden our obligations as corporate parents, and to bring other local government bodies into the sphere of those who were trying to do best by the young people in our care. However, it is clear that acting in isolation

cannot be good enough, and that without clear legislation requiring more local stakeholders to take on that important role, we can never involve all the partners who can have such a transformative impact on young people in care at that crucial early stage. No parent would think of caring for a child as just a narrow subset of his or her role, and the state, and our obligation as a corporate parent, should be no different.

I am very glad to see these amendments; many in the House and beyond have been campaigning for them for some time, including my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who recommended some of these measures in his report on social care a few years ago. We saw very little action in this area under the last Government, but I am delighted that this Government are wasting no time in widening that obligation, and therefore widening the scope of the corporate parents who have the back of some of our young people in care throughout the country.

I am also glad to see the Government amendments that strengthen information sharing. I have had to read a great many difficult serious case reviews involving young people all over the country, so I know that there has been tragic incident after tragic incident owing to failures in information sharing, and the failure of agencies to work together effectively. Strengthening information sharing and multi-agency working must be a core element of bettering our obligation to safeguard young people in all local authority areas, and it will be truly welcome to see that in the Bill.

Clauses 8 and 9 of the Bill will strengthen our obligation to care leavers. No parent would expect their obligation to young people in their care to end when they reached the age of 18, and the state should be no different. Perversely, a child leaving care could be ruled intentionally homeless, but a stronger and more widely available care offer for those who are leaving care will empower local authorities throughout the country to do more to live up to the obligation that we all have, as parents, to do right by young people long into adulthood. A number of amendments could be made to strengthen that provision; the Government may not be bringing them forward today, but I am sure that we will continue to revisit proposals as we monitor how this new obligation for local authorities plays out.

The need to do right by young people cannot end when they turn 18, so we must think about how we can continue our role as corporate parents long into children's lives, when they are young adults. Many of the young people with whom I worked as a local authority lead would welcome extra support, and I am sure that many will welcome the start that the Bill is making today.

Alongside that, it is a fact pretty well appreciated across the House that the overly bureaucratic care system has not always done enough to recognise the importance of wider family networks at really important moments in young people's lives, so the clauses bringing forward stronger commitments on family group decision making, recognising the important role of kinship carers, and strengthening the educational support available to those in kinship care, are truly welcome. So too—although not in this Bill—is the Government's record financial commitment to expand the kinship care pilot and ensure that we start to understand the value that wider financial support could have in enabling more young people to be looked after by members of their wider family network, rather than falling into more formalised care.

6 pm

In order to do right by young people and protect their wellbeing—whether through reforming SEND, having further conversations about smartphones or keeping young people safe online—there is further work for this Government to do. It was very welcome to hear the Minister, in responding to the private Member's Bill on safer phones, confirm this Government's commitment to continuing to do more in this space in future.

In the meantime, however, I am very happy to support a Bill—*[Interruption.]* Does the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) want to intervene?

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I think the hon. Gentleman will find that what the Government committed to do was some research.

Alistair Strathern: I think the right hon. Gentleman will find that the Minister did not just commit to do some research; he committed to bring forward a statement on some really important aspects of online health on which the Government had not formally commented before. I gently suggest that if the Opposition are so clear—

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Of the six Education Secretaries we had between 2019 and last year's election, did any of them propose banning mobile phones in schools—or is this the latest bandwagon from the Opposition?

Alistair Strathern: I thank my hon. Friend, who could not have put my next point better.

I completely recognise that this is a really important topic—it is important for parents and schools right across my constituency, too—but I am afraid the idea that, having had 14 years to bring this forward, the Conservatives have suddenly had a damascene conversion to the idea that this is something that cannot wait and must be delivered now, at a time when there is not a clear consensus among educational professionals or parents about the best way to bring such a ban into effect, feels disingenuous at best. I share lots of their concerns and, over time, I hope to be able work across this House to bring forward good protections to that effect. What I simply will not do is indulge this attempt to turn the issue into an opportunity for the Conservative party to posture, because it had so long and did so little on this work.

In conclusion, I am very glad to be supporting a Bill that delivers step changes in protections for young people, steps changes in support for care leavers and a step change in support for kinship carers. For too long, we have not done enough to look after some of the most vulnerable young people in our society, and I am glad that this Bill and some of the Government amendments underline our commitment to ensuring that we do far better on this front than the last Government did.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I urge Members to ensure that they keep their language respectful at all times.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I rise to speak to clause 9 and the important issue of looked-after children, which I think Members from across the House care about greatly. It is for that reason that the Bill is so disappointing, because there are missed

opportunities on supply and demand, and particularly on my concern—I represent a rural constituency with cheaper housing—about the concentration of looked-after children in particular communities, which the Bill's regional commissioning fails to address sufficiently.

I will take those issues in order, starting with supply. In Committee there was a lot of discussion about profiteering, and I am sure the Minister will respond to my pointing out that the Bill is silent on addressing the real and probably shared issue of how we boost supply by pivoting to talk of the profit clawback. My concern about the profit clawback is that when the Minister comes to claw back the money, he will find that it has long since moved. It would perhaps be helpful if the Minister could clarify the estimate that has been given to the Treasury for how much the Department expects to recover in clawback, because the Opposition suspect that it will not be particularly effective.

Likewise, there are missed opportunities in the Bill for reducing demand, and I very much echo the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) in Committee about boosting foster carers—an issue that is frequently debated in this House. I accept that is not a panacea for all the issues affecting looked-after children, particularly those needing secure accommodation, but one would have expected the Bill to go further in that regard.

It is also the case that what the Government are doing about unaccompanied child migrants is further exacerbating demand. I draw the Minister's attention to the 2023 Home Office research, which shows a massive increase not only in the number of unaccompanied child migrants, but in the number of disputed cases where people claimed to be children when there was concern that they were adults. In half of those cases—49%—the individual was found to be an adult. That is further stoking demand, and it is very regrettable that the Government are not taking action and, indeed, are reversing some of the safeguards put in place by the previous Government to reduce demand. Again, clause 9 is silent on those issues.

Given that I represent a rural community, my third and main concern is that regional commissioning risks being further detached from local communities where there is cheap housing, and where there is therefore a temptation to further concentrate looked-after children, in a way that does not join across the Government's silos with areas such as police funding and housing. I will give the House a specific example. Because Cambridgeshire has had significant population growth but the police funding is based on the population in 2012—that is how the police grant is calculated—commissioning does not pick up the additional pressures that the Cambridgeshire force is facing, particularly in its rural communities. Those pressures are exacerbated where we have looked-after children with a troubled history interacting with the criminal justice system, and where there are challenges around unaccompanied child migrants.

Nothing in this Bill says how regional commissioning interplays with the formula for police funding, even though the data I have from Cambridgeshire police is very clear that a significant proportion of their time is spent as a consequence of this policy. An example of that are the requirements on the police when a child goes missing, which is rightly an issue of significant concern. Of course that is something for which the police should

[*Steve Barclay*]

prioritise time, but having a concentration of care homes in rural communities can require significant additional resource.

Clause 9 fails to address supply and demand. What will be done about the fact that it is further divorced from the rural communities where commissioning is often placed? Given that the Government are hammering rural communities in so many areas—not least farming—how will they reassure my constituents in Fenland that the failure of the money to follow looked-after children sufficiently is going to be addressed?

I will finish with one example from the recent data coming from councils. The Home Office reimburses councils for their spending on children under 18, at a rate of between £114 and £143 a day. On 15 February this year, councils reported that the payments from central Government do not cover all the costs. The risk is that rural communities, which have been hammered by this Government on farming and in so many other areas, will have to pick up the police costs, the health service impacts and the other impacts on public services that come from more distant regional commissioners, which is exactly what clause 9 risks doing. It would be helpful if the Minister could say a little bit more about that when he comes to close the debate.

Tristan Osborne: I rise to support this Bill and the Government's amendments. Specifically, I will talk to new clauses 18 to 22, on corporate parenting; new clauses 44 to 46, on kinship; and new clause 36, tabled by the Conservatives.

As a former teacher in secondary schools in Kent, I believe these measures are overwhelmingly welcomed by many of my constituents, and also by professionals across social work and social care and in the education sector. Of course, the context of the Bill and the Government amendments is 14 years of cuts to many secondary schools and social care services in councils across the country. Successive cuts have been made to the numbers of schoolteachers and those supporting children on the frontline, with many children left in contextual settings that were inappropriate, with schools constantly having to chase agencies for resolutions. Of course, we had six Conservative Education Secretaries since 2019—a revolving door that would make the average attendance officer blush.

To get to the specifics, new clauses 18 to 22, tabled by the Secretary of State, will ensure clearer responsibilities on corporate parenting. I welcome the strengthened provision for care leavers, including the responsibilities placed on local authorities to support the transition of young people into adulthood and independent living. This transition is a period of tumult for many young people, but our most vulnerable do not have the support of parents to help them manage it. I welcome the changes to the Housing Act 1996 to clarify that care leavers should not be considered intentionally homeless and should be supported.

I also support new clauses 44 to 46, which provide much greater clarity on registered providers. In my area of Medway, many young people were placed with providers where people had serious contextual safeguarding concerns, and many of these residencies were unregistered. Unsurprisingly, these children ended up being involved

with the police, and with local authorities as the environment and management of these homes was in some cases unscrutinised and poor. Sadly, as chair of the community safety partnership in Medway, I regularly saw waves of criminality associated with some of these homes. I therefore welcome the measures to tighten up the audit and scrutiny of them by regulators.

In addition, I welcome the debate raised by new clause 25 and elsewhere on kinship care in the UK. Kinship care plays a vital role in supporting children who are unable to live with their birth parents, offering them a familiar and supportive environment during a challenging time. There are over 141,000 children in kinship care in England and Wales. The benefits of kinship care are significant, and children should be offered the same redress as those in foster care. Children placed with relatives or close family friends are able to maintain stronger emotional bonds, retain connections to their cultural identity and stay within their local communities. The clauses on which I wish the Government to go further on are those to support kinship care, and I urge them to continue to do so, working in dialogue with Back-Bench MPs, charities and third sector organisations.

Lastly, on new clause 36, I want to talk from my experience as a teacher about the effective management of banning mobile phones and the safeguarding components specifically linked to part 1. As a former teacher, I know this has significant merit with issues of mental health, social media bullying and screen time causing concern, which is why I welcome the Government's position of further research in this space.

However, many schools already operate policies to this effect, including “no phones visible” policies during the school day, and before I could support any such proposals, I would need clarity about the professional distance in relation to any such amendment, including what would happen if a child were to be found with a phone—would that lead to an immediate suspension or expulsion—and what would happen if a mobile phone is concealed? Are teachers expected to challenge students and try to turn out their pockets, because for many professionals that would be a step too far? I would need to see real guidance before advising teachers about trying to challenge students who may not have a visible phone on them, but where there is suspicion that they have one.

There also needs to be further consultation work. Where do we draw the line between a mobile phone and a tablet device, such as an iPad—which many children may also bring into school—that allows access to social media? Is there not a conversation to be had with social media providers and other companies about withdrawing services for those under-18, as opposed to stopping them holding the technology, especially as we know that much of this is linked to out-of-school activity as well as to in-school activity? Further debates on this topic are needed before we simply jump to a ban.

There are many things that students do in schools that we might challenge, such as eating foods we do not approve of. However, we have to be careful because digital devices and digital literacy are important if children are to grow up into adults who understand the context of the digital devices they hold. Banning can have a cobra effect in the sense of not enabling children to learn how to manage themselves on these devices.

Many of the amendments show the importance of an holistic approach to education. The Bill and the Government amendments acknowledge that academic achievement alone is not sufficient for children's success, and that agencies and social services have a broader responsibility to support our most vulnerable. Part 1 of this Bill links holistically to other parts, which will be discussed tomorrow, on free breakfast clubs, cuts to school uniform costs, and reforms of pay and conditions. I urge all Members to support these amendments.

6.15 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak on this important Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

I wish to focus my attention on two new clauses. First, I am calling my new clause 33 Sara's law, after Sara Sharif, my murdered constituent. This comes out of the findings of the recent review conducted by the Children's Commissioner. I thank the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and others that have suggested a raft of great changes to the Bill when it comes to improving how we look after children in the UK. The list is never-ending, with so many great contributions from many.

Given what happened to Sara Sharif, we know that the system is not protecting vulnerable children as it should. It failed her, so I am hoping to untie that fundamental knot in the children's social care system. The sad reality is that the level of support a child receives too often depends not on their needs, but on where they live and the thresholds the council has for stepping in and saving a child from abuse and neglect.

There is an unacceptable inequality in how local authorities interpret thresholds for an intervention under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. That means children at risk in one council area may receive early help and intervention if a family is in crisis, yet in another they are left without the intervention that could protect them, if not save their life. Every child in this country has in effect been entered into a postcode lottery, and we are gambling with their lives by not attempting to repair that flaw.

We need to look at the devastating case of Sara to understand the consequences of having a system that lacks consistency and clear national standards. I do not think we can put a price on a child's life and decide to step in only on the basis of resources, but that is how the current system works. It is clear that social services over the years have struggled with deep cuts to funding and services, and the Liberal Democrats and I are not yet confident that the new Government will fully fund local authorities.

Sara was just 10 years old when she was brutally murdered after, sadly, years of torture and slavery at the hands of those who were supposed to love her. She was known to social services, yet the response was not sufficient to protect her. Would clearer national guidance with stronger thresholds for intervention have made a difference? In my opinion, yes. Would automatic referrals such as those proposed in this new clause have ensured that professionals had the opportunity to intervene before it was too late? In my view, yes.

New clause 33 calls for a review of the variation in the support that children in need receive across the country, and critically, it requires the Government to

establish national standards for when and how children should receive help. It sets out clear triggers for automatic referral to children's social care, such as when a primary caregiver enters custody or becomes an in-patient for mental healthcare, or when a child is arrested. There are moments of profound instability for a child in such cases, yet without clear national standards and a proactive approach, too many slip through the cracks.

My constituent Sara slipped through the cracks. In January, when I asked the Prime Minister if he would call for an inquiry into the failings of the state surrounding the death of Sara, he said the Government would look into it, but we are still waiting for him to update the House. The proposed changes would set expectations about how frequently a child's situation should be reviewed. Cases like Sara's remind us that it is not enough to assess a child once and then step away; their needs must be updated and reviewed regularly. The risks can escalate quickly. There are warning signs and if regular checks are not in place, intervention comes too late with morbid consequences.

New clause 33 is about accountability, consistency and, most importantly, protection. We cannot continue to accept a system where a child's safety depends on geography and resource rather than need. I think MPs from across the House, particularly Government Members, have a moral duty to protect vulnerable children and there are so many children out there who are still in danger. I hope new clause 33 is accepted. If it is not, I hope the Government will consider it in the other place.

I wish to draw the House's attention to new clause 8, which has been referred to, tabled by the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato). It ensures that corporal punishment cannot be used as a defence in court if it is being used to hide grievous harm to a child. It is not about preventing parents from reasonably reprimanding their children; it is about closing a legal loophole that abusers have regularly used or attempted to use to evade justice. We saw it in the case of Sara, whose father Urfan sought to use such a defence to avoid accountability for the terrible suffering tantamount to torture—that is what the judge said—that he inflicted. No child should endure such brutality. No perpetrator should be able to hide behind awful outdated legal justifications.

We should standardise child protection in this country and close the loopholes that currently exist that abusers can exploit. The Bill, if correctly amended, gives us the chance to do that. Let us take that opportunity and protect vulnerable children.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Very powerful indeed.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of new clause 8 in my name, which has the support of many colleagues across the House and organisations including the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Barnardo's, the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner for England. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Woking (Mr Forster) for their comments in today's debate.

New clause 8 would amend section 58 of the Children Act 2004 to remove the "reasonable punishment" defence that permits assault and battery on children by parents and carers. Children in Scotland and Wales already have the same protections as adults when it comes to being hit, but we find ourselves in the peculiar situation

[Jess Asato]

where a child growing up just over the border in England has fewer rights. Why should they? What is the difference between a child growing up in Berwick-upon-Tweed and a child in Bonnyrigg? Scotland and Wales are not alone: 67 countries around the world have already banned physical punishment—Tajikistan last year became the latest—and 27 others have also committed to a ban. There is a global recognition that children deserve better. Indeed, as part of the UK's commitment to the 16th Sustainable Development Goal, we have already pledged to end all violence against children, and that includes physical punishment in the home. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated unequivocally that protection from physical punishment is a basic human right of a child.

Physical punishment is not punishment; it is abuse. We have a wealth of research to draw on from the last 30 years, and not a single reputable study has found that physical punishment positively impacts children's development. There is no evidence to show that it improves behaviour in children. The reality is that physical punishment does not establish in a child's mind a difference between right and wrong; it simply evokes fear—a fear of violence and pain. We know that children who are physically punished are at a far higher risk of experiencing maltreatment and abuse by parents, because over time parents may feel the need to escalate and inflict more and more pain to elicit the same response. A 16-year-old girl told Childline:

“When I was younger and misbehaved, my mum gave me a warning and put me on the naughty step. Then when I got to five to 12 years old, it was a tap or a little smack. But now it can be a proper smack, or there was one occasion where she pulled my hair and I fell to the floor and she continuously hit me. I don't want to get mum in trouble, but I can't carry on being afraid of her.”

Studies have also found that physical punishment leads to higher levels of aggression directed against parents by their children. Violence begets violence, and teaching children from a young age that violence is an acceptable way of channelling stress and frustration has consequences for all of us in society. It also has a pronounced impact on the children themselves. We know from research conducted by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health that children who are physically punished are almost three times more likely to experience mental health problems than those who are not. We know that physical punishment of children is linked to substance misuse, antisocial behaviour and slower cognitive development. While the majority of parents do not use physical punishment and its use is declining, more than one in five 10-year-olds have still experienced it.

New clause 8 is not about criminalising parents. No one wants to stop a parent from protecting their child who is about to reach for a hot kettle or cross a busy road. Of the many countries that have introduced a ban, there has been no evidence that it has led to an increase in prosecutions. Instead, changing the law is about giving parents, children and professionals clarity, while improving the toolbox parents have to positively raise their child. New clause 8 removes the ambiguity created by the “reasonable punishment” defence and will allow children and adults to come forward more readily to report abuse. A clearer legal framework also makes it easier for professionals like social workers to do their jobs in the best interests of children.

New clause 8 will not, on its own, be able to stop cases like Sara Sharif's, but it will certainly ensure that the threat of violence many children face will no longer be given the pretence of legal cover. We cannot afford to delay action. The NSPCC has seen a threefold increase in the number of child welfare calls mentioning physical punishment in the past couple of years. We need to act now to ban physical punishment, so we can ensure that children can grow up free from abuse and harm, something I know is a priority for this Government and is the purpose of the Bill in front of us.

Evidence from other countries shows us that bans work. In Germany, for example, the percentage of young people subjected to physical punishment fell from 30% to 3% after it introduced a ban in 2002. Given that 71% of adults believe that physical punishment is unacceptable, it seems to me that sooner or later we will have to change the law. My challenge with new clause 8 is: why not sooner? Why do we not commit to ending this abuse today? Children will not thank us for waiting. Future generations will not look kindly on our inaction, nor should they. We have the evidence, the power and the time. We have the ability to act and we should to protect all our children.

Damian Hinds: It is a pleasure to join in this important debate, as it has been to serve on the Bill Committee. I am very pleased that we have two days to debate the Bill on Report, because really it is two Bills, which are very different in character. In part 1, which we are debating today, there is a great deal on which I think all of us in the House agree. In fact, quite large parts of it were in the previous Government's published Bill. It contains some important provisions covering children in care, special educational needs, child protection and so on.

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend speaks with huge levels of authority given his previous roles. He has just mentioned special educational needs. As a fellow Hampshire MP, would he agree that we in Hampshire benefit from excellent services for our local schools, particularly when it comes to special educational needs? However, demand has doubled in the past few years. Would he support my campaign to save the Henry Cort Community College in Fareham and Waterlooville, which is under threat of closure? If the college is to be closed, would it not be better diverted to special educational needs provision to serve the local community?

6.30 pm

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend and near constituency neighbour makes a very important point, and I am sure she is running a very effective campaign. We look to the Government to come forward with what we know will be a large and broad special educational needs reform package. We do not yet know what will be in it or what the implications will be. Of course, we want all children to be wherever is right for them. For some children, that means being educated in a mainstream setting where they can benefit from that. However, we also know that for some children, it is right to be in special school. Having the full range of provision is therefore incredibly important.

There is a great deal in this Bill that I could speak about, and which we did speak about in Committee. However, in pursuit of brevity—as I know you would wish, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am going to limit myself

today to talking about two aspects: one thing that is in the Bill, and another that is conspicuous by its absence. The thing that is in the Bill is a peculiar thing to raise on the Floor of the House of Commons, because it is something with which I have not yet heard anybody disagree, and on which there is no amendment to speak to—although, to remain orderly, Madam Deputy Speaker, I can speak with reference to Government amendment 114, which is right next to it in the legislation.

I speak neither in favour nor against the principle of what I am about to cover, but raise it for what is, I think, an important reason. In this House, it is sometimes precisely with measures on which there is no disagreement that the greatest dangers lie, because this House, with its oppositional layout, thrives on people finding holes in what is being proposed and objecting to them; when everybody is saying the same kind of thing, there is a real danger that things will get through without the proper attention.

I have not yet said what I am referring to, have I? I am referring to the provisions on unique identifiers. A couple of speakers have already mentioned the importance of these measures. The hon. Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) was talking about a number of almost invariably serious case reviews identifying the problems that have occurred. A lot of that centres around the lack of proper data sharing, where different agencies both knew the same child, but did not join together what they knew about that child in order to be able to act in their best interest. Having what is, in the systems world, called an “index term”—a terrible way to refer to a child—or a unique identifier for every child, so that everybody knows when they are talking about the same child, is very important. The Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) spoke about the potential for this area to be genuinely transformational—I think that was the phrase she used. All of that is true.

Clause 4 allows for the creation of a single unique identifier for children and introduces new duties around data sharing. Here is my worry: sometimes when we legislate, something passes through without too much debate, and then, two or three years later, all sorts of other things start happening, and when we query why they are happening, people say, “Well, you lot voted for this. You passed a law about it. Perhaps these are some of the consequences.” I think something along those lines might have happened with GDPR, for example, and some of the things that we now see coming through on rules around children’s social media use and ages.

The creation of the single unique identifier is a massive change in the way we keep records on people in this country. With the potential to join up different databases, there are great positive implications for things like child safety, but there are other implications around privacy, data security and so on. It has been suggested that the NHS number would be the unique identifier used for each child, which, at first glance, seems an obvious and sensible thing to do. As a former Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that in the past, various projects have proposed using the national insurance number as a unique identifier for adults, which, at the time, also seemed like a sensible and clever thing to do. However, when it was prodded further, it turned out that the national insurance number

database is not perfect, and I am afraid the NHS number database may not be, either—it just was not designed for this kind of purpose.

We are obviously not going to have a big debate on this issue today, although they may do in the other place when they talk about the Bill. However, over time, I think we will have to unpack what this whole new system may imply. For a start, is it talking about using the existing NHS database and the index term—the unique identifier for individuals—or is it talking about taking those numbers and putting them into a new database or system, which would have significant cost and time implications? If it is using the current NHS database, we need to think about the implications.

There has been a different debate going on about AI and the use of large amounts of data for academic research. What would be the implications of having this huge database with every child in the country potentially linked to all sorts of other databases, with details about them, for that kind of research? How secure would the system be? We can probably safely say that the system would not give the same number to two different children, but I am not 100% certain that we could say with total confidence that the same one child could not, at different times in their life, have different numbers, particularly with immigration and re-immigration, change in family structures and so on. What would that mean for the system?

More broadly, though, once we had this unique identifier and a national database of this sort, we could use it for quite a few things other than child protection. Some of those things might be considered by many of us in this House to be pro-social things that are worth pursuing. We have been having debates about age verification and the use of electronic devices and social media, for example; such a database would probably be the most reliable identity system for under-18s.

What about after age 18? If children have grown up with this database and with a number and identifier attached to them, that would not disappear just because they pass the age of majority. In theory, they could carry on having a linked database that potentially links up child protection sources, NHS sources, police national computer and so on—who knows what else could be joined up. We might then find that we have a system of national identity cards without having sought that in the first place.

Helen Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman is raising a number of technical considerations about the implementation of a project that is no doubt very ambitious. But does he not hear the cries from parents of children with SEND who are so weary of having to tell their story again and again to different parts of the system that are supposed to help them, and are currently being hampered in those efforts by exactly this want for information about a child being held in a single place? Does he not think that, ambitious though this project is, and important though the technical considerations are, it is worth delivering, and that it is worth giving parents the confidence that we in this House will scrutinise it and do that job? There are big gains to be had from pursuing this course of action.

Damian Hinds: I think the hon. Lady was here for the first two or three minutes of my speech—that is broadly what I said. In fact, I quoted her talking about the

[Damian Hinds]

transformational potential of this measure and its importance. I do not want to go through it all again, but I said that when we all agree on something, there is sometimes a danger of unintended consequences. I then said that we may not talk about all this today—we do not have to do so today—but I think the Government will probably have to come back multiple times for Parliament to be able to consider all the much wider potential implications of creating such a database. I think, not for the first time in our in our lives, we are not a million miles away from one another.

The other thing that I want to talk about, in a less consensual tone, is what is glaring in its absence from the Bill: new clause 36 on mobile phones and social media, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott). There are four parts to it: the first two state that the chief medical officer should be commissioned to issue a report, and the Government will conduct research on the effects of social media on children and young people. That was in the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), which we discussed a couple of Fridays ago.

The third thing was in the wider package, as colleagues will remember, but the Government did not agree to it: a phone ban during the school day. That is point of contention, although I know that many hon. Members across the House, including in the Labour party, agree on it. There are limits to the approach. An argument that is always made when asking, “Why not ban mobile phones at school?” is, “What about out of school?” That is a good question, but it is not a reason not to do the first part. I readily admit that most online harm happens outside school. We know from research, including the recent study from the University of Birmingham, that a school ban does not necessarily reduce the total amount of time that young people spend online—it just displaces some of it. That does not necessarily improve things such as sleep, which is a big worry for teenagers, nor does it address wider issues of attention span, eyesight and so on.

Rules are still important, for the sake of both children and schools, but three things in recent years have changed the context for behaviour in schools. The first is a set of things that happened around covid—a sort of attitude shift that seems to have happened to a large extent throughout society. The other two things are vapes and phones. Of course, there is a universal ban on vapes at school. That does not mean that they never get through, but pupils are not allowed to vape in any state secondary school in this country. Phones are the other thing. We know—I say that because it applies to us as well—that if we have a phone in our pocket, even if we are not looking at the screen in front of us, it is still something of a distraction, because it could buzz at any time. In fact, we might be wondering if it will buzz when someone replies or comments on a post or whatever it might be.

The school day in its entirety should be devoted to school. That means not just lessons and learning things, although that is the primary aim, but being a child or young person, being with friends and growing up without those distractions.

Tristan Osborne: Did the right hon. Gentleman say that it was a “rite of passage” for young people as young as year 6 and 7 to have a mobile phone, and that

it was in the gift of their parents to decide? Last year, did he not suggest that we should wait until the guidance given by Government is fully reviewed and understood before we go for an outright ban? Why has he changed his mind?

Damian Hinds: I do not know if the hon. Member has been reading misquotes.com again, but I did not say what he just suggested. I think he is probably referring to an interview from years ago in which I said that it has become something of a rite of passage that, between years 6 and 7, the great majority of children are given a mobile phone. That is true, and it is not at all what he just said that I said.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): On a point of fact—[*Interruption.*] I am reading from a mobile phone but, talking about quoting, they are important for research. On 19 February 2024, when the right hon. Gentleman was the Minister of State for Schools, a press release issued his Department said:

“Mobile phones are set to be prohibited in schools across England”.

On the right hon. Member’s website on 29 February, there was an article that said, “This latest article”—

by the right hon. Gentleman—

“for the Herald and Post follows the decision to ban mobile phones in schools”.

I raise that point because, previously, Conservative Members made the argument that they were already banning mobile phones in schools. Is it not the case that they were posturing then, just as they are posturing now?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Member clearly did not consult the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), because he has made a slightly contradictory point. I was coming on to say that we did issue non-statutory guidance that mobile phones should be prohibited during school. That was the right thing to do. I do not know if this is further down whatever webpage the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) was looking at, but I said that we maintained the option of making that guidance statutory. That time has come to do that, because the guidance has not been sufficiently effective in its current form, but issuing the guidance was the right thing to do.

6.45 pm

Luke Murphy: It was not just any website; it was the right hon. Member’s website, and it was a direct quote. My point—it was not necessarily to do with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne)—was that when the right hon. Gentleman was Minister of State for Schools, he described the move on his website as an outright ban. No if, no buts. It was described by the previous Government as an outright ban. It was posturing then, and it is posturing now.

Damian Hinds: No, it was not posturing then and it is not posturing now. We issued non-statutory guidance—

Luke Murphy: Which you described as a ban.

Damian Hinds: With respect, there are different levels. There is non-statutory guidance, statutory guidance and primary legislation. I first had to deal with this question in 2019. On that occasion, we decided not to issue

a ban. We had a big discussion about it in a legislative Committee. I am not totally sure that it was the right approach to take at the time, but it seemed to be the view of headteachers in particular that there should be no ban. The hon. Member is right that when I was back in the Department for Education, we introduced non-statutory guidance, and I believe that the time has come to write that guidance into legislation. If he will give me a chance, I will say why.

Even if something should be banned, it is perfectly legitimate to ask: why not just let schools decide? Schools know their pupils better. I have made that argument myself many times over the years on many different things. Both the Labour party and the Conservatives find ourselves in the exceptionalism territory. Labour Members of Parliament say, "Don't tell schools what to do. Leave it up to individual headteachers." Have they read the rest of the Bill? It prescribes what schools must do in the most extraordinary detail. It takes away academy freedoms, specifies the exact length of breakfast, and says, "You may not have more than four items of branded school uniform. For secondary schools, that includes a tie. Primary schools may not have a tie." It includes all manner of detailed specifications, except on this one issue.

To give the mirror image, it is true that we believe, in general, that we should leave things entirely up to schools, who know their children best, but this should be an exception. As that hon. Gentleman was just saying—*[Interruption.]* I was not being rude; I meant the hon. Member for Basingstoke, as opposed to this one, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford. In 2019, we decided not to issue that guidance, but in 2024 we did. It was clear at the time that there was an option to make the guidance statutory, if required.

Since then, the world has kept on changing. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) talked about the continued development, tragically, of mental ill health among children and young people. We had this debate when discussing a private Member's Bill a couple of Fridays ago. Proving causality perfectly is incredibly difficult—we will probably never be able to do it. However, I do not know about colleagues, but I do not meet many people, particularly not teachers, who seriously doubt that there is a major causal link between the two things.

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend, who has detailed experience in the Department, is speaking as eloquently as ever on this topic. Before we move on from the Government Members' interventions, is he, like me, enjoying the slight irony of hearing them argue for consistency, when, on inheritance tax for farmers, the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, winter fuel, national insurance and so many other issues, consistency does not seem to be a priority?

Damian Hinds: As ever, my right hon. Friend makes a compelling point. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I am coming to a close.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): The right hon. Member knows where I stand and my views on this issue. Will he outline what has changed since February 2024, when he said no to a ban on phones in schools, but reserved the right to issue statutory guidance—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I gently suggest to right hon. and hon. Members that we are meant to be debating the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill on Report, and the amendments and new clauses.

Damian Hinds: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker; indeed we are. In fairness to the hon. Lady, there is a connection, but it is important to say that we did not say no to a ban in 2024. We said that we would start with non-statutory guidance, with the option to make that guidance statutory.

Yes, children's usage of mobile phones has continued. People say, "Phones are banned in all schools anyway." That is true, and I doubt there is a school in the whole country that says, "Yeah, it's okay, just whip out your phone in the middle of an English lesson." Everybody has various restrictions. However, if we look at the survey data, we see that there is a bit of a hierarchy; we can listen to Ministers, headteachers, classroom teachers or kids. The further down that list we go, the more we hear people saying, "Phones are about, particularly in breaks and at lunch time." That, to me, is part of the school day; this is not just about lesson time.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): On Friday, I visited Kent college in my constituency, which has recently instituted a ban. Phones are collected in the morning and put into pouches, and at the end of the school day, the children can get them back. The school has found benefits for the collection of lost property, which is attached to the cages that have the phones in them. Is the right hon. Member aware of any cases where a school has instituted a ban, and it has been seen to have negative, rather than positive, outcomes?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Member makes a powerful point very effectively. There will always be arguments about needing exceptions for this case and that, but we can have exceptions, and school headteachers are pretty good at knowing when they need to make an exception to a rule.

It would be helpful to have a national policy in this area. That would not preclude exceptions for children with a special educational need or young carers. Crucially, it would also not preclude children from having a phone as they go to and from school, where the school and the parents want that. Parents often think about that, for safety reasons. There are various ways of dealing with this, such as the pouches that the hon. Member mentioned, or lockers.

I have noticed a shift. A couple of years ago, some people argued against a ban on principle. Now, the only real argument that I hear—I do not say that this is a trivial point—is about the big cost of buying pouches or lockers. If that is what we are arguing about, that is material progress. It is time for us to stop talking about whether, and to start talking about how.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I, through you, wish all Members of the House a very happy St Patrick's day? I rise to speak on new clause 14. What it proposes is not brain surgery, and it is not new or exciting, but it is an essential part of how we approach the enormous problem of children living in temporary accommodation miles away from their home, their home borough, their school and their doctor.

[*Dame Siobhain McDonagh*]

The hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), who spoke for the Opposition, said that he thought we would look back at the issue of mobile phones in schools and think, "What were we thinking to allow that to happen?". We should already be thinking, "How did we come to have tens of thousands of children in temporary accommodation, which is almost exclusively in a terrible state of repair, miles away from anybody who is watching them?"

Many of the families we are talking about are not just homeless, but are the most vulnerable in our community. They include children with special needs, and children and families who experience great difficulty in their day-to-day lives. There are those who have disrupted families, those who move frequently, and those who just find things difficult. As of right now, there are 164,040 children living in temporary accommodation. On average, 54 children from homeless families are placed in temporary accommodation every day.

In London, the area that I understand best, one in every 21 children is living in temporary accommodation—that is at least one in every school class. In schools in central London, 50% or 60% of children could be living in temporary accommodation. That was certainly the case for Harris Peckham. Last year, an article in *The Sunday Times* identified it as having 60% of its children in temporary accommodation. That school, like all schools in the Harris Federation, tries to do its best for those large numbers. It has set up a drop-in centre in the school, to allow parents to take their children to school, spend the day in school, and go home with their children in the evening.

We constituency MPs probably understand a lot more clearly than most in our communities the impact of what is going on. In Merton, we have just under 700 families in temporary accommodation. That is probably the lowest number in London, but to me it is an extraordinary number that I worry about every day, every night, and at every advice surgery. Some 80% of those families are placed outside the borough. When they are placed somewhere outside the borough, the council is required to place only two notifications: one with the receiving borough and one with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—it does not have to inform the schools or the GP—and nothing happens, so all these boroughs are taking on families that they know nothing of.

Families often do not want their GP to know that they have moved, because they worry about being removed from their list. They worry that that would mean their children being removed from the children and adolescent mental health services list, which we know can be as long as 12 months, being removed from operation lists at local general hospitals, and generally being displaced along with being misplaced in accommodation. This also means—we probably consider this far less—that the health visitor does not know that a family with young children has moved into the area.

I have a great friend, Debbie Fawcett, a Queen's nurse who is the homelessness health visitor to families in Merton. Part of her job is to regularly go to hostels, converted warehouses and converted office blocks in and around my constituency to find out where these children are. She gets no notifications; she simply walks round the blocks and gets the families she already

knows to be her spies, in order to find out if families are moving in. She has been known to run into flats after delivery drivers to see if she could find a baby. These families are often placed in accommodation that is so small that the children cannot learn to walk. They are displaced from the support of grandparents, churches and other community groups. They desperately need Debbie's help, but she does not know they are there.

7 pm

Many schools, as we all know, provide support far beyond education. They provide help with food, with uniforms and with guidance to families in difficult times. At the moment, those schools do not know that those families are in temporary accommodation. There is also shame attached to being homeless and in temporary accommodation, so parents often do not want to tell the school. They often struggle heroically to get their children to school. I know of many families who bring their children from Luton into Mitcham and Morden to keep the continuity in their schooling. They fear that if they tell the school, the school will remove them from their list.

One of the most shocking things that happens is that children with very high needs who receive special school transport, to get to a special school that supports children with a great many difficulties, have their transport cancelled when they are moved out of the borough. Their families then have to negotiate with a council they do not know to see if they can get that transport back. There has to be a better way. There has to be better notification. That will not sort the problem of temporary accommodation, but it could just protect those families, protect councils and protect us against a huge and terrible thing happening.

In this Bill we rightly talk at length about children who are home-schooled, but let me say that living in temporary accommodation must be at least as risky as being home-schooled. Through the brilliant work of Dr Laura Neilson, a GP in Oldham, we know the terrible fact that 74 children died in temporary accommodation over five years, where the coroner said that temporary accommodation was a major factor. We also know that 58 of those 74 children were under the age of one and died from sudden death syndrome, probably because they did not even have a cot of their own. There are far more children who die while living in temporary accommodation, but we cannot make that causal link that it was the main reason for their deaths. We know that 80 children in one year, or 3% of the total number of children who died that year, were living in temporary accommodation. How is it that we are not telling GPs and schools that this is happening to the families and the children under their care? I do not believe it is beyond the wit of the Government to be able to rectify this.

All councils should be sending notices to receiving boroughs—I am not claiming for a single second that all councils do this; I know they do not and that is a problem in itself—and all councils do, because the money depends on it, send notifications to the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We are talking about a really expensive service here. In London we spend £4 million every day putting these families in temporary accommodation. I am sure most Members who have seen this accommodation will know that it is a terrible waste of taxpayers' money, but we

need to ensure that it is spent properly and safely, and that people know where the families are living and that they get whatever support they can.

I know that the Government feel unable to accept the amendment at this time, but I hope they understand the spirit in which it is laid down and the importance that the all-party parliamentary group for households in temporary accommodation attaches to these recording factors. I am pleased that the Minister has agreed that she and the other Departments will look at this in a timely fashion, because we cannot wait. Something terrible may well happen, and I do not want to feel that it is on my conscience, or any of our consciences, that we could have done something to prevent it from happening. I fully appreciate that the only way this problem will really be sorted is by building more houses, but one important small step is to ensure that the schools attended by homeless children know that those children are in temporary accommodation, and that their GPs and their health visitors also know.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I rise to speak in support of amendment 172, tabled by my party, and then I will say a few words to lend cross-party support to new clauses 8 and 3.

I truly welcome the important steps taken in the Bill to strengthen the systems intended to keep children safe, yet the Bill fails to embed meaningful consideration of children's views. This means that critical decisions may be made at local and regional levels without consideration of the views and experiences of the children they affect. It is concerning that the proposed requirement in the Bill is to seek the views of the child only where the local authority thinks that is appropriate. The NSPCC points out that this is weaker than the existing Children Act 1989 requirements to ascertain and give due weight to the wishes and feelings of the child, in line with their age and maturity. In short, while there are so many good things in the Bill, it inexplicably falls short of that gold standard. Our amendment 172 seeks to address that.

Amendment 172 would ensure that local authorities offering and facilitating family group decision making must consistently seek to ascertain the child's views and to properly support them to engage, where this is in their best interests. Importantly, the amendment also seeks to ensure that, where attendance at a family group decision making meeting may not be in the child's interests—which must of course include giving due weight to their wishes and feelings and identifying safeguarding concerns—that is not the end of the story, because even if the child is not in attendance, the amendment requires the local authority to ensure that the child's views are sought and, where relevant, independently represented. This could be, for example, through an independent advocate, recognising the incredible work they do to support even the youngest children to be heard and to participate where possible. So I hope the Minister will look seriously at that amendment.

New clause 8 was tabled by the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato). I thank her for her years of work on this issue, and I want to reiterate that the Green party supports putting into law equal protection for children. The physical assault of children is never acceptable, and we need to follow Scotland and Wales by urgently updating our law. The Children's Commissioner, the NSPCC, the Royal College of Paediatrics and

Child Health, and many others have been crystal clear, not least in the wake of the horrifying case of Sara Sharif, that children should be equally protected from assault.

The Children's Commissioner makes the important point that equal protection from physical assault is not a so-called smacking ban. That term trivialises this issue and is misleading about the types of behaviour that would come under scrutiny through such legislation, wrongly implying the creation of a new offence. Equal protection would instead remove the defence currently available to parents and carers who have been charged with assault, which by their nature are some of the most serious cases of child maltreatment.

I will also say a few words in support of new clause 3, tabled by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who chairs the Education Committee. There is strong cross-party support for a requirement for the Secretary of State to consult on and publish a draft national care offer, to set minimum standards for local care offers. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) tabled a similar amendment in Committee—she is unfortunately unable to speak in today's debate as she is on Environmental Audit Committee business.

All local authorities, as we have heard, have to produce a local offer for care leavers, but the support they get is a postcode lottery. A great national offer would help support independent living into adulthood for all care leavers. Enhancing and improving support for all care leavers would involve an ambitious cross-Government programme of work, but it would mean that for the first time there could be a clear list of statutory entitlements that care leavers could access. Such entitlements should mirror the support that many young people receive from their parents, including support with rent deposits or free transport. With the number of children in care at a record high, we simply must do more to support those leaving care. There is both a financial and moral case for the Government to do that.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I rise to comment on Government new clauses 18 to 22 and new clause 3. I very much welcome the new corporate parenting duties and the value they add to the Bill and to the activities of authorities up and down the country. The new clauses add value because this Bill is about boosting standards in schools and creating opportunities. It is about children getting the best start in life and ensuring that there are clear protections for young people. Crucially, it is about stopping children and young people from falling through the cracks in the system.

In addition to the unique identifier that this debate has considered to join up services to help children and young people; the overhaul of children's social care, which is long overdue, starting by capping excess profits, ensuring collaboration and ensuring that every pound counts towards getting the best for children; and the measures to support kinship carers and care leavers elsewhere in the Bill, all of which are crucial, it is also crucial to strengthen what children in care can expect authorities to do to secure good outcomes for them.

I previously led children's services as a cabinet member in Southampton. That was during a time when we needed to make huge strides forward to improve how we supported children and young people. I know from that experience what rests on the services provided: they make or break

[Darren Paffey]

opportunities for the young people looking to us for care. It is welcome that the Bill now includes accommodation in the local offer, which makes good on a commitment to guarantee care leavers a place to live. New clause 18 sets out the wider responsibilities for authorities. The reality is that the barriers faced by care-experienced young people are greater than those faced by most of their peers, and good outcomes will likely be far harder for them to secure.

It is right that authorities do more in good, sensible collaboration, but what does that look like? It is couched in unfortunate language, in a sense: “parenting” is a word that pretty much everyone can relate to, and we understand “corporate”, but not in this context. We know within the sector what corporate parenting means, but it potentially draws away from how we should be thinking about it in terms of a family, rather than an institution, public service or organisation with thresholds and goals. That means a family gives love and attention to those in its care. It ensures a warm, safe place to live, echoing the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). It is about getting them in front of a doctor or dentist precisely when they need it.

We know that the support does not stop when kids leave home. As a father of teenagers and a small one, I have not yet faced the moment when they leave home, but I know that if and when they eventually leave, I will not suddenly say, “You’re someone else’s issue now”. Therefore, corporate parents cannot and must not do the same. When kids leave home, parents continue to help them out. If, for example, that family has a family business, they give first dibs on a job or training opportunity to their child. That is what councils do as corporate parents. They act as guarantors and can help with university or apprenticeship costs. In short, they fight for those young people and act as one family. They do not pass the buck and say, “It’s not my problem,” and that is what corporate parenting must be about across all Government organisations and other authorities.

7.15 pm

Having worked closely with young people in care, I know that far too many of them feel that they have been let down by systems that are there to protect them—they often fall through the cracks. While new clause 18 is not a magic wand, it is another important step in the right direction. It says that this Government get it, that we understand what care-experienced young people face. For too many of them, that looks like constantly moving from house to house, from placement to placement. It looks like school changes, often a lack of housing—or certainly a lack of appropriate housing—when leaving care, and different parts of the system not talking to each other. This addition to the Bill would act to change that experience for the better and make that journey through care into adulthood as supported as possible. I ask Ministers to comment on how they see best practice on corporate parenting being promoted in the statutory guidance. I look forward to more joined-up, child-focused work across all agencies as a result of this addition to the Bill.

Finally, I will comment on new clause 3 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). This issue came up in Committee. I spoke

in support of the principle of a national care leaver offer. I am pleased to see this proposal. In Committee, I accepted and supported the intentions of the Minister to drive forward strong, cross-departmental collaboration to support care-experienced young people. I know that Ministers have listened and introduced provisions on corporate parenting. You live and learn in this place, so I figure that there is no harm in pressing Ministers again to perhaps do the same on the national care leaver offer.

Whatever shape the Bill goes forward in, there is enough in it to make it a real moment of progress and pride when we vote for Third Reading. I call on hon. Members across the House to do that.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): On Second Reading, I spoke about the role of supported lodgings, but I also spoke about the impact on well-meaning and responsible parents who, for a variety of reasons, choose to home-educate their children and who will be disproportionately impacted by the legislation. I realise that this issue is in part 2 of the Bill and will be debated tomorrow, but I am on a Public Bill Committee tomorrow, so I want to get on the record my support for amendments 193 to 198, tabled by the Conservative Education team, which all seek to tackle the hammer blow that the Bill applies to home-educating families. However, today I must stick to part 1—I appreciate that I was speaking slightly off topic.

Clauses 7, 8 and 9 seek to further support those who have been in the care system by providing a statutory basis for their support to the age of 25. Like the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), as a former member of a corporate parenting panel as a councillor, over the years I have met many young people who are looking for support and security as they start their transition to adulthood. I should at this point declare an interest as a member of Plymouth city council. I want to share a recent innovation by the council. We have a great history of cross-party working as a corporate parenting panel, but the council has just instituted paying for prescriptions and providing additional housing support for over 18s. The particularly clever point is that it charges the cost of the prescriptions back to the integrated care board, so that is a good illustration of what is going on out there and is the sort of thing we could build on.

Indeed, when I was a member of a corporate parenting panel, I felt strongly that a good way to get national recognition and national provision, as the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen said, would be to pursue something like a care leavers covenant—a bit like the veterans covenant. This is not over the top. We have touched the edges of the expectations around jobs, housing and homelessness, and the implication and understanding of the veterans covenant could be extended to care leavers.

As I said, I have met many care leavers who are looking for that support. As a result, I have a particular interest in the transition to adulthood. We can stand here and talk about young people from birth to 25, but something about the transition to adulthood has always resonated with me. It is particularly important that I am able to speak about that again today.

Specifically, I welcome the Government’s confirmation in Committee that supported lodgings will be included in the Bill’s statutory guidance as a form of accommodation

to be considered by local authorities. Having highlighted the value of supported lodgings to young people on Second Reading, and having seen the evidence that Home for Good and Safe Families provided in Committee, I remain convinced that they are a valuable option for young people and should be used more.

Furthermore, I know the Fostering Network is keen to see the Bill proceed and more explicitly provide for staying put, not just staying close, thereby extending the opportunity for young people to remain with their foster carers at the age of 18. Ultimately, that would be one less move they need to make if they do not have a secure home after that age. However, I am not sure that is in the final Bill—it remains to be seen. I suppose the House of Lords could make an amendment, but we will have to see where we end up.

It is disappointing that amendment 184, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), does not have Government support. It would have ensured that staying close support takes account of the views of young people, requiring local authorities to take account of the wishes of the relevant young person when providing staying close support to allow for continuous improvement. It would also have introduced a requirement to keep a record of those wishes to ensure that the young person's views and desires are protected from the loss of knowledge when personnel change.

We have already heard about many inconsistencies in the Bill, and this feels like another. We are keen for young people to have a number that follows them all the way through school, but we are not keen to ensure that their records and their wishes as care-experienced young people are followed through and protected.

As I am sure many Members will agree, it is all well and good for us to stand here today and say that supported lodgings should be promoted, but as someone who has not been in the care system, I can speak only from the experience of receiving my family's continuing support after the age of 18. However, I also had a choice at that stage, and it is so important that, as corporate parents, we ensure such choice continues.

My life is effectively based on my choices, which meant going away to university, but I also got to come home every holiday. Although I may have lost my bedroom to my younger brother, I still had a home right through until I moved to London for my first job—I even moved back again in my early 30s. I had the support of a home, which we are saying we should provide for those who are care-experienced.

It is essential that we recognise the value of choice for those care-experienced young people who do not have the choices we may have. If we can at least listen to them and ensure that their views and preferences are carried through the system, putting them in the driving seat, it would be beneficial to their transition to adulthood.

Clause 7 strengthens the provision of advice and support for young people aged 18 to 25 who have been in the care system. While I welcome the extension to the expectation of who local authorities support and how, it feels like a limited list—this seems like a missed opportunity.

Bear with me, Madam Deputy Speaker, because this is a reasonably long story that does not directly relate to these amendments until the end, but I think it is important

to put it on the record. On Friday, a 33-year-old man attended my surgery to share his experience as someone who had been placed in care and then adopted. Unfortunately, this Bill does not cover his experiences.

He was sexually abused as a baby by both his parents, and he was eventually removed from home—with hindsight, he was also neglected. The impact of his life story means that he has experienced homelessness, prison on more than one occasion, and ongoing mental health issues related to the trauma he experienced. These issues extended into his adoptive life with a new mother who became an alcoholic and was physically abusive towards him.

Now a young man, despite the odds stacked against him, he has settled down, has three children and is still with their mother, although he says that is tough at times. He is a facilitator for Andy's Man Club in my constituency, and he has set up a support group and a podcast to help others like him. On the one hand, he is a success.

However, he highlighted an issue that I think is important to raise today. He clearly articulated to me how he feels he was let down by social services when he asked to see his care records. This is where I believe his story links to the Bill. Regardless of the fact that he discovered there were two sets of records—his social services files and his adoption records—he received no support when he made a request to access them. He was simply given the files by Devon county council, and that was that.

Having read two of the five files he was given, which he found to be in a highly disorganised state, he had to stop because of their content's significant adverse effect on him. His case highlights the need for provisions like clause 7 to go further on the staying close offer, by prompting a conversation about how we support those who have, through no fault of their own, experienced some of the most horrific early childhood experiences.

How can we better support previously looked-after adults as they continue their journey through life? I appreciate that we cannot necessarily provide this support forever, but perhaps the only thing we need to do when they access their social services records, as we do not know at what point in their life they will do so, is ensure that they receive a meeting with someone trained to explain what those records mean. That is what young adults like my constituent are requesting.

My constituent's records contained distressing details, but they also included lots of technical language that he did not understand because he is not a social worker. He may be over 25 now, but I do not believe his experiences are age-related. I call on the Minister to ensure that guidance on the sharing of care records is explored as we finalise clause 7. This simple proposal could make an extraordinary difference.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point about the importance of accessing coherent and organised records. However, does she agree that one of the reasons for those records being disorganised is the churn of social workers, and one of the causes of that churn is our care system's extensive reliance on the excessive profiteering of external companies? This Bill provides for retention of care workers by ruling out excessive profiteering. Does she welcome that?

Rebecca Smith: I will reserve my judgment, because I am not convinced that stripping out excessive profiteering will actually help the system. Ultimately, what we need is the provision of service. If people just leave the sector altogether, we will not have social workers anyway. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point, but I understand the link to what I was saying.

I welcome how far we have come in recent years on extending support in areas such as housing and provision up to the age of 25, but I believe the Bill is creating another cliff edge. What more can be done to enable those affected in adulthood by the emotional and mental impact of their life in care to access trained support? That might be something we need to consider further.

Slightly changing tack, and talking of missed opportunities and perhaps a lack of ambition, I fail to see why the Government cannot support safeguarding young people in schools by banning mobile phones in the classroom. I feel there is another inconsistency here, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) mentioned. Clause 24 limits the use of branded school uniforms to reduce peer pressure and costs. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), who is no longer in his place, made that argument while, at the same time, arguing for ensuring that young people can take their smartphone and their tablet into school. Talk about something that creates peer pressure and highlights the disparities between those who can afford it and those who cannot. I simply believe the Government do not want to support the amendment because it was tabled by Conservative Front Benchers. We need to move away from party politics and seriously consider what is best for young people. We should at least be consistent. Let us make sure that the legislation we are creating does not do one thing on the one hand and something completely different on the other.

New clause 36 is not about banning young people from using phones—I do not believe that is the state's role; it is for parents to choose if and when their children can use a phone. Instead, it is about recognising the impact that the presence of phones can have before, during and immediately after the school day. There are some parents who recognise that. There are those who limit what their children can access on their smartphones and those who are making the most of what some might refer to as a brick phone—I do not know whether any of us here this afternoon ever had one of those—or, as it is known today, a dumb phone or non-smartphone.

7.30 pm

Some parents are now choosing to go back in time by giving their children really simple phones, which still enable them to call on the way home or, should they be young carers, to have a phone in school with them. That removes all the peer pressure and, to be perfectly frank, the difficulty that a lot of parents face in having to say no to all the demands. I do not have children, but I have friends who do, and they are in that difficult 13 to 14-year-old age group. The biggest fights they have are over what their children can access on their phones. If we made having a smartphone less appealing in the first place, we would be doing a huge amount to help parents to do their difficult job in these modern times. I do not believe our new clause would hinder anything; instead, it would protect children in school and promote focus

and attention. As I have said, it would also limit the peer pressure on children and their parents for a fully smartphone world.

Finally, the Government have also failed to grasp the role that the Bill could have played in strengthening safeguards and support for families experiencing domestic abuse. Cross party, we have come a long way in how we deal with domestic abuse cases in this country, and the legislation has been massively progressive over the last few years. I particularly welcome how the previous Government worked to recognise children as victims in their own right in domestic abuse cases. However, the safeguarding provisions in the Bill could have gone further and been used as an opportunity to do more to provide explicitly for children who experience male violence.

We know that children are either victims themselves or are severely impacted by witnessing violence or coercion in the home. I have mentioned this before, but groups working to tackle violence against women and girls and sexual violence in my home city of Plymouth are looking to move the language we use away from “violence against women and girls” and towards “violence against women and children”, specifically to recognise that threat and the need to do more in looking after children. Perhaps this Bill could have provided an opportunity to do that; however, we will have to leave that for another day.

In conclusion, this is the “most underwhelming and unambitious bill for schools in history”—not my words, but those of Caroline, a teacher of 20 years' experience. As the debate moves to part 2 of the Bill tomorrow, I hope there may be a glimpse of something brighter. However, probably pretty much like her, I remain unconvinced.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I rise to speak to new clauses 43 to 47, standing in my name and those of my hon. Friends. New clause 43 is yet another attempt to put my Healthy Start Bill into law. When I first introduced that Bill, 200,000 eligible pregnant women, babies and infants were missing out on Healthy Start vouchers. That is approximately £58 million going unclaimed from a scheme that is already budgeted for. These vouchers provide financial assistance in the form of a prepaid card to all under-18s who are pregnant, families with babies and children under the age of five, and pregnant women claiming certain benefits. This is to help with the ever-increasing cost of fruit and vegetables, milk formula and vitamins.

Just last year, the child of the north all-party parliamentary group, which I chair, heard evidence that children in the north are more likely to die before reaching their first birthday than those anywhere else in the country. It has been widely reported for some time that, in desperation, parents have resorted to the theft of baby milk and formula or to having to water it down, which is not surprising considering that formula prices are at historically high levels. As it stands, there is a lack of awareness about the scheme, and the application routes are overly complex and varied. The reason so many are missing out on vouchers is that the system operates on an opt-in, not an opt-out model. Auto-enrolment for all those eligible would ensure maximum take-up of this essential nutritional safety net. The Healthy

Start scheme was introduced by a Labour Government. The current problems with it are the fault of the last Government's management of the scheme. It is in this Government's gift to solve those problems.

New clause 44 relates to improving sibling contact for children in care. The Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to allow a looked-after child reasonable contact with their parents, but there is no parity of provision for a looked-after child's contact with their siblings or half-siblings. If siblings cannot be placed together, they should have exactly the same rights to contact defined in primary legislation as they do with their parents. The relationships that adults deem to be the most important for children in care are not the same as those that are most important to the children themselves. The Government's own research acknowledges that maintaining contact with siblings is reported by children to be one of their highest priorities. Having that relationship ripped away causes them anguish on many levels.

Although the Department does not collect statistics on siblings' contact levels, work by the Family Rights Group has shown that half of all sibling groups in local authority care are split up. Many of those siblings come from neglectful and abusive backgrounds. They state themselves that the only constant, positive, reassuring and enduring relationship is the one they have with their siblings. That is especially the case if they have been abused by their parents. Therefore, it cannot be right that our primary legislation gives more weight to a child's contact with those who have or may have caused them significant harm than it gives to contact with their siblings, who are totally blameless.

Guidance on sibling contact does exist, but it is sufficiently opaque to be ignored, and it regularly is. We all know in this House that guidance is no substitute for a clear duty. I first raised the issue in 2016. Every Minister who followed—there were a lot of them—promised that the regulations would be amended. To date, they have not been amended; to date, children in care do not have contact with their siblings prioritised. This is robbing them of what they cite as their most important and enduring relationship.

New clause 45 seeks to rectify a clear inconsistency in the law, whereby children in stable foster placements can stay with their foster families until the age of 21, under the terms of the Staying Put arrangements, but similar provisions do not exist for children in residential care. We should not be presiding over a two-tier system, where those in foster care receive more comprehensive support from the state than those in residential care. The Minister knows that children in residential care often have complex needs and require an immense amount of support. That need for support continues when they leave care. One of the factors known to give them a better chance in life is suitable and stable accommodation. Staying close is not enough. Local authorities have a duty to ensure significant accommodation for looked-after children in their area. New clause 45 would introduce a similar duty to ensure sufficient accommodation for all care leavers up to the age of 21, not just those in foster care.

I turn to new clauses 46 and 47. Just as children leaving residential care are treated differently from their peers in foster care, children aged 16 to 17 in residential care are also treated very differently from their younger peers. In 2021, the previous Government introduced

provisions through statutory instruments to prohibit unregulated accommodation for children in care aged 15 or under, but not for those aged 16 or 17. Later, in 2023, they introduced what they deemed appropriate standards for supported accommodation for children in care and care leavers. These statutory instruments legitimised and encouraged the increasingly shameful practice of placing children in unregulated, unsafe hostels, bed and breakfasts, shared homes and caravan parks. Some children were even placed in tents on campsites.

All those settings have left them without any support, vulnerable to criminal abusers, drug gangs and sexual exploitation. The changes that followed in 2023 to supported accommodation for children aged 16 and 17 included no requirement to provide these children in care with any care at all, no requirement for qualified staff or managers to be present in their accommodation, and no requirement for independent monthly monitoring of that accommodation. Ofsted is only required, on a three-yearly cycle, to look at a small proportion of these accommodations. They also did not prohibit corporal punishment, as is the case in children's residential homes, and these changes still allowed putting children into care in caravans, barges and boats or accommodation with vulnerable adults and prison leavers.

As of March 2024, the latest statistics that I have are that up to 50%—nearly 900,000—of 16 and 17-year-olds in care were living in this careless, bleak accommodation. I have said before in this House that 50 children in unregulated accommodation have died, that we know of, the details of which are rightly not fully known or in the public domain, but the children themselves I have spoken to have said they are literally surviving. They are not living, they are not being allowed to prepare for adulthood, they are not in education, and they are not in employment. They are literally surviving hour by hour.

I remain deeply saddened that we did not object to these changes at the time, despite my efforts. Our 16 and 17-year-olds in care have been abandoned for far too long. My new clauses 46 and 47 will give them the support and care that they so desperately need and desperately want—the support and care that the previous Government ripped away from them.

While I have been in this place long enough to know that the Minister is not going to accept all of my new clauses today, I remain ever confident and hopeful that he will work with me and consider these new clauses deeply and carefully as the Bill progresses to the other place and eventually returns back to this Chamber.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): As the son of a lady from Limerick, may I offer my mum, my wider family and everybody in the House a happy St Patrick's Day?

I rise to speak in support of two new clauses. New clause 13 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) requests a review of adoption support services offered by local authorities and requires the Government within 12 months of passing the Act to conduct a review of the adequacy and effectiveness of those services. This will give those providing adoption services and those receiving them the comfort to know that they are indeed adequate and hopefully increase the confidence in adoption services and increase the take-up of those offering their homes to children in need.

[Mr Lee Dillon]

On the second amendment I wish to speak to, I declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on households in temporary accommodation. New clause 14 tabled by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) has the support of 35 colleagues from both the Labour and Liberal Democrats Benches. It requires local authorities to notify the child's school and registered GP practice of a household's homelessness status.

In this debate, we heard from the hon. Member about the impact of living in temporary accommodation, but this new clause will help in detecting any learning or health outcome issues as a result of living in temporary accommodation—accommodation that the Chair of our Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee has mentioned in this place before as being no longer, sadly, that temporary. It is to be hoped, too, that it will help in learning the lessons of the 74 children who have died in temporary accommodation and that being classed as a contributory factor to their deaths. I commend both these new clauses to the House.

7.45 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As a former teacher, I know at first hand the importance of safeguarding and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background or circumstances. That is why I wholeheartedly welcome and want to talk about new clauses 18 to 22, focusing on corporate parenting. They represent a vital step in protecting vulnerable children and enhancing their overall wellbeing.

These amendments shift the responsibility for the welfare of children, particularly those in care or at risk, from being solely a single-agency duty to a much-needed collective duty on local authorities, social services, healthcare providers and educational agencies. My hon. Friends the Members for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), and for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), eloquently spoke about that, giving examples from roles that they held before coming to this place. The idea of corporate parenting is that services and agencies must come together to act in the best interests of children, much as a parent would. They are tasked with ensuring that children receive the care, protection and opportunities that they need to grow, thrive and reach their full potential.

As a teacher, I saw at first hand how crucial it is for agencies to work together. A child's welfare needs are not confined to those that arise in the classroom; we need to provide them with a holistic support system that addresses their physical, emotional and psychological needs. These new clauses will strengthen the Bill and create an integrated approach in which services collaborate and share vital information to support children. That will reduce duplication of work, minimise silo working, and ensure that children are not ignored.

When it comes to accessing mental health services, education, housing and medical care, no child should fall through the cracks. Every child deserves to have their needs met, and this Bill will ensure that all agencies involved are jointly responsible for making that happen. This landmark reform to child safeguarding means no more empty words about lessons to be learned. Instead, we have real action, and a Government who are taking responsibility.

The need for these changes is clear. We have seen far too often the tragic consequences of systems failing to collaborate or act quickly enough. Cases such as that of Victoria Climbié, a young girl who suffered horrifically at the hands of her guardians, despite being in contact with multiple child protection agencies, highlight the devastating outcomes of such failures. Similarly, the case of Baby P, or Peter Connelly, is a heart-wrenching reminder that even children who are known to authorities can fall victim to abuse when systems do not work as they should. The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) spoke about his constituent Sara Sharif. Sadly, these are just a few of the tragedies that should never have happened.

While we cannot change the past, we can and must ensure that we never allow such failures to happen again. New clauses 18 to 22 aim to prevent more children from being let down by the system. By making local authorities and agencies more accountable, the Bill ensures that there is a shared responsibility for every child. It is about creating a proactive, rather than reactive, system of child protection. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen, I would welcome examples of good practice in corporate care, and for the Government to explore this issue.

We all know that children who have the support that they need are more likely to succeed. I have witnessed small interventions, whether from a teacher, a social worker or a healthcare professional, making a world of difference to a child's life. Joining up these sometimes small but often life-changing interventions can only enhance them. The new clauses are about ensuring that such interventions are not isolated, but are part of a larger picture, so that there are co-ordinated efforts to meet the needs of every child, especially the most vulnerable. I thank all Members for their passionate and informed speeches today, particularly those from Labour Members. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) said, we see the concerns and plight of the children in our constituencies at first hand.

In conclusion, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill marks a significant shift in how we safeguard children. The holistic, co-ordinated approach outlined in the Bill, particularly in clauses 18 to 23, offers the best chance in years to create a safer and more supportive environment for our children. Now is our opportunity to build a system in which every child is truly protected and given the support that they deserve. A vote against the Bill is a vote against the safety of our children, their childhood and their future. It would mean more words and inaction, and would shamefully allow children to continue to slip through the cracks and be let down. I urge all hon. Members to use their vote to pass this landmark reform and safeguard all children, so that they not only survive but thrive.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I rise to speak in favour of new clause 35 and amendment 174, both in my name, as well as the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson).

The Corporate Parenting Forum was one of the more enjoyable committees I was on when I was a local councillor. I agree with the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) that the forum has quite a cold

name, given all the warm work that it does. It shows the dedication of social workers, the compassion of foster carers and adoptive parents, and the resilience and character of the children. However, anyone involved in that forum would also have seen that the hard work of those involved was often undermined by a system that held people back from caring to the best of their ability.

I am pleased that the Bill will make significant progress in that regard. However, there are areas where it could go further, and I intend to speak about a couple of them. One area of particular interest to me is the so-called care cliff edge. Those leaving the care system at 18 are forced to grow up so much faster than their peers. I have raised the issue on the Floor of the House before—in particular the age differential for universal credit. That impacts young care leavers far more than any other group.

The Bill seeks to lessen the care cliff edge. The “staying close” support requirements are of particular interest to me, as is strengthening the support provided up to the age of 25. However, there is an anomaly on housing. I understand that the Government may accept that care leavers should not be regarded as becoming homeless intentionally, but my new clause 35 would go a step further and extend priority need status under the homelessness legislation to all care leavers up to the age of 25, regardless of all assessed vulnerabilities. The Bill provides that status to young care leavers aged 18 to 20, but that is out of line with the rest of the support available to young care leavers. Given all we know about the vulnerabilities of care leavers, which have been spoken about in the Chamber today, we should not put them in a position where they have to prove their vulnerability at that crucial crisis point.

Last Friday, I was at a homeless shelter in my constituency. I met a young carer who had spent eight months in a tent prior to arriving at the shelter. He told me the story of how that happened. He had been in supported accommodation before the age of 18, but that home shut down just as he reached the age of 18, so his transition plan was completely undermined in a moment. He bounced about from place to place for the following few years. He has now reached the crucial age of 25, but he has not received the support he needed in the last few years. New clause 35 could help rescue people like him in the future.

My other area of interest is kinship care. I must admit that I had not heard of kinship care until a few years ago, but I grew up in kinship care. I was the eldest of three boys. My mum had me at 19, and times got pretty tough as a teenager. Things boiled over, and eventually the relationship with my parents broke down. I left home and I never went back. As cocky as I was at 14 or 15 years old, I could not have lived on my own, but luckily my grandparents stepped up to take me on. My Nan and Pops, as I knew them, helped pick up the pieces and put me back on the straight and narrow. I went from being a boy who had started to fall behind in school and drink a bit down the park, to slowly taking my education more seriously and getting my act together.

If it had not been for my grandparents, I am pretty sure that I would not be sitting on these green Benches today. It was not easy for them, though: they were on a state pension, lived in a council house and did not have a lot to give, but what they did have to give was love, guidance and support. Crucially, that was accepted

readily by me because they already had my trust and respect, and they had authority over me because they were my grandparents. That is the real power of keeping care within the family. There are bonds that are ready made, which is difficult to replicate in any other form of care, and they provide the foundation that children need to thrive. I acknowledge that the Bill is groundbreaking on kinship care, but we have so few opportunities to make change in this area, and I am determined to get it right the very first time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham has tabled amendments on kinship care leave, kinship allowances, extending the pupil premium and prioritising school admission arrangements, all of which I have put my name to. I strongly hope that the Government can find a way to support those amendments. I have also tabled amendment 174, which would ensure that kinship families are actively engaged in shaping and forming the local authority policies that are outlined in the legislation, as families are in developing policies for children with special educational needs. The simple principle is: nothing about us without us. Kinship is a particularly complex form of care. The relationships have history. We need to appreciate the special nuances, and listen to kinship carers when developing policy. We must ensure that the authorities hear the voice of kinship families when designing the system to support them.

I wish that my grandparents had lived long enough to see me take my place on these Benches; they would have been very proud. I hope today that we can begin to say thank you to them, and to the thousands of kinship carers like them, by working towards the strongest possible rights and support.

Neil O'Brien: We have heard some superb speeches this afternoon. The Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), gave a brilliant and thoughtful speech, which ended with her talking about the welfare reforms that the Government will propose tomorrow. Our proposal for a ban on smartphones in schools is part of a general drive to undo the damage that a smartphone childhood is doing to young people's mental health. We see that the driver of ballooning welfare claims, which the Government are really worried about, is young people and their mental health claims. If we want to be serious about prevention, a good place to start is with the amendment that we will vote on in a few moments. I am a glass-half-full kind of person. Although various Labour Members, including the hon. Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), said that they would not be voting for the smartphone ban today, I could sense chinks of light in what they were saying; perhaps they were starting to come round to the idea.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) gave a great speech, in which he mentioned the challenge posed by the large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the system, who now represent a third of all looked-after children in some local authorities. The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) gave a fantastically powerful speech about safeguarding, in which he spoke about the tragic case of Sara Sharif. Although we will have to disagree about the policy, the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) gave a good speech arguing for a smacking ban. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire

[Neil O'Brien]

(Damian Hinds) raised important questions about unique identifiers, on which we all agree in principle, but getting it right will be crucial.

One of the most important speeches was the excellent contribution by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). She talked good sense and gave the Government good advice on part 2 of the Bill, and on schools. She also proposed sensible measures, which we support, to ensure that the flow of information around the system is all that it should be, and that the same kind of information that is provided to the Department is provided to those working on the frontline with children.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) gave bleak but important testimony. Her idea of a covenant was important. There were other good speeches that I have not mentioned, but we ended on an excellent note with the contribution made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean). He made the case for kinship care powerfully; we are in agreement on that, and I hope that we will make progress on the issue as the Bill goes to the other place. It was a wonderful speech, and he was completely correct that his grandparents would have been very proud to see him in this House.

8 pm

Stephen Morgan: I reiterate my thanks to all right hon. and hon. Members across the House for their thoughtful contributions on a range of amendments, of which I aim to cover as many as possible in the time available.

A key pillar of this Government's reform of children's social care is to shift the focus towards early support to help families together and to keep them together where possible. I will therefore begin with the amendments concerning family group decision making, tabled by the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) and the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott).

On amendment 172, we agree that the voice of the child and their views are integral. In some cases, it may not be appropriate for the child to attend meetings. However, during family group decision making, the local authority must seek the views of the child where appropriate. Statutory guidance will also set out that local authorities should ensure that the facilitator has the right skills and training, and I am confident that skilled professionals will engage the child in an appropriate way.

On amendment 176, there is robust evidence that children can be diverted from care when family group decision making is offered at the pre-proceeding stage. We also encourage local authorities to offer this process as early as possible in the child's engagement with children's services, to support a "family first" culture.

Turning to amendment 179, if a looked-after child goes to live with a family member, the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 already require a care plan to be in place, which must include arrangements to meet the child's needs and must be reviewed at least every six months. It would be inappropriate to assume that every child going to live with a family member needs a child protection plan. It is right that we protect all children at risk of harm, but it is also right that we do not intervene in family life where children are safe, loved and well supported.

Turning to new clauses 25 to 28, tabled by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), I emphasise how much the Government value kinship carers; they come forward to care for some of the most vulnerable children in society, who would otherwise likely be in care. We recognise the challenges that many kinship carers face in continuing to access work alongside the pressures of raising a child unexpectedly. In October 2024, the Government announced £400 million of new funding for the kinship financial allowance pilot, which will provide a weekly financial allowance to kinship carers to support them with the additional costs incurred when taking on parental responsibility for their kin. That is the single biggest investment made by Government in kinship care to date, and decisions about future roll-out will be informed by robust evaluation.

New clause 25 would introduce a new right to kinship care leave. Employed kinship carers may already benefit from a number of workplace employment rights designed to support employees in balancing work alongside caring responsibilities—for example, unpaid parental leave for employees who have or expect to have parental responsibility, which we are making a day one right through the Employment Rights Bill. We have also committed to a review of the parental leave system to ensure that it best supports all working families.

On new clauses 27 and 28, we are providing more than £2.9 billion of pupil premium funding. Schools can direct spending where their need is greatest, including to pupils in kinship care, and such children may already be eligible for the highest admissions priority where they are or were looked after by the local authority. New section 22H(7), inserted by clause 5 of the Bill, states:

"A local authority must review and update its kinship local offer from 30 time to time".

That gives opportunities for the views and opinions of children living in kinship care and their carers to be taken into account. I hope that the hon. Members for Twickenham and for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) and the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks are reassured by that.

I turn to new clause 13, tabled by the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden). Adoption is a vital part of our system, and it is important that we ensure that support is of high quality. However, Ofsted already reports regularly on adoption support in local authority children's social care inspection reports, as well as on voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies.

On new clause 3, tabled by the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), increasing support for care leavers is a key Government priority. Clause 8 of the Bill will build on existing provisions by requiring each local authority to publish the arrangements it has in place to support and assist care leavers in their transition to adulthood and independent living. That will include its arrangements for anticipating the future needs of care leavers in respect of accommodation.

I turn to the related new clause 45, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), which would extend staying-put arrangements. This new clause is not needed. As part of the Bill, we require each local authority to provide eligible care leavers with staying-close support where their welfare requires it. That means that all eligible young people who leave residential care can be supported to find and keep suitable accommodation into adulthood.

I turn to amendment 184. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) for raising the important principle of local authorities listening and responding to the wishes and feelings of eligible care leavers. As set out in Committee, when assessing and providing staying-close support, the local authority will be expected to have due regard to the accompanying duties regarding the creation and review of a young person's pathway plan. The views of young people are expected to be considered as part of that.

I turn to new clause 47, which was also tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, and amendments 188 and 189, tabled by the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the quality of care in and oversight of children's homes, and I welcome the support of the Opposition for the position—implicit in their amendment—that action needs to be taken to better equip Ofsted to deal with poor practice across children's homes. However, we do not believe that the new clause or these amendments are required. Introducing a full inspection at provider group level would not be appropriate or a well-targeted way to use Ofsted resource. Clause 12 is deliberately designed in a way that supplements the existing robust regime for inspection of individual settings, which ensures that Ofsted can take the quickest and most effective action to safeguard vulnerable children.

Amendment 189 would give local authorities the power to issue an improvement plan notice to a children's home for minor concerns or admin breaches following a regulation 44 visit, which would add little value over and above what is already in place under existing regulations. It is also not clear what would constitute a minor concern or what regulatory action could follow; it risks muddying the waters of accountability and responsibility. There are already mandatory national minimum standards through the Supported Accommodation (England) Regulations 2023 and Ofsted registration and inspection requirements for providers accommodating 16 to 19-year-old looked-after children and care leavers.

New clause 14 relates to a notification for when a child is placed into temporary accommodation. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for her significant campaigning on this issue—I know that this morning she met with my ministerial colleagues, who will follow up with her directly. As she said in her contribution, too many children are spending years in temporary accommodation at a point in their lives when they need space to play and develop, as well as nutritious food to thrive, and access to education. Although we do not accept the new clause, I understand the rationale behind it and commit to continuing to work with my hon. Friend on the matter.

I turn to children placed in secure accommodation. Depriving a child of their liberty must always be a last resort, and it is of paramount importance that any restrictions placed on a child are appropriate and for no longer than absolutely necessary. However, I do not think that amendments 185 to 187 are necessary. A statutory regime already exists when children are being deprived of their liberty under section 25 of the Children Act 1989, and this measure would extend that to relevant accommodation. The Bill gives powers to the Secretary of State to make regulations for relevant accommodation and to set a maximum period beyond which a child may

not be deprived of their liberty without the authorisation of the court. We also intend to bring forward regulations to require local authorities to seek approval from the Secretary of State before depriving of their liberty children who are under the age of 13 and in relevant accommodation.

I turn to new clause 8, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato). Protecting children at risk of abuse is at the heart of this Bill. Regarding the common law defence of reasonable chastisement, we are looking closely at the legal changes made in Wales and Scotland, but we have no plans to legislate at this stage. Wales is in the process of reviewing the impact of changing the law, and will publish its findings by the end of 2025. We want to look at the evidence before taking such a significant legislative step.

I now turn to new clause 4, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. All children must have an assessment of their health when they become looked after. Existing regulations require that that assessment must be completed by a registered medical practitioner, include assessment of emotional and mental health, and be kept under review.

New clause 37, tabled by the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks, is not required. Robust protections are already in place where proceedings have been initiated. Pre-proceedings will almost always be initiated when a local authority has determined that child protection activity is not sufficient to keep a child safe and promote their welfare. The initiation of proceedings will not result in automatic discharge of a child protection plan; such a plan can be discharged only through a decision taken at the child protection conference between multi-agency practitioners who have been working with the child and their family.

One area in which the Government have not wasted any time is taking action against child sexual abuse. New clauses 15 and 50, covering recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, are addressed by the steps that this Government have taken and will take to deliver the change and the justice that victims deserve. In January, the Home Secretary made a statement to the House confirming that the Government will lay out a clear timetable for taking forward the 20 recommendations of the final IICSA report, including establishing a child protection authority.

As the Home Secretary stated, the cross-Government ministerial group is considering the working through of the remaining recommendations, supported by a new victims and survivors panel. The Government will also be implementing all the remaining recommendations of the IICSA's separate stand-alone report on grooming gangs from February 2022. As part of that, we will update key guidance on child sexual exploitation. Second Reading saw political opportunism of the worst kind from the official Opposition, and I would like to take this opportunity at the Dispatch Box to condemn it. The Home Secretary, the Education Secretary and the Minister for combating violence against women and girls all have a track record of standing up against that abuse, and they are acting decisively in Government.

Let me turn now to the new bandwagon that the Conservatives have jumped on, that of mobile phone use in schools, and to new clause 36. Phones have no place in schools. That is what the Education Secretary said last week, and it is as simple as that. Teachers and

[Stephen Morgan]

headteachers have the Government's full backing in ridding our classrooms of the disruption caused by phones, and they already have the means to do so. We will be checking that that is happening, strengthening Government monitoring of implementation of the guidance to ensure that our classrooms are phone-free.

However, I must note—as a number of Members have mentioned tonight—that just a year ago the Conservatives claimed that their action meant mobile phones were prohibited in schools, and that their guidance meant a consistent approach across all schools. That begs the question: what has changed? Not only does the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks seem to have missed the Education Secretary's statements; she has missed the Secretary of State for Science and Technology already announcing the studies that she is asking for. Those studies are being conducted by the University of Cambridge and will report back before the end of the school year. She has even missed the Health Secretary confirming just this month that the chief medical officer will consider the impact of phones and advice for parents.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Morgan: Of course we hear parents' concerns about screen time, but this is a wider issue across the board that is not exclusive to schools. It is an issue on which we are already acting across Government to make sure that parents and teachers are supported in ensuring that children's safety and wellbeing are protected. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I cannot hear the Minister speak, so I assume that nobody else can.

Stephen Morgan: The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) had the opportunity to speak in the debate, but he has chosen to turn up at the very end to make an intervention. It just shows what his interest is in these issues.

We take these matters seriously, because we take children's wellbeing seriously. The clue is in the name—Labour's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. The measures in the Bill to protect children from harm, improve their schools and save their education from causing financial distress to their parents all relate to their wellbeing, and we know that mental health goes hand in hand with wellbeing. I was at this very Dispatch Box just last week to discuss the support we are offering in schools, and we will of course have more time to talk about those issues further. I understand that new clause 29 seeks to be supportive on this matter. The Government recognise the importance of understanding trends in the wellbeing of children and young people; indeed, schools are already encouraged to measure pupil wellbeing.

8.15 pm

Turning to the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks relating to information sharing, as set out in Committee, amendment 182 would create a very broad duty that would be difficult to implement in practice. Additionally, "Working together to safeguard children" already sets out the duties of practitioners to share and act on information received. On amendment 181,

we agree that the documenting of decisions about information sharing is important, and we cover it in our non-statutory guidance on information sharing. We intend to strengthen this by addressing these matters in statutory guidance that relevant persons would be required to have regard to.

Finally, I turn to new clause 10 and amendment 171, and to a topic that has become a priority for Labour Members, who are listening to our constituents who demand change. That topic is support for children with SEND. The last Conservative Education Secretary deemed the system that her party left behind to be "lose, lose, lose", and the current Conservative Deputy Chief Whip, the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), said that the Conservatives "didn't do enough" and that they "should hang our heads in shame".

We agree—the difference is that we are doing something about it. I will be honest: I find it hard to take lectures from Conservative Members on education, knowing the scale of the mess that they left behind and the families they failed with no support, no understanding and no plan to turn things around. When they come to this place and bemoan the change that this Government are driving, I just find it shameful.

Returning to new clause 10 and amendment 171, I appreciate the input of the hon. Member for Twickenham, and note that nothing is off the table when it comes to SEND reform. However, this Government do not want to tinker around the edges of what is frankly a generational challenge. Reform must be wide-ranging, whole-system and expert-led; that is what we plan, and we will set out our plans in due course. I also assure the hon. Member that we are considering the place of profit in special schools. I hope she will agree that it would not be appropriate to extend the profit cap powers to a different sector before we set out a plan to deal with issues in the SEND system. We want to consider the role and function of independent special schools holistically, and we will set out our plans for SEND reform in due course.

In conclusion, through our plan for change, this Government will give children growing up in our country the best start in life. Each day, we are breaking down barriers to opportunity so that background does not determine where you end up in life—so that if you work hard, you can get on. Through its focus on driving high and rising school standards, cutting the cost of sending children to school and—as we have covered today—stopping vulnerable children falling through the cracks, this Bill represents a child-centred Government in action. That kind of Government was sadly lacking for so long, but it is back with Labour.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 18 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 19

CASES IN WHICH DUTY UNDER SECTION
(CORPORATE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES)(1)

DOES NOT APPLY

"(1) The duty under section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*)(1) does not apply in relation to the exercise of—

- (a) any function of the Secretary of State in relation to immigration, asylum or nationality, or

(b) any general customs function of the Secretary of State.

(2) In subsection (1)(b), “general customs function” has the same meaning as in Part 1 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 (see section 1(8) of that Act).

(3) The duty under section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*)(1) does not apply in relation to—

- (a) the exercise of a function in or as regards Scotland to the extent that the function could be conferred by provision that would be within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament if it were contained in an Act of that Parliament (see section 29 of the Scotland Act 1998);
- (b) the exercise of a function in relation to Wales to the extent that the function could be conferred by provision that would be within the legislative competence of Senedd Cymru if it were contained in an Act of the Senedd (see section 108A of the Government of Wales Act 2006);
- (c) the exercise of a function in or as regards Northern Ireland to the extent that the function could be conferred by provision that—
 - (i) would be within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly if it were contained in an Act of the Assembly (see section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998), and
 - (ii) would not, if it were contained in a Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly, result in the Bill requiring the consent of the Secretary of State under section 8 of that Act.” —(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This new clause ensures that the corporate parenting duty under NC18 does not apply in relation to certain functions of the Secretary of State, and limits the application of the duty in relation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 20

CORPORATE PARENTING DUTY: COLLABORATIVE WORKING

“(1) Relevant authorities and local authorities in England must, so far as reasonably practicable, collaborate with each other when performing their corporate parenting duty where they consider that doing so would safeguard or promote the wellbeing of looked-after children or relevant young people.

(2) In subsection (1), “corporate parenting duty” means—

- (a) in the case of a relevant authority, the duty under section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*)(1);
- (b) in the case of a local authority in England, the duty under section 1(1) of the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

(3) Collaboration under subsection (1) may in particular include—

- (a) sharing information;
- (b) providing advice or assistance;
- (c) co-ordinating activities (and seeking to prevent unnecessary duplication).

(4) Subsection (1) is not to be read as—

- (a) requiring or authorising the processing of information if the processing would contravene the data protection legislation (but in determining whether the processing would do so, take the duty under subsection (1) into account);
- (b) requiring or authorising a disclosure of information which is prohibited by any of Parts 1 to 7 or Chapter 1 of Part 9 of the Investigator Powers Act 2016.

(5) In this section—

“local authority in England” has the same meaning as in section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017; “processing” and

“the data protection legislation” have the meaning given by the Data Protection Act 2018 (see section 3(4) and (9) of that Act);

“relevant authority”, “looked-after children” and “relevant young people” have the same meaning as in section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*).

(6) In section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, after subsection (4) insert—

“(5) See also section (*Corporate parenting duty: collaborative working*) of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2025, which requires local authorities in England to collaborate with other bodies in performing their respective corporate parenting duties.” —(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This new clause requires relevant authorities and local authorities in England to collaborate with each other when performing the corporate parenting duty under NC18 (for relevant authorities) and the duty under section 1(1) of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (for local authorities).

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 21

DUTY TO HAVE REGARD TO GUIDANCE

“(1) A relevant authority must have regard to any guidance given by the Secretary of State as to the performance of the duty under section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*)(1).

(2) Guidance for the purposes of this section may in particular include guidance about—

- (a) how the duty under section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*)(1) applies in relation to a particular relevant authority or to relevant authorities of a particular description;
- (b) outcomes which a relevant authority should seek to achieve in performing the duty.

(3) Before giving guidance, the Secretary of State must consult—

- (a) those relevant authorities to which the guidance relates, and
- (b) such other persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(4) In this section, “relevant authority” has the same meaning as in section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*).” —(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This new clause requires relevant authorities to have regard to guidance in relation to the corporate parenting duty under NC18. It also requires the Secretary of State to consult before giving any such guidance.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 22

REPORTS BY SECRETARY OF STATE

“(1) The Secretary of State must, after the end of each relevant three-year period, lay before Parliament a report on how the Secretary of State has performed the duty under section (*Corporate parenting responsibilities*)(1) during that period.

(2) In subsection (1), “relevant three-year period” means—

- (a) the period of three years beginning with the day on which this section comes into force, and
- (b) each subsequent period of three years.” —(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament a report on the Secretary of State's compliance with the corporate parenting duty under NC18.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 36

ACTION TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S WELLBEING IN RELATION TO MOBILE PHONES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

“(1) Within 12 months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must, for the purposes of promoting the wellbeing of children—

- (a) direct the Chief Medical Officers of the United Kingdom (“the UK CMOs”) to prepare and publish advice for parents and carers on the use of smartphones and social media use by children,
- (b) publish a plan for research into the impact of use of social media on children's wellbeing, and
- (c) require all schools in England to have a policy that prohibits the use and carrying of certain devices by pupils during the school day.

(2) Any advice published under subsection (1)(a) must have regard to—

- (a) the paper published on 7 February 2019 entitled “United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers' commentary on 'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews'”, and
- (b) any scientific or other developments since the publication of that paper which appear to the UK CMOs to be relevant.

(3) Any policy implemented under subsection (1)(c)—

- (a) may provide for exemptions from the policy, or for an alternative policy, for sixth form students, in so far as such exemptions or alternative policies do not negatively impact upon the wider policy;
- (b) may provide for exemptions for medical devices;
- (c) is to be implemented as the relevant school leader considers appropriate; and
- (d) may, where implemented by a boarding school or residential school, include appropriate guidance for the use of certain devices during other periods which their pupils are on school premises, subject to such policies safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in accordance with relevant national standards.

(4) For the purposes of this section—

“certain devices” means mobile phones and other devices which provide similar functionality and whose main purpose is not the support of learning or study;

“the Chief Medical Officers of the United Kingdom” means the Chief Medical Officers for—

- (a) England,
- (b) Wales,
- (c) Scotland, and
- (d) Northern Ireland

“the school day” includes all time between the start of the first lesson period and the end of the final lesson period.”—(*Laura Trott.*)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to take action to promote children's wellbeing in relation to mobile phones and social media by commissioning a report from the Chief Medical Officers and requiring schools to ban the use of mobile telephones during the school day.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 159, Noes 317.

Division No. 124]

[8.22 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Andrew, rh Stuart
Amos, Gideon	Aquarone, Steff
Anderson, Lee	Argar, rh Edward
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra</i>)	Babarinde, Josh
	Bacon, Gareth
	Baldwin, Dame Harriett

Barclay, rh Steve	Jarvis, Liz
Bedford, Mr Peter	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Bennett, Alison	Jenrick, rh Robert
Berry, Siân	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Bhatti, Saqib	Jones, Clive
Blackman, Bob	Jopp, Lincoln
Bowie, Andrew	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Brandreth, Aphra	Kohler, Mr Paul
Brewer, Alex	Kruger, Danny
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Lam, Katie
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Cane, Charlotte	Lopez, Julia
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Cartlidge, James	Maguire, Helen
Chadwick, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Will Forster</i>)	Mak, Alan
Chamberlain, Wendy	Malthouse, rh Kit
Chambers, Dr Danny	Martin, Mike
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Mayhew, Jerome
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	McMurdock, James (<i>Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson</i>)
Cocking, Lewis	McVey, rh Esther
Coghlan, Chris	Miller, Calum
Collins, Victoria	Milne, John
Cooper, Daisy	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Moran, Layla
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Morello, Edward
Cross, Harriet	Morgan, Helen
Dance, Adam	Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Will Forster</i>)
Darling, Steve	Morrissey, Joy
Davey, rh Ed	Morton, rh Wendy
Davies, Gareth	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Davies, Mims	Munt, Tessa
Davis, rh David	Murray, Susan
Dean, Bobby	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Dewhurst, Charlie	Norman, rh Jesse
Dillon, Mr Lee	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Dinenge, Dame Caroline	O'Brien, Neil
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Olney, Sarah
Dyke, Sarah	Patel, rh Priti
Evans, Dr Luke	Paul, Rebecca
Farage, Nigel	Perteghella, Manuela
Farron, Tim	Philp, rh Chris
Foord, Richard	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Forster, Mr Will	Pritchard, rh Mark
Fortune, Peter	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra</i>)
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Ramsay, Adrian
Franklin, Zöe	Rankin, Jack
Freeman, George	Reed, David
French, Mr Louie	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Fuller, Richard	Robertson, Joe
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Roome, Ian
Garnier, Mark	Rosindell, Andrew
George, Andrew	Sabine, Anna
Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)	Savage, Dr Roz
Glen, rh John	Shannon, Jim
Glover, Olly	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Goldman, Marie	Simmonds, David
Grant, Helen	Slade, Vikki
Green, Sarah	Smart, Lisa
Griffiths, Alison	Smith, Greg
Harris, Rebecca	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Hayes, rh Sir John	Smith, Rebecca
Hinds, rh Damian	Sollom, Ian
Hoare, Simon	Spencer, Dr Ben
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Stafford, Gregory
Hollinrake, Kevin	Stride, rh Mel
Holmes, Paul	Stuart, rh Graham
Huddleston, Nigel	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Hudson, Dr Neil	Taylor, Luke
Jardine, Christine	

Thomas, Bradley
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin

Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nick Timothy and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Charalambous, Bambos

Clark, Feryal
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky
Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Gosling, Jodie

Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lillian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Khan, Naushabah
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex

McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Mrs Sarah

Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Keir Mather and
Martin McCluskey

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 4

INFORMATION SHARING AND CONSISTENT IDENTIFIERS

Amendments made: 111, page 6, line 21, leave out from “facilitate” to end of line 22 and insert—

“(a) where the recipient is within subsection (4)(a) or (b), the exercise by the recipient of any of its relevant functions, or

(4)(a)

(b) where the recipient is within subsection (4)(c), the provision of services by the recipient pursuant to arrangements made by a person within subsection (4)(a) or (b) in connection with the exercise of any of that person’s relevant functions.

(4)(a)”

This amendment clarifies how the duty under section 16LA(2) of the Children Act 2004 (inserted by clause 4) operates where information is disclosed to a person engaged to provide services relating to safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children.

Amendment 112, page 6, line 32, at end insert—
 “, and

(c) a person who provides services pursuant to arrangements made by a person within paragraph (a) or (b) in connection with the exercise of any of that person’s relevant functions.”

This amendment ensures that the information-sharing requirements in section 16LA of the Children Act 2004 (inserted by clause 4) also extend to persons engaged to provide services relating to safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children.

Amendment 113, page 7, leave out lines 4 to 8 and insert—

“(9) This section does not authorise or require the disclosure of information if the disclosure would contravene the data protection legislation (but in determining whether a disclosure would do so, take into account the duties imposed by this section).”

This amendment clarifies the operation of the data protection legislation in relation to section 16LA of the Children Act 2004 (inserted by clause 4).

Amendment 114, page 7, line 10, at end insert—

“‘relevant function’ means a function relating to safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children.”

This amendment defines “relevant function” for the purposes of the new provisions inserted by amendments 111 and 112.

Amendment 115, page 8, leave out lines 1 to 4 and insert—

“(9) This section does not authorise or require the processing of information if the processing would contravene the data protection legislation (but in determining whether the processing would do so, take into account the duties imposed by this section).”

This amendment clarifies the operation of the data protection legislation in relation to section 16LB of the Children Act 2004 (inserted by clause 4).

Amendment 116, page 8, line 16, at end insert—

“(12A) Where a person (a “service provider”) provides services pursuant to arrangements made by a designated person in connection with the exercise of any function of the designated person that relates to safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children, this section applies to the service provider as it applies to the designated person.”—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This amendment ensures that the consistent identifier requirements in section 16LB of the Children Act 2004 (inserted by clause 4) also extend to persons engaged to provide services relating to safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children.

Clause 11

USE OF ACCOMMODATION FOR DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY

Amendment made: 117, in clause 11, page 16, line 7, after “England” insert “or Wales”.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This amendment ensures that the clause 11 amendments to section 25 of the Children Act 1989 to allow local authorities in England to seek authorisation for the deprivation of liberty of children in certain accommodation in England provided for care and treatment extend to local authorities in Wales.

Clause 12

POWERS OF CIECSS IN RELATION TO PARENT UNDERTAKINGS

Amendment proposed: 188, page 17, delete from line 21 to line 17 on page 21 and insert—

“23A Requirement for inspection

(1) The CIECSS may order an inspection of a parent undertaking, or any of its subsidiaries, if it has—

(a) a subsidiary undertaking which meets the requirements of subsection (2), or

(b) two or more subsidiary undertakings which meet the requirements of subsection (3).

(2) A subsidiary undertaking meets the requirements of this subsection if—

(a) the subsidiary undertaking is registered under this Part as carrying on two or more establishments or agencies for which the CIECSS is the registration authority, and

(b) the CIECSS reasonably suspects that there are grounds for cancelling the subsidiary undertaking's registration in respect of two or more of those establishments or agencies.

(3) A subsidiary undertaking meets the requirements of this subsection if—

(a) the subsidiary undertaking is registered under this Part as carrying on one or more establishments or agencies for which the CIECSS is the registration authority, and

(b) the CIECSS reasonably suspects that there are grounds for cancelling the subsidiary undertaking's registration in respect of one or more of those establishments or agencies.”—(Laura Trott.)

This amendment would require an inspection if the CIECSS believes that are reasons to cancel a children's home registration, rather than issue an improvement plan notice.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 160, Noes 319.

Division No. 125]

[8.46 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Dillon, Mr Lee
Amos, Gideon	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Anderson, Lee	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra</i>)	Dyke, Sarah
Andrew, rh Stuart	Evans, Dr Luke
Aquarone, Steff	Farage, Nigel
Argar, rh Edward	Farron, Tim
Babarinde, Josh	Foord, Richard
Bacon, Gareth	Forster, Mr Will
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Fortune, Peter
Barclay, rh Steve	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bedford, Mr Peter	Franklin, Zöe
Bennett, Alison	Freeman, George
Bhatti, Saqib	French, Mr Louie
Blackman, Bob	Fuller, Richard
Bowie, Andrew	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Brandreth, Aphra	Garnier, Mark
Brewer, Alex	George, Andrew
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Glen, rh John
Cane, Charlotte	Glover, Oly
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Goldman, Marie
Cartlidge, James	Grant, Helen
Chadwick, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Will Forster</i>)	Green, Sarah
Chamberlain, Wendy	Griffiths, Alison
Chambers, Dr Danny	Harris, Rebecca
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Hayes, rh Sir John
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hinds, rh Damian
Cocking, Lewis	Hoare, Simon
Coghlan, Chris	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Collins, Victoria	Hollinrake, Kevin
Cooper, Daisy	Holmes, Paul
Costa, Alberto	Huddleston, Nigel
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Hudson, Dr Neil
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Cross, Harriet	Jardine, Christine
Dance, Adam	Jarvis, Liz
Darling, Steve	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Davey, rh Ed	Jenrick, rh Robert
Davies, Gareth	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Davies, Mims	Jones, Clive
Davis, rh David	Jopp, Lincoln
Dean, Bobby	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Dewhurst, Charlie	Kohler, Mr Paul
	Kruger, Danny
	Lam, Katie

Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Reed, David
Lopez, Julia	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Robertson, Joe
Maguire, Helen	Roome, Ian
Mak, Alan	Rosindell, Andrew
Malthouse, rh Kit	Sabine, Anna
Martin, Mike	Savage, Dr Roz
Mayhew, Jerome	Shannon, Jim
McMurdock, James (<i>Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson</i>)	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
McVey, rh Esther	Simmonds, David
Miller, Calum	Slade, Vikki
Milne, John	Smart, Lisa
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Smith, Greg
Moore, Robbie	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Moran, Layla	Smith, Rebecca
Morello, Edward	Sollom, Ian
Morgan, Helen	Spencer, Dr Ben
Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Will Forster</i>)	Stafford, Gregory
Morrissey, Joy	Stride, rh Mel
Morton, rh Wendy	Stuart, rh Graham
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Munt, Tessa	Taylor, Luke
Murray, Susan	Thomas, Bradley
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Trott, rh Laura
Norman, rh Jesse	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Vickers, Martin
O'Brien, Neil	Vickers, Matt
Olney, Sarah	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Patel, rh Priti	Wilkinson, Max
Paul, Rebecca	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Perteghella, Manuela	Wilson, Munira
Philp, rh Chris	Wood, Mike
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Wrigley, Martin
Pritchard, rh Mark	Young, Claire
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra</i>)	
Rankin, Jack	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Nick Timothy

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Beales, Danny
Abbott, Jack	Beavers, Lorraine
Abrahams, Debbie	Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana</i>)
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Bell, Torsten
Akehurst, Luke	Benn, rh Hilary
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Bery, Siân
Aldridge, Dan	Billington, Ms Polly
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Alexander, rh Heidi	Blake, Rachel
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Bloore, Chris
Ali, Rushanara	Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Ali, Tahir	Bonavia, Kevin
Anderson, Callum	Botterill, Jade
Anderson, Fleur	Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Asato, Jess	Brash, Mr Jonathan
Asser, James	Brickell, Phil
Athwal, Jas	Bryant, Chris
Atkinson, Lewis	Burgon, Richard
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Burton-Sampson, David
Bailey, Olivia	Butler, Dawn
Baines, David	Byrne, Ian
Baker, Alex	Cadbury, Ruth
Baker, Richard	Caliskan, Nesil
Bance, Antonia	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Barker, Paula	Campbell, Irene
Barron, Lee	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Carden, Dan
Baxter, Johanna	

Charalambous, Bambos
 Clark, Feryal
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky
 Goldsborough, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd

Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisan
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica

Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggum, Michelle

Sewards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Keir Mather and
 Martin McCluskey

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 13

POWER OF CIECSS TO IMPOSE MONETARY PENALTIES
Amendment made: 118, page 23, line 3, at end insert—

“(2) None of the provisions in or made by virtue of this section are to be read as requiring or authorising the processing of information which would contravene the data protection legislation (but in determining whether the processing would do so, take into account the duty imposed or the power conferred by the provision in question).

(3) In this section, “the data protection legislation” and “processing” have the same meaning as in section 3 of the Data Protection Act 2018.”—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This amendment ensures that the provisions in or made under section 30ZD of the Care Standards Act 2000 (inserted by clause 13) do not override the provisions in the data protection legislation.

Clause 15

POWER TO LIMIT PROFITS OF RELEVANT PROVIDERS

Amendment proposed: 171, page 29, line 18, at end insert—

“(c) independent schools with caring responsibilities and offering SEND provision.”—(*Munira Wilson.*)

This amendment would include independent special schools within the profit cap provision.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 65, Noes 317.

Division No. 126]

[8.50 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Jarvis, Liz
Amos, Gideon	Jones, Clive
Anderson, Lee	Kohler, Mr Paul
Aquarone, Steff	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Babarinde, Josh	Maguire, Helen
Bennett, Alison	Martin, Mike
Berry, Siân	McMurdock, James (<i>Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson</i>)
Brewer, Alex	Miller, Calum
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Milne, John
Cane, Charlotte	Morello, Edward
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Morgan, Helen
Chamberlain, Wendy	Munt, Tessa
Chambers, Dr Danny	Oiney, Sarah
Coghlan, Chris	Perteghella, Manuela
Collins, Victoria	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Cooper, Daisy	Ramsay, Adrian
Dance, Adam	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Darling, Steve	Roome, Ian
Davey, rh Ed	Sabine, Anna
Denyer, Carla	Savage, Dr Roz
Dillon, Mr Lee	Slade, Vikki
Dyke, Sarah	Smart, Lisa
Farage, Nigel	Sollom, Ian
Farron, Tim	Taylor, Luke
Foord, Richard	Wilkinson, Max
Franklin, Zöe	Wilson, Munira
George, Andrew	Wrigley, Martin
Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)	Young, Claire
Glover, Olly	
Goldman, Marie	
Green, Sarah	
Hussain, Mr Adnan	
Jardine, Christine	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Susan Murray and
Bobby Dean

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Akehurst, Luke
Abbott, Jack	Alaba, Mr Bayo
Abrahams, Debbie	Aldridge, Dan
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
	Alexander, rh Heidi
	Al-Hassan, Sadik

Ali, Rushanara	Dickson, Jim
Ali, Tahir	Dixon, Anna
Anderson, Callum	Dixon, Samantha
Anderson, Fleur	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Asato, Jess	Dowd, Peter
Asser, James	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Athwal, Jas	Eagle, Dame Angela
Atkinson, Lewis	Eccles, Cat
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Edwards, Lauren
Bailey, Olivia	Efford, Clive
Baines, David	Egan, Damien
Baker, Alex	Ellis, Maya
Baker, Richard	Elmore, Chris
Bance, Antonia	Entwistle, Kirith
Barker, Paula	Eshalomi, Florence
Barron, Lee	Esterson, Bill
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Evas, Chris
Baxter, Johanna	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Beales, Danny	Farnsworth, Linsey
Beavers, Lorraine	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana</i>)	Ferguson, Mark
Bell, Torsten	Ferguson, Patricia
Benn, rh Hilary	Footy, Emma
Billington, Ms Polly	Foster, Mr Paul
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Foxcroft, Vicky
Blake, Rachel	Foy, Mary Kelly
Bloore, Chris	Frith, Mr James
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Furniss, Gill
Bonavia, Kevin	Gardner, Dr Allison
Botterill, Jade	Gemmell, Alan
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	German, Gill
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Gilbert, Tracy
Brickell, Phil	Gittins, Becky
Bryant, Chris	Goldsbrough, Ben (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Burgon, Richard	Gosling, Jodie
Burton-Sampson, David	Gould, Georgia
Butler, Dawn	Grady, John
Byrne, Ian	Greenwood, Lilian
Cadbury, Ruth	Griffith, Dame Nia
Caliskan, Nesil	Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hack, Amanda
Campbell, Irene	Hamilton, Paulette
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Hanna, Claire
Carden, Dan	Hardy, Emma
Charalambous, Bambos	Harris, Carolyn
Clark, Feryal	Hatton, Lloyd
Collinge, Lizzi	Hayes, Helen
Collins, Tom	Hayes, Tom
Conlon, Liam	Hazelgrove, Claire
Coombes, Sarah	Hinchliff, Chris
Cooper, Andrew	Hinder, Jonathan
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Hopkins, Rachel
Costigan, Deirdre	Hughes, Claire
Cox, Pam	Hume, Alison
Coyle, Neil	Huq, Dr Rupa
Craft, Jen	Hurley, Patrick
Creagh, Mary	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Crichton, Torcuil	Hussain, Imran
Curtis, Chris	Ingham, Leigh
Daby, Janet	Irons, Natasha
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Jameson, Sally
Dalton, Ashley	Jarvis, Dan
Darlington, Emily	Jermey, Terry
Davies, Jonathan	Jogee, Adam
Davies, Paul	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Davies-Jones, Alex	Johnson, Kim
Dean, Josh	Jones, rh Darren
Dearden, Kate	Jones, Louise
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jones, Ruth
	Jones, Sarah

Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan

Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris

West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Keir Mather and
Martin McCluskey

Question accordingly negated.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With the leave of the House, I shall put a single question on Government amendments 119 to 131.

Clause 18

INFORMATION SHARING

Amendments made: 119, in clause 18, page 34, line 37, at end insert—

‘(4A) The Secretary of State may provide financial oversight information to the Care Quality Commission for use in connection with the Commission’s functions under sections 54 to 56 of the Care Act 2014.

(4B) “Financial oversight information” means information held by the Secretary of State in connection with the Secretary of State’s functions under sections 30ZE to 30ZJ.’

This amendment enables the Secretary of State to disclose certain information to the Care Quality Commission for use in connection with the Commission’s functions under sections 54 to 56 of the Care Act 2014.

Amendment 120, page 35, leave out lines 1 and 2.

This amendment removes subsection (5) because it is clear without it that the information in question may consist of or include personal data.

Amendment 121, page 35, line 14, at end insert—

‘(9) In this section, “the data protection legislation” and “processing” have the same meaning as in section 3 of the Data Protection Act 2018.’

This amendment adds a signpost to the definition of terms used in section 30ZO of the Care Standards Act 2000 (inserted by clause 18).

Amendment 122, page 35, line 14, at end insert—

‘(2) In the Care Act 2014, after section 56 insert—56A
Provision of information to the Secretary of State—

(1) The Care Quality Commission may provide market oversight information to the Secretary of State for use in connection with the Secretary of State’s functions under sections 30ZE to 30ZJ of the Care Standards Act 2000.

(2) “Market oversight information” means information held by the Commission in connection with its functions under sections 54 to 56.

(3) Except as provided for by subsection (4), a disclosure of information authorised by subsection (1) does not breach—

(a) any obligation of confidence owed by the person making the disclosure, or

(b) any other restriction on the disclosure of information (however imposed).

(4) Subsection (1) does not authorise the processing of information if the processing would contravene the data protection legislation (but in determining whether it would do so, take into account the power conferred by that subsection).

(5) In this section, “the data protection legislation” and “processing” have the same meaning as in section 3 of the Data Protection Act 2018.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

This amendment enables the Care Quality Commission to disclose certain information to the Secretary of State for use in connection with the Secretary of State's functions under sections 30ZE to 30ZJ of the Care Standards Act 2000.

Clause 20

ILL-TREATMENT OR WILFUL NEGLECT: CHILDREN AGED 16 AND 17

Amendments made: 123, in clause 20, page 36, line 29, leave out “in England”.

This amendment and amendments 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130 and 131 ensure that the clause 20 protection against ill-treatment or wilful neglect applies to children aged 16 and 17 in certain care and detention settings in Wales, as well as in England.

Amendment 124, page 36, line 32, after “home” insert “in England”.

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 125, page 36, line 34, after “centre” insert “in England”.

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 126, page 36, line 36, leave out “accommodation provided at an establishment” and insert—
“an establishment in England providing accommodation”.

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 127, page 37, line 1, after “accommodation” insert “in England”.

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 128, page 37, line 2, at end insert—

(e) a place in Wales at which a care home service or a residential family centre service, as defined by Schedule 1 to the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 (anaw 2), is provided;

(f) a place in Wales at which accommodation is provided to disabled children and which is notified to the Welsh Ministers in accordance with regulations under section 2 of that Act;

(g) youth detention accommodation in Wales as defined by section 188(1) of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (anaw 4).’

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 129, page 37, line 4, leave out “in England”.

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 130, page 37, line 14, leave out “in England”.

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

Amendment 131, page 37, line 35, leave out “in England”.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

See the explanatory statement to amendment 123.

New Schedule 1

RELEVANT AUTHORITIES

‘PART 1

LIST OF RELEVANT AUTHORITIES

- 1 The Secretary of State.
- 2 The Lord Chancellor.
- 3 (1) The governing body of a maintained school in England.
- (2) In sub-paragraph (1), “maintained school” has the meaning given by section 39(1) of the Education Act 2002.
- 4 (1) The proprietor of a non-maintained special school in England.
- (2) In sub-paragraph (1)—
 - (a) “non-maintained special school” has the meaning given by section 337A of the Education Act 1996;
 - (b) “proprietor” has the meaning given by section 579(1) of that Act.
- 5 (1) The proprietor of—
 - (a) an Academy (as defined by section 579(1) of the Education Act 1996),
 - (b) a city technology college, or
 - (c) a city college for the technology of the arts.
- (2) In sub-paragraph (1), “proprietor” has the meaning given by section 579(1) of the Education Act 1996.
- 6 (1) The governing body of an institution in England within the further education sector.
- (2) In sub-paragraph (1)—
 - (a) “institution within the further education sector” has the meaning given by section 91(3) of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992;
 - (b) “governing body” has the meaning given by section 90(1) of that Act.
- 7 (1) The proprietor of a special post-16 institution in England in relation to which an approval under section 41(3) of the Children and Families Act 2014 has effect.
- (2) In sub-paragraph (1), “proprietor” and “special post-16 institution” have the meaning given by section 83(2) of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- 8 His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills.
- 9 NHS England.
- 10 An integrated care board.
- 11 An NHS foundation trust.
- 12 An NHS trust.
- 13 The Care Quality Commission.
- 14 The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales.

PART 2

POWER TO MODIFY PART 1

- (1) The Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument amend Part 1 of this Schedule by—
 - (a) adding a person or description of persons,
 - (b) removing an entry listed in it, or
 - (c) varying an entry listed in it.
 - (2) A statutory instrument containing regulations under sub-paragraph (1) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.
 - (1) Regulations under paragraph 15(1)(a) may not add a person or description of persons to Part 1 unless the Secretary of State considers that the person exercises, or (as the case may be) all persons of that description exercise, functions of a public nature.
- paragraph 15(1)(a)

- (2) Regulations under paragraph 15(1)(c) may not vary an entry listed in Part 1 so that it relates to a person who does not exercise functions of a public nature or, in the case of a description of persons, so that the description consists of or includes persons who do not exercise functions of a public nature.

paragraph 15(1)(c)

- (1) Regulations under paragraph 15(1)(a) may not add a person or description of persons to Part 1 if the Secretary of State considers that the person or (as the case may be) any person of that description—

paragraph 15(1)(a)

- (a) exercises devolved functions only, or
 (b) exercises any devolved functions, unless the entry for that person or description of persons provides that they are a relevant authority only to the extent that they are exercising functions that are not devolved functions.

- (2) Regulations under paragraph 15(1)(c) may not vary an entry listed in Part 1—

paragraph 15(1)(c)

- (a) so that it relates to a person who exercises devolved functions only, or in the case of a description of persons, so that the description consists of or includes any persons who exercise devolved functions only, or
 (b) so that it relates to a person who exercises devolved functions, or in the case of a description of persons, so that the description consists of or includes any persons who exercise devolved functions, unless the entry provides that they are a relevant authority only to the extent that they are exercising functions that are not devolved functions.
- (3) In this paragraph, “devolved function” means a function that could be conferred by provision that would be within the legislative competence of—
- (a) the Scottish Parliament, if it were contained in an Act of that Parliament (see section 29 of the Scotland Act 1998),
 (b) Senedd Cymru, if it were contained in an Act of the Senedd (see section 108A of the Government of Wales Act 2006), or
 (c) the Northern Ireland Assembly, if it were contained in an Act of the Assembly, where the Bill for that Act would not require the consent of the Secretary of State (see sections 6 to 8 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998).—(Stephen Morgan.)

This new Schedule lists the persons who are relevant authorities for the purposes of the corporate parenting duty introduced by NC18. It also contains a power for the Secretary of State to amend the list of relevant authorities by regulations.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Bill to be further considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

SENIOR COURTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES

That the draft Civil Proceedings and Magistrates' Courts Fees (Amendment) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.—(Anna Turley.)

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Ordered,

That Josh MacAlister be discharged from the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee and Melanie Onn be added.—(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Ordered,

That Deirdre Costigan be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Alex McIntyre be added.—(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Mr Alex Barros-Curtis be discharged from the Justice Committee and Matt Bishop be added.—(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

WORK AND PENSIONS

Ordered,

That Ben Obese-Jecty be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Danny Kruger be added.—(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Domestic Abuse Offences

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

9.4 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to lead this debate on domestic abuse offences, and a particular honour to do so on the very spot from which I saw the most moving speech that I have ever seen in the House of Commons being given. It was in 2016, around November or December time, and it was given by Michelle Thomson, who was then the independent Member of Parliament for Edinburgh West. She spoke about her experience of abuse and being a victim of violence at the hands of a man, and at the end of that speech she said:

“I am not a victim. I am a survivor.”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 409.]

Those words sent a shiver down my spine, gave me goosebumps, and unlocked in me a real determination to try to use my own experience and my family’s experience to improve what life is like for victims and survivors across the country.

I say in Michelle Thomson’s words that I, too, am not a victim, but I am a survivor. As a result of that, and also of my mum’s experience at the hands of a former partner of hers, we know what domestic abuse looks like. I know what it is to be crying upstairs under the covers as a child, listening to shouting, screaming, smashing and the rest coming from downstairs and not knowing if mum was okay. I know what it is to go downstairs the morning after and see broken glass, or a kicked-in Hoover and the rest, and to not know whether mum was okay. I know what it is to live in a household where you are worried that any word that you say, any movement that you do and any thought that you might have can be attacked by an abuser in your own home who is meant to keep you safe and who you are meant to trust.

There are so many people across our country who are victims and survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of abuse. It is estimated that one in five people will be a victim or a survivor of domestic abuse in their lifetime. In my view, the law does not go far enough to protect people in those circumstances. Great progress was made in the last Parliament in the form of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which defined domestic abuse in law for the first time. It also created a series of domestic abuse-aligned offences, including coercive and controlling behaviour, non-fatal strangulation and non-fatal suffocation, but I am afraid that that piece of legislation, and indeed our legislative framework overall, do not go far enough to recognise the domestic abuse that my family has experienced and that many Members of this House will be familiar with, too.

An example of a failing in the law exists in the form of the experience undergone by an extremely brave and inspirational survivor, Elizabeth Hudson. Elizabeth was a victim, a survivor, of domestic abuse at the hands of her ex-husband. He, among many other terrible acts at home, held a knife to her throat. He was convicted of assault occasioning actual bodily harm for his crimes. For her, and for so many, such a conviction does not reflect the full gravity or the full circumstances of such a nefarious crime. That has led to all sorts of problems, not just for Elizabeth but for many other survivors as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I first commend the hon. Gentleman for his courage in telling his personal story. We are all moved by it—I know I am—and I thank him for that. He has shown himself to be a determined, capable Member of Parliament, and I wish him well.

Across Northern Ireland, we witness people being arrested for first-time domestic offences. Ultimately, the charges are not prosecuted in court and the cases are dropped. Fast forward and people are re-arrested for domestic charges that are in fact worse, showing a pattern of escalating violence. Does he agree that arrests for domestic abuse must be fully investigated and, if proven, prosecuted to the full extent of the law to protect people from violence and instil confidence in the judicial system?

Josh Babarinde: I thank my friend the hon. Member for his kind words, and I completely agree that all abusers, domestic or not, must face the full force of the law. It is critical that happens for victims and survivors to have confidence in the police and our wider criminal justice system, and that is lacking for many victims and survivors. We see that in some of the consequences of the SDS40—standard determinate sentences—early release scheme that the Government had to implement in the light of the poor state that the last Government left our prisons in.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward such an important debate. Does he agree that one of the challenges of the current system is that domestic abusers and perpetrators are often convicted of a single act when domestic abuse happens over many years and can vary in the type of attacks and abuse that happen? Convicting abusers and perpetrators for the totality of their abuse therefore becomes difficult, and the prosecution will often go for the easiest single act to convict, thereby early release and the length of the conviction do not reflect the amount of abuse that their victim-survivor has had to endure.

Josh Babarinde: The hon. Member is absolutely right that domestic abuse is more than just an act; it is a campaign—a campaign of abuse, of misery and of an abuse of power by one or more people against another, and that is what makes it so difficult to convict.

There are so many areas in which the law could do better, and I was speaking about the early release scheme as an example. The scheme would release folks who had served 40% of their sentence rather than 50%. The Government nobly made a commitment to survivors that they would do everything possible to exclude domestic abusers from being released early under the SDS40 scheme, recognising that it can be super-destabilising for survivors, who need to prepare for when their abuser is back in society, their community and their neighbourhood.

Unfortunately, we know many domestic abusers were released early under the SDS40 scheme. That happened because the only way someone can be excluded from, or included in, an early release scheme is on the basis of the offence they have committed—something the Justice Secretary has confirmed—and not on the basis of anything else we might know about their behaviour. The problem is there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in the law. We therefore cannot properly exclude those people from an early release scheme, if that is something we are committing to those survivors.

[Josh Babarinde]

Instead, we know domestic abusers are often convicted of actual bodily harm, assault or battery. Those offences were criminalised by an Act written in 1861—the Offences against the Person Act—that was not written with domestic abuse in mind. As a result, so many domestic abusers are falling through the cracks, and so many victims and survivors do not get the justice or recognition they deserve.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, a Justice Committee colleague, on securing this debate. Victims of domestic violence are often women. Does he believe we would likely give domestic violence more attention if it were classified as domestic abuse? Does he think that might make a difference in giving more attention to domestic violence cases?

Josh Babarinde: I thank my Justice Committee colleague for his intervention. Of course, domestic violence is a form of domestic abuse, but we must remember that domestic abuse covers so many different kinds of activity, including emotional abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. It is critical that we recognise them all, because all too often there is disproportionate recognition of, say, physical violence, but some of the more hidden forms of abuse are just as damaging to victims and survivors.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing a debate on this incredibly important issue.

I am the MP for Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, and Women's Aid Staffordshire is based in my constituency. I have raised these statistics before, but we have seen a 361% increase in referrals to its sexual violence service in recent years, and an 851% increase in referrals to its specialist counselling services. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are facing a national crisis?

Josh Babarinde: I thank the hon. Lady for sharing those statistics. More than a national crisis, this is a national emergency, and Women's Aid has rightly declared it so. That is why it is now more important than ever that our legal framework properly recognises domestic abuse in law.

I have described how our current legislation is leaving survivors without the respect and the protection they deserve. For example, many abusers qualify for early release when the Government's intention is that they should not. I have raised this a number of times in this House and beyond, including on the Justice Committee. Ross Gribbin, a director general at the Ministry of Justice, confirmed that the only way of closing this loophole is through primary legislation that this House must debate and vote on.

That leads us to think about the solutions to patching up this legal loophole. The solution must be to create a specific offence of domestic abuse in law. I have proposed a very specific way of doing it, in consultation with a number of stakeholders, and that is to create a series of domestic abuse aggravated offences in law. In the same way that we have racially and religiously aggravated ABH, GBH, assault and so on, we would have a domestic abuse equivalent.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for making a powerful speech on a subject that I know matters to so many people in this House.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to consider not just aggravated offences but sentencing? Killed Women is campaigning to close the sentencing gap. Perpetrators who murder women at home receive shorter sentences than those who murder women on the street. Having domestic abuse aggravated offences would end that injustice when it comes to sentencing.

Josh Babarinde: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. The law is already going some way to achieve that. Domestic abuse is already an aggravating factor in sentencing at the back end, but it is not an aggravating factor at the front end in terms of the offence for which people can be convicted. We know there is a precedent for making domestic abuse an aggravating factor. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced a number of aggravating factors, and it was extended to include racially and religiously aggravated offences. We ought to amend that legislation to include domestic abuse.

However, this is about far more than being able to include or exclude domestic abusers from early release schemes. This is also about data. I asked the Ministry of Justice a very simple written parliamentary question just before Christmas: how many domestic abusers are currently in prison and what is their reoffending rate? The response was:

"It is not possible to robustly calculate the number of domestic abusers in prison or their reoffending rate. This is because these crimes are recorded under the specific offences for which they are prosecuted".

In other words, we do not know how many domestic abusers there are because there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in law. Instead, they are convicted of, for example, offences under the Offences against the Person Act 1861. This is a national scandal. We should know how many domestic abusers there are in prison.

The Government have a powerful ambition, which I fully support, to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade, but how can we possibly know whether we are achieving it if we do not know how many domestic abusers are in prison at any given time? More than that, if we are serious about reducing reoffending—I dedicated my career before coming into this place to doing exactly that kind of work—how can we know what kind of interventions are the most successful if we have no way of measuring that because there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in law?

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I commend my hon. Friend for speaking so eloquently and movingly about his personal experiences. There is a recognised link between animal abuse and domestic abuse. I pay tribute to organisations such as the Links Group that train veterinary professionals to recognise when the cases they are seeing may be indicators of abuse or domestic abuse, which ties in exactly with what he is saying. If there is no specific offence of domestic abuse, it is really hard to signpost and give guidance to everyone in the community on how to proceed, so that people are identified and helped at an early stage.

Josh Babarinde: I completely agree. We know that there are links between domestic abuse and animal abuse. We also know that there are links between domestic abuse and child sexual abuse, for example—this is a link that I have experienced the hard way. Again, our legislation and the data we are collecting are not helping us to make that link in the way that we could, so that we could figure out which interventions are best at busting these social ills.

There are more reasons why a specific offence of domestic abuse is so critical. Let us take Clare's law, which is the scheme that allows individuals, mostly women, to request to see information about the offending histories of their partners. If they qualify for the scheme, they get to see things like the charges that individual has faced or the offences they have been convicted of. It would be very easy for an abusive partner to explain away a conviction or a charge for assault or battery as, say, a brawl with a stranger in a pub, but would they be able to explain away domestic abuse-aggravated assault in the same way? No.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech and for his courage and leadership on this matter. He asks about the ways in which the perpetrators of domestic abuse might hide their crimes. In my constituency of Bicester and Woodstock, I have heard too many examples of women suffering abuse who are not finding a way to cut through to the authorities. Does he agree that, too often, cuts to victim support and an inaccessibility of legal aid are preventing the victims of domestic abuse from starting the process that might ultimately lead to charges for the kinds of aggravated offences that he is so rightly calling for?

Josh Babarinde: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is critical at a time like now, when we have heard about the scale of the national emergency of domestic abuse, that victim support organisations are adequately funded. I have met representatives of a number of organisations, including Victim Support, that in light of cuts to police and crime commissioner core funding and the national insurance contribution increase are facing a 7% real-terms funding cut. We should be funding these organisations more, not less, at this time to support constituents such as those my hon. Friend has mentioned.

There might be some challenges to my proposal. A challenge that was put to me was, "Josh, might this not lead to the very sentencing inflation that the Government are trying to avoid now to ensure that our prisons do not fill up so quickly?" My response to that is twofold. First, domestic abuse, as we have explored in this debate, is already an aggravating factor in sentencing. It already carries a greater sentence. I am proposing that we enhance the front end, as I said earlier, not just the back end.

My second response to that challenge is that the Crime and Policing Bill that the Government put before this House very recently—Second Reading was last week—creates a number of brand new offences. They are offences that I completely agree with and commend the Government for, including assault of a shop worker and a dedicated offence of spiking. These are the right things to do, but if we can do that for those crimes, surely we can do it for the crime of domestic abuse.

I remember in the Crime and Policing Bill debate several Members, particularly on the Government side, praised the trade unions for their campaigning to get the offence of assault against a shop worker over the line. I agree that great campaigning by trade unions helped to achieve that, but the survivors and victims of domestic abusers do not have such a union. We in this House are their union, which is why we must campaign for a dedicated offence of domestic abuse to protect them.

I am pleased and proud that so many have rallied around this proposal to create a specific set of domestic abuse offences in the law. Women's Aid, ManKind Initiative, Refuge, Victim Support and many more charities and support organisations in this space believe that this needs to be done. I am really grateful to many of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, who are sitting around me now, for backing this proposal, but also to those across this House; I am particularly thankful to Members on the Government Benches who have privately reached out to me to express their support for these proposals, and I know a number of them have expressed that support to their Front Benchers as well. I am grateful to lots of our media outlets for getting behind this and for platforming the campaign, in particular the team at "Good Morning Britain", which helped me launch this campaign and the Bill I am holding in my hand to make this proposed offence closer to a reality.

I am also thankful for the many warm and constructive conversations I have had with Ministers, including the Minister for victims the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), the Minister for safeguarding the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) who I met a couple of weeks ago, and the Minister for prisons Lord Timpson, but also for the exchanges I have had with the Solicitor General and the Secretary of State for Justice in this Chamber. I appreciate that constructiveness, but I am really keen now for more than warm words: I am keen for action.

Victims and survivors need and deserve the recognition that the creation of a brand new specific offence of domestic abuse in law would create and I stand ready to work with anyone in this Chamber and beyond to make it a reality.

9.29 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for speaking so movingly and convincingly.

I want to raise the case of a constituent who has come to me with multiple problems to do with her abusive husband. He is not yet her ex-husband, because he is stalling the divorce process, and hiding and dissipating assets. I worked briefly in family law, so I know that this is by no means an unusual situation and that, in most cases, it is the man who is involved in perpetrating this sort of thing. If this was happening in any other situation—for instance, between two business partners—such actions would be prosecuted as fraud, but when pursued through the family court, as they are all the time, they are not prosecuted at all; they are just treated as one of those things.

Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 created the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship. An example of coercive or controlling behaviour is economic abuse, including coerced debt,

[Mrs Sarah Russell]

controlling spending and similar activities. However, in this case the husband is no longer directly controlling or coercing the wife because they are separated; he is just spending all of their money and she cannot stop it.

Economic abuse that relates to deliberately dissipating someone else's assets is not really dealt with. Many victims of domestic abuse have their personal finances ruined in the course of their relationships. It is a real problem that any insolvency solution that might help them to rebuild their finances involves having their home address and other personal details published online in the insolvency register. That deters a lot of people from getting involved in the insolvency solutions that would enable them to start to rebuild their finances and their lives.

One can apply to withhold the details of addresses and so forth, but that involves paperwork, possible court proceedings and a fee of £300, which is a huge amount of money for someone who is already in an insolvency process. There is a strong argument that we need to reform the process and potentially make the insolvency register private.

Finally, I again thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne for securing the debate. I thank Cheshire Without Abuse, which does work in this area in my constituency, and the Money Wellness service, which people can engage with if they are having money difficulties.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady has brought to mind a circumstance that I, as an elected representative, have witnessed on a number of occasions over the past few years. A married man has secured a loan on a joint account held with his wife but then, when the relationship fell apart and all the money in the bank was away, she was left with the loan, so she was done over twice. That is an example of a situation that could be sorted out in the legislation that the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) referred to, and I thank the hon. Lady for mentioning the issue.

Mrs Russell: I have seen instances like that within my own social circle. It is not unusual and a lot of the people involved appear to be people who would have engaged with the bank. I know banks have some safeguards around this sort of thing now, but they are inadequate and people are often left in terrible financial situations.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne and I wish him luck with his campaign.

9.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) on securing this important debate, and I thank him for his commitment to tackling domestic abuse. His leadership is not just political, but deeply personal and shaped by his own experiences; it drives his advocacy for better support for victims and survivors. His dedication is truly inspiring. Only through working in partnership across Government and society will we succeed in tackling domestic abuse and halving violence against women and girls. The hon. Gentleman's passion, dedication and personal commitment to this cause shines a light on the challenges faced by victims and survivors, and I look forward to continuing to work with him.

As the House will be aware, this Government were elected on a landmark pledge to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade, and driving down domestic abuse is right at the heart of that pledge. For too long, the justice system has not been working for domestic abuse victims. We know that reports are higher than they were five years ago, while prosecutions are lower. That is unacceptable. We have taken swift action to begin reforming the system to better support victims and ensure that they have access to justice.

Across Government, we are taking steps to improve the justice system's response to domestic abuse, from the first time that someone calls the police, to court and all the way through to the way in which perpetrators are managed after a sentence. We have introduced domestic abuse specialists in 999 call centres in selected areas so that when a victim calls the police, specialists can support first responders to assess the risk and ensure that there is an appropriate response. The Crown Prosecution Service and the National Police Chiefs' Council have launched the domestic abuse joint justice plan, which brings police and prosecution experts together for a stronger, more co-ordinated approach to investigating and charging domestic abuse so that we get better outcomes for victims.

At the court stage, we have taken swift action to tackle delays by funding more than 108,500 sitting days in the Crown courts this financial year. Next year we will fund the Crown courts to run at a record level of 110,000 sitting days. We need to do that to tackle the outstanding caseload. We have also commissioned Sir Brian Leveson to recommend once-in-a-generation reform for our criminal courts, and he will report in spring this year.

We are ensuring that domestic abuse victims can access legal aid throughout the court process by changing the means test, recognising that while victims may own property or be listed as a tenant, they are often unable to benefit from the home if their abuser still lives there. We are also taking action to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse and their children are better protected in the family courts. We are expanding the pathfinder pilots, which are helping to ensure that children's voices are heard in each case, reducing their trauma and providing more access to specialist support.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for bringing forward this really important debate. I absolutely agree that more needs to be done in the family courts, and I welcome what has been done so far, but does my hon. Friend agree that we also need to look at the rules around presumption of contact, particularly for children, where domestic abuse is involved? We need to update those in order to ensure that get away from the assumption that contact with an abuser is advantageous to a child's welfare.

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner on this issue. To echo the words of the Prime Minister, the family courts should never be allowed to be used as a means for an abuser to continue their abuse, and this Government will report on the issue of presumption soon.

We need to ensure that the severity of domestic abuse is captured in our sentencing framework. We have committed to implementing two of the outstanding

recommendations made in Clare Wade's domestic homicide sentencing review to make murders involving strangulation and those connected with the end of a relationship statutory aggravating factors.

We are further strengthening our response through the improved management of perpetrators. We have launched domestic abuse protection orders in selected areas, combining the strongest elements of other orders to protect victims from all forms of domestic abuse. They put tough restrictions on abusers and can include orders for behaviour change programmes to finally stop the cycle of abuse from repeating. Since February, offenders sentenced for 12 months or more for coercive or controlling behaviour are now automatically eligible for management under multi-agency public protection arrangements. That rightly puts the response to this awful offence on a par with physical violence.

Alongside our work to tackle offending, we are strengthening protection for victims. Our new victims' code will help ensure that every victim of crime, including domestic abuse, understands their rights, and will also ensure that we can properly monitor the service that local agencies are offering. The duty to collaborate will improve how local commissioners commission services for domestic abuse victims. We are also increasing the power of the Victims' Commissioner, so that there is more accountability when victims are let down by the system.

On funding, we are continuing to prioritise support for victims and survivors of abuse. Police and crime commissioners are provided with funding to commission local practical, emotional and therapeutic support services for victims of all crime types, including domestic abuse. The criminal justice system is facing considerable demand pressures and a challenging fiscal environment. Difficult decisions have been made regarding funding, but we have continued to prioritise victims of violence against women and girls by protecting that spending within the Ministry of Justice, maintaining last year's funding levels for sexual violence and domestic abuse support this year. This will ensure that domestic abuse and sexual violence support services can continue their vital work. That is on top of the core funding that we give to police and crime commissioners to allocate locally, and I should stress that we are encouraging police and crime commissioners to prioritise victims of violence against women and girls in their budgets.

Our work to tackle domestic abuse and better support victims will require a cross-Government approach—we have already heard this evening how important it is to include the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, as well as the Treasury and financial services. We will use every lever in our power and work with key partners across Government to deliver against this ambition. I am proud to co-chair the violence against women and girls mission board, which brings together Ministers from across Government with responsibility for this area to drive forward delivery of our mission. I have also been engaging extensively across Whitehall on prevention and early intervention, as well as on the wider support that victims of domestic abuse need, such as safe housing provision or support for their pets. All of our important work will be underpinned by a new strategy to combat violence against women and girls, which we will publish later this year.

I now turn to the particular interest of the hon. Member for Eastbourne in creating a cohort of domestic abuse offenders in order to exclude these offenders from early release measures, as he has set out. As he knows, SDS40 was an emergency measure introduced to avert a prison capacity crisis that this Government sadly inherited. However, we made sure to exclude certain offences from that change, including: sex offences, irrespective of sentence length; serious violent offences with a sentence of four years or more; and a series of offences linked to domestic abuse, including stalking, coercive or controlling behaviour, and non-fatal strangulation. As the hon. Member has said, exclusions from the policy are based on offences, not offenders. This means that it has not been possible to exclude all offenders with a domestic abuse history, as there is no current single means of determining whether a given conviction was for an offence committed in the context of domestic abuse.

I am hugely sympathetic to the issues that the hon. Member has raised this evening. However, I am not convinced that his particular solution—creating a series of domestic abuse aggravated offences—is the right one. I am concerned about the unintended consequences of attempting to capture and define via a list of specific offences the full spectrum of offences in which domestic abuse could be a factor. As we have heard this evening, that spectrum of offences is vast, and I am extremely wary that attempting to capture them in a list could unwittingly create a system in which some offences are deemed serious enough to constitute offences that could be aggravated by domestic abuse, whereas other offences in which domestic abuse could play a part are not. For example, we should not return to the outdated view that domestic abuse only involves physical violence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) has said, economic abuse should also be taken into consideration, and it will be a core part of this Government's violence against women and girls strategy.

This Government are dedicated to ensuring that the harm caused by offences typically committed against women and girls—including domestic abuse—is appropriately and proportionately reflected in the sentencing framework. That is why the sentencing review chaired by David Gauke, the former Lord Chancellor, has been asked to look specifically at the sentences for offences primarily committed against women and girls. I recognise that being able to better identify domestic abuse offenders throughout the system and to capture that data is important in supporting victims and managing perpetrators.

Josh Babarinde: I thank the Minister for her response and for her feedback. I appreciate that setting a static list of offences to which a domestic abuse aggravation is connected could mean that when offences and the nature of domestic abuse change, things get left behind. Would she therefore consider a more open-ended aggravation that is dynamic and could attach to any offence? What I have proposed is an aggravation on the basis of the definition in the Domestic Abuse Act. Would she consider a more dynamic one that does not list a finite number of offences?

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member makes an important point, and he has pre-empted the next section of my speech. The Government and I are actively considering how we can better identify domestic abuse offenders, and I want to reassure him that nothing is off

[Alex Davies-Jones]

the table. I would be happy to work with him, and I invite him to come and meet me to discuss how best we do that in more detail. I know he has a similar agreement from my ministerial colleagues and those he has already met to discuss it.

Tackling domestic abuse is a top priority for this Government and a core part of our mission to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade.

We are working across Government and using every lever in our power to deliver against that ambition—not more rhetoric, but action; deeds, not words.

Question put and agreed to.

9.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 17 March 2025

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Women's Changed State Pension Age: Compensation

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Work and Pensions Committee on 29 January 2025, on DWP's Annual Report and Accounts, HC 688; Oral evidence taken before the Work and Pensions Committee on 22 January 2025, on Pensioner Poverty: challenges and mitigations, HC 465; Written evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, on Pensioner Poverty: challenges and mitigations, reported to the House on 26 February and 5 February 2025, HC 465; and Correspondence from the Work and Pensions Committee to the Department for Work and Pensions, on Pensioner Poverty: challenges and mitigations, reported to the House on 5 March 2025, HC 465.]

4.30 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700765 relating to compensation for women affected by state pension changes.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to introduce this e-petition on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank the petitioners for making this debate possible, and all the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—campaigners for their tireless efforts, especially Jane Cowley, Angela Madden and Debbie de Spon.

The Government's refusal to compensate WASPI women is both shocking and disheartening. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found clear maladministration in the Department for Work and Pensions' communication of state pension age changes and recommended that each affected woman should be awarded £2,950 as compensation.

The facts of the matter are that, despite a 15-year lead-in period, women were informed 21 years after the legislation passed, leaving many unaware of the impact on their retirement and life plans. Shockingly, some women never received any notification at all. The DWP has yet to explain why it concluded that written notification was necessary, yet failed to provide it. The ombudsman's instruction for Parliament to ensure compensation is extremely rare, and the DWP's refusal to comply with those recommendations is almost unprecedented, occurring in less than 1% of cases. More than 200 MPs have criticised the Government's inaction, including 50 Labour MPs.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on opening this important debate. Some 74% of the public support fair compensation for WASPI women. What does it say about this place and our democracy if, when 74% of the public have that opinion, we as a Parliament do not act to give WASPI women fair compensation?

Dr Savage: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point, and I include that figure—that staggering amount of public support for WASPI compensation—later in my speech.

At least 80 Ministers previously pledged support for the WASPI campaign while in opposition but, somehow, that support has not survived the transition into power. The 160,000 people who signed this petition feel betrayed and, as already mentioned, it is worth noting that 74% of the public support compensation for WASPI women.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on opening this Petitions Committee debate. As the previous Chair of the Petitions Committee, I know that 160,000 people signing a petition shows the strength of feeling, as very few petitions reach that threshold. Does she agree that that is a testament to the commitment of WASPI campaigners?

Dr Savage: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady.

The assumption that affected women should have monitored their pensions is deeply offensive. Like most normal people, they were focused on their lives, their work and their families. The oft-cited statistic that 90% of women knew about the changes is misleading; it comes from a 2006 survey about the general awareness of possible future changes, not the specific impact on individuals, and only 5% of the respondents to that survey were 1950s-born women. The ombudsman, in fact, found that only 43% knew that their pension age was 65.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she share my concern that we are going down a dangerous path when, despite the ombudsman having made a recommendation, that has been rejected? Does that not shake faith in the entire system of ombudsmen?

Dr Savage: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is an egregious lack of transparency and accountability at the heart of this case.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The hon. Member is being generous with her time. It is not just the ombudsman in which faith could be shaken. The public are rightly concerned that dozens if not hundreds of Labour Members of Parliament previously supported the WASPI women but have turned their backs on them now that they are in government. This is not just about the ombudsman; this is about parliamentary democracy and our constituents having faith that what we say will actually happen.

Dr Savage: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Now I will make some progress.

As a result of the changes, between 6% and 15% of affected women have fallen into poverty. Recent surveys show that 84% worry about energy bills, 76% worry about their financial future and, tragically, 71% avoid leaving their home to save money. I want to highlight the case of Marion Bond, one of my constituents in South Cotswolds. During a lifetime spent as a teacher, Marion made many sacrifices, including turning down promotions and working part time to care for her children while her husband worked long hours. Despite supporting his career, her divorce settlement was based on the assumption that she would receive her pension at 60. Instead,

[*Dr Savage*]

she unexpectedly faced a delay, losing six years of pension. The small compensation recommended by the ombudsman is a fraction of the £40,000 that she calculates she lost as a result of the lack of communication.

Marion's story is not unique. A survey on Facebook that asked "What would you have done differently?" yielded over 1,500 heartrending stories as women shared how their lives would have been different with proper notification. The stories include escaping abusive relationships, continuing with much-loved careers rather than taking voluntary redundancy, and fulfilling care responsibilities for grandchildren or other relatives. Although men and women should have equal retirement ages, that is not the issue here. The issue is the communication failure. The mishandled roll-out of the change left many women stranded, facing unemployment and reliant on benefits. That in turn affected their mental and physical health and placed financial strain on their families, impacting childcare and the social and healthcare sectors.

There is a fundamental question about how we value women in our society. We must recognise that women face invisible financial penalties due to gender, including pay gaps and unpaid labour burdens.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My hon. Friend is giving a powerful opening speech. She mentioned the gender pay gap, which is why we have a gender pension gap of almost 40%. Does she agree that that is another reason for looking again at WASPI women? The lack of notification that they had means that the money means so much to so many of them.

Dr Savage: I thank my hon. Friend for a good point very well made. Women such as Marion and the rest of the WASPI women have devoted their lives to raising the next generation, contributing significantly to our economy. Ministers' claims that women experienced no financial loss are false. Women lost the opportunity to make informed decisions, leading to significant material losses. The compensation sought is not a benefits payment, but redress for an injustice. It should not be means-tested, following precedents set by other Government compensation schemes such as those for the Windrush generation and Post Office sub-postmasters.

This debate centres on a core principle of good governance. When a Department fails to fulfil its own policy, it has an obligation to those affected. The DWP's refusal to engage with victims or to even consider compensation violates that principle. The DWP has not even provided a reason for refusing compensation, demonstrating a deeply offensive lack of accountability. For many years, the Liberal Democrats have pushed the Government to fairly compensate WASPI women in line with the ombudsman's recommendations. I know that WASPI will continue to take all actions necessary to help 1950s-born women to achieve justice through compensation, but only Parliament can make that happen.

As we debate this petition, we must consider the role that the Government play in providing a safety net for the most vulnerable members of our society. I am sure we will hear many stories today of inspirational women who have served their community, family and country, and then been fundamentally let down by the British

Government. The clock is ticking. More than 300,000 women born in the 1950s have died since this campaign began, with another passing away every 13 minutes on average. The solution is clear: the Government must act now to compensate WASPI women fairly and swiftly. These women have served their community, family and country, and it is time that we served them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. As we can see, a large number of hon. Members wish to take part, so if we are going to get everybody in, I must impose a five-minute limit on speeches. I ask Members to please refrain from interventions as much as possible.

4.41 pm

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance, Sir Edward. I thank the Petitions Committee for arranging the debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (*Dr Savage*) for her powerful opening speech. While I am in the business of thanking people, let me thank the tens of thousands of WASPI women who I have met around the country over the years, fighting for what they see to be justice. I agree with them. That organisation will not simply disappear, and the Government cannot simply ignore it—they will not be allowed to. The WASPI women have many friends and allies in this place on both sides of the House who will work with them to try to secure justice.

When I voted for the reimbursement of the WASPI women the other day, I did so with two thoughts in my mind. The first was that there is something going wrong with the way we govern our country. Our governing class has lost touch with the people in general. It is very important that we begin to think hard about why that has happened and what we do about it. The first step must be that politicians say what they mean and mean what they say. I told the WASPI women in my constituency, and everywhere else I have met them, that I would back them until they get justice. I will continue to do so.

Beyond individual politicians, the structures of our politics are no longer working properly. The ombudsman was set up especially to allow citizens who feel an injustice to go to an organisation separate from the state to pursue justice. How can that organisation, which is there to give voice to people, be ignored by a Government of whichever side? This debate should not be about finger pointing between the parties, but let us be clear that previous Governments introduced these measures and failed to implement the ombudsman's report, so it is a problem for the whole House.

After thinking about changing our politics, my second thought was about social justice. It is not fair that women were told at the last possible moment, with the state sitting on a report for 28 months, that their financial arrangements would change. I had a look at what happened in Spain: the Government increased the retirement age to 67, but they did it over 14 years. That allowed people to make their own financial plans about their circumstances. Each person knew what was coming in due course. The British state, of course, because of the gap between the public and the governing class, failed to do such a thing.

Let me give one constituency case of a woman who came to see me. She was 58, had worked all her life and had saved a small amount of money, working hard and not earning very much. Her mum and dad were seriously ill, but she had enough money saved to get through to being 60, so she retired and went to look after them, only to discover to her horror that she would have to wait for years for the pension to come in. The money she had saved was not sufficient. Next, sadly, her mum and dad died, and she was left with no support or income of any kind—no carer's allowance, nothing. She was left in total poverty, as a result of the state's failure to say what would happen to her in her life.

The state cannot be allowed to make decisions that transform people's lives in such a way through no fault of their own—people who have worked and paid tax all their life. Millions of women have suffered in their own individual way, and all of us will have heard lots of stories about that. There are 6,170 WASPI women in my constituency alone; my majority is 6,600. Members can work that out for themselves—look at the numbers. Each one of those women will have family members who feel a burning sense of injustice too. But it should not be about us and saving our seats; it should be about what is right, about justice and about a different kind of politics entirely.

It seems to me that options were available, but the then Government ignored them. There could have been a proper transition. Now we have an ombudsman's report that has made clear recommendations and that imposes an obligation on us—every Member of this House—to implement them. We must do that. Let me make one final point—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. There is a five-minute limit—sorry, Jon.

4.46 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Our greatest Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, said that

“power has only one duty—to secure the social welfare of the people.”

Being held to account cements the legitimacy that Governments derive from their democratic mandate. Beyond parliamentary accountability, over time other checks and balances have emerged. With due respect to the excellent Petitions Committee, and the Intelligence and Security Committee on which I serve, the ombudsmen, with their genesis in the late 1960s, perhaps in public terms best represent that kind of independence, accountability and scrutiny.

References to the ombudsmen for their considered deliberation are more than an ornament to our polity; they have become an essential component of it. Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum, represented in this debate, appreciate that just as things are not lightly sent to the ombudsman, neither should their judgments be taken lightly. In particular, a Government who attempt to brush under the carpet the fallacies, faults and frailties identified by the ombudsman are guilty not just of bad housekeeping but of concealing systemic failure.

Yet that is exactly what has befallen the WASPI women: those wives, mothers and grandmothers who toiled hard for Britain only to be told that their fair expectations

of life after work were to be blighted, not just by the consequence of Government policy—the principles of which, by the way, they do not contest—but by its wholly inadequate implementation by a Government Department.

In the words of the ombudsman,

“maladministration in DWP's communication about the 1995 Pensions Act resulted in complainants losing opportunities to make informed decisions about some things and to do some things differently, and diminished their sense of personal autonomy and financial control.”

The ombudsman's remedy is to recompense on a scale—a series of levels from 1 to 6. The ombudsman recommended a level 4 response, which relates to

“a significant and...lasting injustice that has, to some extent, affected someone's ability to live a relatively normal life.”

Few, if anyone, anticipated the current Government's careless disregard of this just cause or of the ombudsman's recommendations. It was surprising, because the Prime Minister himself had made it clear that he believed in “fair and fast” compensation. The Work and Pensions Secretary said:

“This injustice can't go on. I have been a longstanding supporter of the WASPI campaign”.

The Home Secretary said:

“I'm backing the WASPI women...I'll keep up our fight for a better deal for WASPI women.”

Even the Deputy Prime Minister said categorically that Labour “will compensate” the WASPI women as it is “their money”.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I have had about 100 emails from WASPI women in my constituency. The ombudsman found that there was a case to answer, and recommended five options for compensation, leaning towards option 4. Does my right hon. Friend agree that even if the Government will not grant option 4, they should at least give the WASPI women something?

Sir John Hayes: In working alongside the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for today's debate, I met many WASPI women, and have since. They are not unreasonable, and they do not expect every line of their most ambitious desire to be met, but they did expect the Government to make some proper reference back to the ombudsman's report and, consequently, to approach them with a proposal to settle their demands. I find it extraordinary that the Government did not do that. I am genuinely really surprised. The WASPI women are reasonable people, and they understand the constraints the Government are working within, but they expected greater respect for and greater reference to the independent scrutiny from the ombudsman.

Members might have thought, from all that I have read out about what Ministers said when they were shadow Ministers, that the Government's position was clear, but it appears not. I say again, as I have before to the new Minister: change course. Few of those with power readily welcome criticism. Fewer still enjoy being chastised. But some—just some, and I hope that includes the Minister—correct mistakes, right wrongs and do what is just willingly. In so doing, they grace the very concept of political privilege by nurturing popular faith in the rightful exercise of power.

[*Sir John Hayes*]

The challenge of meeting the reasonable demands of the WASPI women by simply implementing what the independent ombudsman recommended is an opportunity for those in the Government with responsibility to step up and dignify their office by doing what is right. The way the WASPI women have been treated is just not fair. When public faith in fairness is lost, to draw on the words of the great poet W. B. Yeats,

“The ceremony of innocence is drowned”
as it becomes clear that

“The best lack all conviction”..

4.52 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. My mother is a WASPI woman and, as fortune would have it, today is her birthday. It would be wonderful if the Minister could give her the birthday present of changing the Government's position on this issue.

The arguments have been well rehearsed and, indeed, the facts are clear thanks to the ombudsman's report. Published in March 2024, it found that the DWP failed these women. The communication of changes to the state pension age was not just inadequate: it was negligent. Women were left in the dark, unable to make informed decisions about their financial futures. The impact of the failure has been devastating. Lives have been upended and plans have been torn apart. Women who worked hard, contributed to society and looked forward to a well-earned retirement were instead met with stress, anxiety, uncertainty and the harsh reality of financial insecurity.

The Government have rightly apologised, but I say gently to the Minister that it is somewhat intellectually incoherent to apologise but then also offer reasons—such as claiming that 90% of women knew—as to why compensation should not be paid. If they believe that, what are they apologising for?

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I wish the hon. Gentleman's mother a very happy birthday. It is a great date of birth to share.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the ombudsman's report concluded that there had been maladministration between 2005 and 2007, and that some women had suffered a loss as a result of that maladministration. The Government accept that there was maladministration. The ombudsman has left it to Parliament to decide how to make sure that those who suffered loss get properly recompensed. What would it say about us as a Parliament if we decide that yes, the maladministration is there and the loss is there but, frankly, we are not going to do anything about it?

Mr Brash: I agree with the hon. Member, who makes the interesting point that it is down to Parliament, rather than Ministers, because we are talking about the parliamentary ombudsman. I have to point out, though, that it would have been helpful if the ombudsman's report had not been kicked into the long grass by the previous Administration.

I continue to believe that options were available to Ministers other than simply saying no. Other options include looking at those most in need—we have already

heard about those WASPI women who are beneath the poverty line; or looking at staged or interim payments based on age; or just engaging in dialogue about the ombudsman's findings at all. I urge Ministers to consider those options.

Rather than rehearse arguments that have been made many times, I want to talk more broadly about the impact of this issue on our politics, as my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) mentioned. We cannot leverage votes on an issue when in opposition, only to turn around and say no when we are in government, because that risks disenfranchising our voters. Recent history tells us that disenfranchisement does not lead voters to vote for no one. It leads to them voting for anyone. This country faces that danger right now, in terms of the level of trust in politics. Voters' trust is rightly hard won, but very easily lost.

During the general election campaign, on countless doorsteps and in numerous emails and conversations, I was challenged by Hartlepool voters on the WASPI issue. I pledged my support to every single one of them. I stood by them as they campaigned and told them that if I became their Member of Parliament, I would always stand up for them. I will not renege on that promise. I remember being joined on one doorstep by a senior member of the then shadow Cabinet. The voter, fixing the shadow Minister with a stare, gestured to me and said, “But how can we trust him?” The reply came from the shadow Minister, “Well, Jonathan is Hartlepool first, country second and party third.” I am happy to say that that remains the case.

I am not here to bash my party or my Government. Politics is not binary. Although many will disagree, I believe that standing up and saying when you think something is wrong is a profound act of loyalty to my party. It is my duty to stand up for WASPI women. That is the promise I made to them and, no matter the consequence, that will never change.

4.58 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward.

The latest figures suggest there are over 6,000 WASPI women in the Moray and Highland region, and they are an active and vociferous group. Of the 650 constituencies, my Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey constituency is in the top 25 for signatures on the petition. Women from my constituency regularly travel the many hundreds of miles to London to demonstrate and demand fair recompense from this Government and from previous Governments. Sadly, they are being thwarted at every turn.

All the while, every day over 100 WASPI women die having seen no justice. WASPI women have proven that the communication with them was dire—the ombudsman's report made that very clear, after very thorough investigation—yet not even a hint of recompense has been given. It is an utterly appalling situation.

Let us be clear: the millions of women affected are of a generation of women who have been discriminated against throughout their working lives. They have been victims of getting lower pay than their male counterparts doing the same job, as has been well evidenced by equal pay settlements with numerous bodies. They have been

victims of the glass ceiling, victims of both casual and overt sexism in the workplace, and victims of a patriarchal society that, although much diminished, still creates a major imbalance today. Women are far more likely to be worse off as pensioners than men and have, on average, much smaller pension pots when they come to retirement age.

Ministers continually refer to the £22 billion black hole left by the previous Government. I accept that the financial legacy they have been left is pretty grim, but let us be clear: that refers to recurring spend and absolutely not to what would be a one-off compensatory spend. Financial experts, professionals and auditors take a very different view on one-off spend compared with recurring spend. We need to keep that in context, and I hope the Minister will reflect on that. Justice is justice, and it must not depend on budgets for it to be served.

It is in that context that the vast majority of Labour MPs refused to vote in the recent Division on this issue that was forced by my party. I commend the small number who stuck to their principles and voted with us, and I urge the large majority who did not to consider their position on this matter seriously, and get back behind the campaigners they were happy to pose with for campaign photos in the run-up to last year's election.

I am humbled by the determination and drive of those campaigners, as well as the dignified way in which they continue to make their point. Campaigners from throughout the UK are once again here in numbers, and I commend and fully support their efforts to get the fair and just compensation they deserve.

5.1 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. My thanks go to the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for an excellent opening speech.

Since the announcement that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made in December, Members of the House have become familiar with the findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. I was appalled at the announcement when it was made, and I am no less so now. Like many Labour parliamentary colleagues, I have attended rallies and met many WASPI women. In opposition, these victims of injustice had our unwavering support. Now we are in power, they are still no closer to getting what they truly deserve.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I think it sets a dangerous precedent to go against recommendations commissioned from an independent ombudsman. However, those from all parts of Parliament are equally to blame in this, and it is slightly unfair to blame it all on the one Minister sitting on his own over there.

Brian Leishman: For the record, I certainly was not singling out any particular Minister. It is an issue—to be honest, an injustice—on which consecutive Governments have a stained record. Now that we are in power, it is on our desk, so we could actually make it right. The responsibility is with us in Government.

In January, I sponsored a ten-minute rule Bill and voted for WASPI women to receive the justice that they deserve, and my commitment to them is ongoing. Today, I urge the Government to recognise that the people who

voted for us do not want the language of “tough choices”, because “tough choices” always seems to mean working class people becoming poorer. It is clear that status-quo politics is not the answer. Millions of people are disenfranchised, demoralised and desperate, and it is no wonder that people are sick of hearing about fiscal constraints after 14 years of austerity, a pandemic and a cost of living crisis that has increased inequality all over the UK.

Last July, the electorate voted for change from all of that, and there is no change in carrying on with failed Tory policies that serve to impoverish people. On this side of the Chamber, we all believe that the election of a Labour Government is about relieving the suffering of injustices, delivering social justice and fairness, making things better and building an alternative economy and society that works for the benefit of the many. The WASPI women are not asking for something that they are not due; all they are asking for is fairness and justice. Now that we are in Government, we would do well to live and deliver on our party's true values.

5.4 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on an issue that is incredibly important to thousands of women and their families in my constituency. I pay tribute to the WASPI campaigners who are in the Public Gallery, and all my constituents who have campaigned tirelessly on the issue.

This debate is about justice, fairness and doing what is right. Liberal Democrats have said all along that we support fair and fast compensation for all the women who were unfairly impacted by the changes to the state pension age. They include my constituent Mary; instead of retiring and receiving a pension in 2016 when she reached 60, as she had been expecting to do all her working life, she found herself having to live on virtually nothing for six years. Ill health following breast cancer, combined with the side effects of chemotherapy, left her too tired to do very much at all.

Then there is Karin. Karin's life was upended when she took voluntary redundancy in 2016, believing she had three years until her state pension, only to discover that she had six years to wait. The unexpected delay left her struggling financially while caring for an elderly mother, a severely disabled sister and young grandchildren. Karin is deeply disillusioned with the Government's decision to ignore the ombudsman's finding, and frankly, who can blame her? She feels that lifelong injustices faced by women of her generation—from being denied equal workplace rights after having children, to the state pension age changes—have been systematically ignored.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Does the hon. Member agree that the WASPI women are right to use the word “gaslighting” to describe the Government's suggestion that there is no problem here and that everybody knew? They are not standing by the pledge they made in opposition; it is as if that pledge was never made. That strikes harshly at women who have spent their whole lives facing other aspects of sexism, as she describes.

Liz Jarvis: The hon. Member makes an excellent point, and I will come on to that later. Mary and Karin, like so many of my constituents who were impacted by

[Liz Jarvis]

the changes to the state pension age, feel incredibly let down by the Government. After being ignored for so long by the previous Conservative Government, they really believed the MPs who told them that they supported their claim for fair and fast compensation.

The Government should be compensating these women because it is the right thing to do. Many of the women in my constituency who were impacted found themselves in dire circumstances with little to live on. They were forced to take low-paid jobs to make ends meet, and in some cases they turned to food banks. These are not wealthy women, and the unexpected loss of income and the fact that they had to work much longer than they were expecting has had a huge impact on their lives and those of their families. That is in addition to having to cope with the loss of the winter fuel allowance, which is particularly challenging when it has been so bitterly cold. Many of the women are also unpaid carers.

There is also the wider issue that these women feel that they do not matter to this Government—that because they are women of a certain age, they are somehow invisible. These women were born in the 1950s. They spent years working and raising families, and many of them will now have caring responsibilities. Frankly, the way that they have been treated by successive Governments is appalling. They deserve respect and to be treated with dignity.

This issue has been incredibly badly handled by the Government. We all recognise that the previous Conservative Government left the country in an absolute mess and that there are many issues that need fixing—including, most urgently, the NHS and social care—but that does not make this head-in-the-sand approach right. The parliamentary ombudsman said very clearly that there had been maladministration, and the Secretary of State and the Government accepted that. To then turn around and say, “We are sorry about what happened, but we just don’t have the money to compensate you,” is simply not good enough. These women feel betrayed. Telling them that 90% of them knew about the changes, when the ombudsman found that that was not the case, is gaslighting. Indeed, the ombudsman stated that 43% of the women knew; that is quite a difference.

If the Government continue to ignore the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s recommendation for compensation, it raises the question: what is the point of the ombudsman? Where else can people turn if they are victims of maladministration or wrongdoing and feel that no one is listening to them? Many women maintain that they did not receive letters at all, and the Department for Work and Pensions does not have a record of who it wrote to. I can believe that; if any Member has had dealings with the DWP, either as a private citizen or on behalf of constituents, they will know what a nightmare it can be. I suspect that if we asked many people, even now, they probably would not know the exact date when they could retire and receive the state pension.

I urge the Government to reconsider their response, and to look at providing a scheme of compensation starting with those on pension credit. We know that the Government are facing incredibly difficult challenges, but ignoring the voices of thousands of women is a huge mistake. This issue is not going to go away.

5.9 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. It is right that this House should consider compensation for women affected by changes to the state pension age. Before, during and after the general election, I pledged my support to the close to 6,000 women of West Dunbartonshire affected by this injustice. It was right and fair to do so then, and I cannot and will not turn my back on them now. I continue to support West Dunbartonshire WASPI women, who are led by their inspirational co-ordinator, Elizabeth Daly.

In March 2024, the PHSO stage two and three report found clear maladministration in the way that the DWP communicated state pension age changes. It is clear to me, based on the communication I have received from my constituents, that they did not know that their state pension age was changing, or, if they did, that they received that information far too late to make the necessary adjustments to their retirement plans. The PHSO instructed all of us in Parliament to consider the findings—it took the rare, but necessary, step of laying the report before Parliament, not just the Department or the Government. It was for us to consider the findings, apologise and issue compensation.

For the very welcome apology for maladministration to be in any way meaningful, there must be redress for the injustice. There must be compensation—not a handout for hardship. It should not be means-tested; it should be on the same basis as all the other recently announced Government compensation schemes. I urge my Government colleagues to look again at the ombudsman’s report and its recommendations. Current national financial challenges should never be a barrier to awarding compensation. To ignore the ombudsman’s report not only undermines its important role and function; it is unprecedented in this context and sets us on a very dangerous path. There is nothing right and fair about the statement to the House of 17 December 2024. I ask the Government to please review and explore what scheme they can consider to offer financial redress to the over 300,000 1950s women in Scotland, including the 6,000 in West Dunbartonshire.

They include my constituent Elizabeth, whose story I have permission to share. She said:

“I left school and started working in the summer of 1971, aged 15. I was expecting to retire on my 60th birthday, which was December 2015.

In the summer of 2014, my husband took gravely ill and was in ICU for several weeks and hospitalised for 3 months in total. He was discharged with a walking frame and tube feeding, which I had to be trained to administer. I was given compassionate leave when required and allowed to temporarily reduce my working hours for 6 months. After that period, I had a maximising attendance review and had to decide to return full time or permanently reduce my hours to 17.5. I had to choose the latter, as he was still very weak and dependent. After he had a relapse and I was absent again, I had another maximising attendance review. It was during this meeting that I discovered I would not be able to retire at 60 after all. I was distraught. I had reduced my hours and the other half of my post had been filled!

When my husband died in 2018, I was earning half pay. I continued to work and, in fact...finding myself on the frontline at 65...My mental health deteriorated again and I was absent from work during the winter of 2020...I made the decision to give notice of my retirement. I wouldn’t receive my State Pension until mid December 2021...Choices were removed from women! If we had known about this change in age, we could have made different decisions. Every decision I made up to 2014 was made on the

assumption I would retire at 60. I feel I have been a victim of injustice, with the PHSO confirming that women born in the 1950s suffered maladministration from the DWP... We have waited long enough."

They have waited long enough, and it is time to act.

5.14 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for securing and opening this debate, the hundreds of thousands of people who signed this important petition, and the formidable campaigners. An estimated 6,500 women in my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon have been impacted by this pension injustice. Many of them have contacted me to tell me of their feeling of betrayal by those who should right wrongs. For years, millions of WASPI women have fought for justice after being failed by successive Governments. These women worked hard, contributed to our society and played by the rules, only to have their pension age changed without proper notice, leaving many of them financially stranded.

The ombudsman's ruling was clear: the Government's failure to communicate the changes caused real financial hardship and those affected deserve compensation. Thousands of these women have died without receiving justice or redress, but what did we hear in December? We heard that the DWP is rejecting the ombudsman's recommendation that compensation should be paid. Instead of standing up for these women, the DWP has turned its back on them.

Let us be clear—this is not just about payouts. This is about acknowledging the harm that has been done and about recognising the stress, the anxiety, the broken plans, the financial insecurity and the poverty that these women now face.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): WASPI women should be fairly compensated. Just this week, I spoke to a woman who lives in the village of Street in my constituency. She worked hard for 40 years, but has recently been made homeless—she has been evicted—as a result of not receiving fair compensation. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should reverse their decision and give WASPI women the compensation they deserve?

Manuela Perteghella: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. I too have heard of women who have had to keep working despite ill health, and who have had to use up all their life savings but still face poverty now.

The Liberal Democrats have long stood with WASPI women. We made a manifesto commitment to fight for fair compensation and we will not let this issue drop. The Conservative Government failed to implement the recommendations. This Labour Government had a chance to do the right thing, and they still have that chance. Please do so. We will not stop fighting until these women get the compensation they deserve. It is time for this Government to listen, to act and to deliver justice for WASPI women.

5.17 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward.

First, I offer an apology from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). Normally he would have been here for this debate, but he is chairing a meeting on disability cuts as we speak.

More than 5,000 women in my constituency of Liverpool West Derby are affected by these pension changes. I have sat down with many of them. Their lives have been changed forever by a political decision. They have had to scrap their plans and many of these proud women have been forced into poverty.

The Minister who is here today cannot brush aside the fact that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report on this issue, which was published in March 2024, vindicated the WASPI campaign's assertion that WASPI women had been unjustly treated and had been denied money. The report made it clear that the DWP should acknowledge its failings and apologise for the impact that those failings had on the complainants and others affected. The ombudsman also ruled that compensation is owed, but because it cannot order compensation it was for the Government to determine the terms of redress. At last, we had a ruling that reflected the injustice and Parliament was given a clear instruction by the ombudsman to fix this mess.

It was the expectation of many people, including myself, that the new Government would right this historical wrong and deliver compensation as a matter of urgency, in an amount that was fair and just. When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions stood up and announced that no compensation at all would be paid to the WASPI women—women born in the 1950s—the shock and despair were felt across the UK. Those feelings were palpable, and the shock and anger felt by my constituents about this decision has been made absolutely crystal clear to me on a number of occasions.

On Friday, Minister, I am opening a Centre for Social Justice office in Liverpool West Derby; I am absolutely sure that many women over 50 will be coming through the doors to ask for help after suffering so many blows from political choices made in this place. From the pension changes to austerity to the winter fuel payment cut, it is endless and it feels endless for these women. This is simply an injustice that must be put right.

I told the previous Government in a similar debate last year:

"This is an injustice that needs to be addressed urgently. It is completely unacceptable that the Government have so far refused to take action to right this wrong. There is nothing to stop the Government taking immediate action to provide compensation".—*[Official Report, 12 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 27WH.]*

Like many others in this debate, I have on a number of occasions pledged my support to the WASPI women and to women over 50. I stand steadfast by that pledge of support. I have been to Downing Street twice, most recently last month, to call for full restitution, as well as mediation with the groups. They have made an offer to work with the Government on how we can get out of this logjam. At Prime Minister's questions in December, I asked the Prime Minister to let Parliament decide whether compensation should be paid. I call on the Minister today to ensure we have a free vote, so that we get a true reflection of the will of Parliament.

The current position is the wrong position, and I urge the Government to rethink their stance. It the ombudsman's position, it undermines office of the ombudsman, and indeed it undermines faith in this place, which has been

[*Ian Byrne*]

shaken to the core for so many of these women. I know from speaking to women in my constituency how much hurt it has caused and continues to cause. The sense of betrayal from politics, this place and our Government is absolutely palpable.

On behalf of the many Liverpool West Derby constituents affected by this injustice, I urge the Minister and the Government to rethink, to change course and to sit down with these women for mediation, so that eventually we can award compensation to all those affected by this grievous injustice.

5.21 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the 160,000 individuals who signed the e-petition on securing this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for opening it with power and passion. We are here to address a grave injustice that has affected millions of women across our country, including in Eastbourne—known for being home to many a great pensioner.

The WASPI women were let down by successive Governments after an increase to the state pension age was implemented without proper communication or notice. As a result, these women, many of whom had worked for decades and paid into the system in good faith, found their retirement plans shattered, with little time to adjust. This scandal has left many women in financial hardship, forced to continue working or unable to retire with dignity. One of them is my constituent Yvonne in Eastbourne, who said in a letter to me:

“I was offered early retirement. I did my sums carefully as I still had a mortgage to pay and accepted the offer. Only after everything was signed and settled did I discover that the months were now changed into years. This meant having to find work for longer than I expected to and giving up the plans my husband and I have.”

Many more women represented by Members of all political parties could paint a very similar scenario.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My hon. Friend's story of Yvonne reminds me of my constituent Christine, who had a long career in the NHS. She took a lower paid job in 2012 on the assumption that she would be able to claim her state pension in 2016. It was not until she contacted the DWP after she had left the NHS that she found out that she was not entitled to the state pension for twice the amount of time that she thought she would have to survive on a smaller income. This has been the experience of countless women in my constituency and across the country. They planned their retirement and future based on the wrong information. Does my hon. Friend agree that the continued betrayal of these women by successive Governments is disgraceful, and that ignoring the ombudsman's recommendation sets a dangerous precedent?

Josh Babarinde: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and nor could the ombudsman. The ombudsman has been very clear that these women suffered maladministration and that they should be compensated—no ifs, no buts. It is therefore grossly unjust that the Government have ruled out compensation, despite apologising for the injustice.

Compensation is not just a political issue; in my view, it is a moral obligation. I urge the Government to act on the ombudsman's findings and U-turn on their refusal to provide fair compensation to the WASPI women. The Liberal Democrats stand with the WASPI women's continued fight for compensation. I am proud to stand alongside women like Angela Boas in Eastbourne to continue fighting for the justice that these women need and deserve.

5.25 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to work under your chairmanship Sir Edward. I am pleased that the Petitions Committee has brought this debate to the House, especially given that as many as 160,000 signatures have been recorded, with some 266 of them from my own constituency. I thank all those who have written to me and all those who have campaigned and fought so hard over the years to try to bring the issue of WASPI women to a successful conclusion.

I should probably make a declaration—not one that is required by procedure, but one that is relevant to this debate. I am a WASPI woman, one of over 4,000 in my constituency. Clearly I am still working, and in a fairly privileged position as a Member of the House, but I have watched the various increases in the state pension qualifying age with great interest over the years.

I understand why it is necessary to equalise the pension age for men and women, but it is important to see that in context. In 1995, Parliament legislated to increase the pension age for women from 60 to 65 and bring it in line with the retirement age for men. That was meant to happen in stages between April 2010 and 2020, but in 2011, new legislation accelerated the timetable, meaning that women's state pension age reached 65 by November 2018. The same legislation brought forward the increase in the overall state pension age to 66, which happened between December 2018 and October 2020 for both men and women. Many women of my age felt as though the qualifying age was becoming more and more distant the closer we got to our 60s. As we know, many women did not receive notification of the changes in the qualifying age, and many others did not receive it timeously enough to allow them to make adjustments and changes.

The ombudsman considered the case of the WASPI women and concluded that there had been maladministration between 2005 and 2006, with a 28-month delay before beginning a direct mail exercise to notify affected women. Personally, I do not know whether I ever got a letter about the raising of the state pension age. I tend to keep that kind of thing, but I do not have such a letter. I do remember a friend telling me about it. I went on to the website and looked at the online calculator, and I found out that I would get my pension at 66, but not everyone has the opportunity to do that. Not everyone has access to the internet, and not everyone is literate enough with IT to be able to make those calculations.

As the ombudsman said, such women lost opportunities to make informed decisions about their finances, which diminished their sense of personal autonomy and financial control. It seems to me that when an ombudsman records such findings and suggests a course of action, we should follow it, but the ombudsman clearly had an

idea about the thinking within government—and I mean government in the generic sense, as the report predates this Government. I say that because the ombudsman concluded that it should lay the report before Parliament, and hoped that parliamentarians would implement its findings. That is what I hoped and expected would happen, and I cannot say how disappointed I am that it did not. But I say gently to the Minister that it is not too late to put it right.

I mentioned earlier that I am in a privileged position, and I am: I am privileged to have been sent here to represent my constituents, and I will continue to use that privilege to support and fight for WASPI women until such time as the ombudsman's recommendations are implemented.

5.30 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on opening this debate in such a powerful way.

I had to do some sums earlier on, because I seem to recall that the very first time I spoke as a Member of Parliament was in a debate, in this very Chamber, about this injustice to 1950s-born women. I was able to find out that I made that contribution on 5 July 2017. If I recall correctly, there was then, as there seems to be this afternoon, great consensus amongst Members that 1950s-born women have indeed suffered a great injustice. What has changed since then, however, is that we have had years of debates, petitions, demonstrations and an investigation by the ombudsman, who has also found in their favour.

Little could I have imagined back then—some eight years ago, now—that we would be standing here in this very Chamber debating and agreeing yet again that a great injustice had befallen 1950s-born women, yet also be arguing about a Government refusing to implement and honour the recommendations of the ombudsman. It would be easy to despair if it were not for the 1950s-born women of my constituency, who are an absolute inspiration. Thousands of women have spent the past eight or so years diligently attending meetings, organising petitions and offering support to each other. The impact of the maladministration has been severe, as others have mentioned: people have fallen into great financial hardship and distress, which has led far too often to strain on family relationships, as well as an impact on people's health.

However, these women have stuck together, organised and ensured that they give each other support in the darkest of days. More importantly, they set about the task of diligently collecting the information and evidence required of them to prove their case as part of the ombudsman's process. These women have done that. They have jumped through the many hoops of the various stages of the ombudsman process, with some compiling cases for the independent case examiner.

I agree with all those who have spoken before me: it is a real travesty for us to fail to offer those women justice after they have proven their case and had the ombudsman rule in their favour. I agree with others that that calls into question the integrity of not only the ombudsman process itself, but, more fundamentally, the whole democratic process that Parliament embodies.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making a powerful and eloquent case. He is absolutely right that the issue goes beyond even the just case of the WASPI women to something more fundamental: how Governments are held to account and how they willingly deal with that—this is not something that should be extracted with pain and anguish. The Government should step forward, change their heart and their tune, and deliver.

Ben Lake: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention, and I very much agree. We have an opportunity to right this wrong now. That would not only deliver justice to the 1950s-born women who suffered as a consequence of the changes—or the failure to communicate them—to the state pension age, but provide an important contribution to restoring faith in MPs, Parliament and the whole democratic process. I hope that the Government will reconsider the matter.

However, I have to say—perhaps this is the cynic or the pessimist in me—that when we consider everything we have asked 1950's-born women to do in recent years, such as jumping through all the various hoops and processes, coming up to London, which is quite the journey to make from west Wales, petitioning, demonstrating and organising, it is quite outrageous to ignore the ombudsman after it has proven, acceded to and accepted their case. On top of that, the Government are now, I understand, refusing to even engage with representatives of 1950s-born women in alternative forms of mediation. Perhaps worst of all, they are not giving Parliament the opportunity in Government time to vote on the matter. That is my one call and request of the Minister.

We have already heard this afternoon about the four options offered by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Give us that chance to express and voice the will of Parliament. I am confident that there is consensus in Parliament to see justice done for a generation of inspiring women, whom I feel incredibly honoured to represent.

5.35 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. This very important debate greatly matters to all my constituents, particularly the 4,900 women in my constituency whom it impacts. As the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) said in eloquently opening the debate, over 3.7 million women born in the 1950s have suffered grave injustices because of the changes to state pension age brought about in 1995, 2007 and 2011. Those changes were introduced without proper notice, leaving many in financial and emotional distress.

Those 1950s women worked hard all their lives; they paid their dues and contributed to the country and the economy, only for many of them to find that the retirement they had planned for was stolen from them without support or the basic courtesy of being informed in time. The Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign has fought tirelessly for over a decade to shine a light on that injustice, and I pay tribute, along with other Members, to its determination. I assure those in my constituency that it continues to have my support and solidarity.

The previous Government kicked the can down the road and delayed committing to anything that could repair the damage done to WASPI women. Their delay

[*Imran Hussain*]

has meant that at least 300,000 WASPI women have died waiting for the justice they deserved. I will say that the current Government must not, and cannot, go down the same path. While I note this Government's acknowledgment of the ombudsman's report that failings happened, communication was inadequate and women suffered, I also note their commitment to ensure that the maladministration and delay in sending out notifications never happens again, both of which are welcome.

Frankly, an apology alone is not enough. Apologies do not pay the rent, put food on the table or undo years of financial struggle. Let me be clear: this is about the principle of Government decision making and the responsibility to communicate properly, so that people can plan their futures with confidence. Crucially, as has been said by many hon. Members, it is also about recompense and redress. In this case, a 28-month delay in notifying affected women meant that they lost precious time to adjust their plans. Some lost tens of thousands of pounds, while others lost their homes. That is time and money that they will never get back.

I say to the Minister that we must look again at the ombudsman's recommendations for fair remedy. Words are not enough; we need action. I know that a High Court challenge could be on the way, but that should not be necessary. The WASPI women should not have to take their own Government to court to be heard. The point has been made, which I want to echo, that there is a reason why we have a parliamentary ombudsman, why we have inquiries and why we should follow well-made recommendations. I believe the Government seriously need to look at this case.

We must now ask: what more can be done to ensure that 1950s women receive fair treatment? I urge the Minister to address that question and to set out the next steps that the Government are taking to work constructively with campaigners, MPs and affected women to find a fair resolution. Whether it is through targeted support, a compensation framework or other measures, we must ensure that WASPI women are not abandoned once again.

5.39 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing the debate, and I pay tribute to the many women who have come along.

I would love to say that it is a pleasure to take part in this debate, but it is not. After eight years of taking part in debates, protests, meetings, all-party parliamentary groups and proceedings on private Members' Bills about this issue, and waiting on the ombudsman's report, it is above all frustrating that we have to do it yet again because the Government have failed in their responsibility to uphold the ombudsman's recommendations.

For me, there is a particular irony in that. Last week, I was in New York at the Commission on the Status of Women, and I come back here and wonder exactly what this debate, and the situation that the WASPI women find themselves in, says about the status of women in this country. As has been said, this generation worked hard, and paid their taxes and national insurance; they are now finding that there is no compensation, even though the Government admit that they let them down.

Looking at the Labour Benches, I am also struck by hope: if so many Labour MPs recognise the failing in this Government's stance on WASPI women, perhaps the Government will listen. They are not listening to the Opposition or to the WASPI women, but perhaps they will listen to their own MPs when they say, "You've got this wrong; you're letting these women down," and we will have an end to this.

I admit that when I was elected, almost eight years ago now, I did not know much about the WASPI women and their case. However, one of the first women who came to me after I was elected had been affected. Her letter from the DWP was late, and she had made financial decisions about her future before it reached her; she was less than two years away from retirement when she was told that she would have to wait an additional five years. Like many women, she lost out financially. Many women will also have been let down by this Government's decision not to award compensation.

The previous Government were criticised for kicking the issue into the long grass, and they did, but this Government had an opportunity to overturn that. They have not taken it, despite the promises that many of them, including Cabinet Ministers, made before the general election. Instead, they turned their back on the millions of pension-age women who were wronged, through no fault of their own.

For years, we have pushed the Government to do something. I suspect that the WASPI women, not just in the Gallery but up and down the country, felt that a corner had been turned in July of last year: that the ombudsman's report would be upheld, and that a Labour Government would stand by them. The time has come for the Labour Government to be as good as their word to the WASPI women, and take action.

5.43 pm

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. Petitions are powerful tools for democracy that amplify people's fight for a cause. Listening to these voices is just as important.

My sister is a WASPI woman, and I rise to voice my support for all WASPI women. These courageous and resilient women have faced an injustice. They have toiled throughout their lives, often battling against societal disadvantages. They are not just campaigners; they are our mothers and grandmothers—the pillars of our families and communities. The sudden and unexpected change to the state pension age plunged some women into financial despair, forcing them to struggle during what should be their golden years.

I am immensely proud to support a Labour Government who have tirelessly worked to rectify historic wrongs, from addressing mineworkers' pensions to supporting LGBT veterans and compensating victims of the infected blood scandal. This Government have consistently stood against injustice, but they failed to recognise this one.

The WASPI women were not given adequate notice, nor time to prepare for these changes. Many had planned their futures based on the original pension age, only to have their lives disrupted without proper consultation or consideration. The Government must confront this injustice and provide fair compensation to those affected.

It is time to right this wrong. We must learn from the past to ensure that no other generation endures this unfair treatment.

The DWP claims that 90% of women were aware of the changes to the state pension age, which means that 10% were left in the dark due to the DWP's failure to provide timely information. The DWP's communication failures affected the lives of WASPI women, particularly the most vulnerable. The parliamentary ombudsman found that the Department for Work and Pensions committed maladministration by failing to effectively communicate the changes in the state pension age and recommended that the Government provide compensation to the affected women.

It is impossible to quantify the financial hardship and emotional distress that these women have endured. But we must also recognise that this Government inherited a £22 billion financial deficit from the Conservatives, and we must consider the most judicious use of taxpayers' money. Having said that, I implore the DWP and the Minister to revisit this issue with the urgency and compassion it deserves.

Standing here, I am reminded of Margaret, a constituent from Cumnock. She was a devoted single mother who worked tirelessly to provide for her children and uphold her responsibilities to society. In her words, "I paid my way." I promised Margaret that I would fight for justice on her behalf. When the decision was made not to compensate, I returned to visit Margaret and reaffirmed my commitment to her. Now, by standing here, I want to amplify the voices of Margaret, Lynn, Francis and countless others like them. We need to share the story of the WASPI women, and in doing that, we need to push for justice.

5.46 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the petitioners and the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for bringing this debate here today and leading it.

The claim the Government have made is that 90% of affected women knew of the changes to their state pension age. That survey was not representative of the affected cohort: around 200 women born in the 1950s were asked, out of a total sample size of 1,950 people. I ask the Minister, as the WASPI campaigners ask, is it fair to let the DWP mark its own homework? I also ask him to explain why the Government have taken the almost unprecedented step of ignoring the independent findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Several hundred women in my constituency, along with thousands of other women in Scotland, signed the petition to introduce a compensation scheme—almost 160,000 women signed it across these islands. I am sorry if I sound angry on this auspicious day—and I wish everyone here, including you, Sir Edward, as well as people watching at home, a very happy St Patrick's day—but I am angry, and I reflect the anger of the WASPI women. It is the human aspect of this decision that so sticks in the craw: pensioners seem to be singled out to take the hardest cuts of all. Many WASPI women have written to me talking of losing family and friends who never lived to see them get justice for their loss.

This was a Government elected—many of its Members in Scottish constituencies—on promises of change. Yet all we see is a series of broken promises: national insurance rises, the family farm tax, pensioners in fuel poverty, the Scotch whisky industry, energy prices and the two-child cap. Last July, SNP supporters lent Labour candidates their vote. They believed the promises that were made. "Read my lips," said Anas Sarwar, "no austerity under Labour." Yet what we see is attack after attack on the most vulnerable people. Here we have the WASPI women—people who many Labour candidates stood and had their photographs taken with, holding placards promising their support, and this Government have spurned them. Well, hell hath no fury; the WASPI women will not forget that, along with all the other broken promises.

I have heard many Scottish Labour MPs speak today, but when they had the chance to support our motion, only one voted with us. The 2026 Holyrood elections are just around the corner, and although 2029 may seem a long way off, voters—just like the WASPI women—will not forget Labour's broken promises. I say to the Government: give the WASPI women the justice they deserve.

5.50 pm

Michelle Scrogam (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for opening the debate.

I first want to acknowledge the tireless campaigning of the Barrow and Furness WASPI women. They have worked tenaciously to advocate for fairness and justice for all those affected. WASPI women did not ask for this change, and they had no say in how it was implemented, but they are the ones left to cope with the consequences: the financial strain, the anxiety and the uncertainty.

The issue is not about opposing pension reform. No one denies that we need a sustainable and fair pension system, but we must recognise that the way these changes were carried out was deeply unfair to those who had no ability to prepare. It is also important to recognise the context in which the Government find themselves. This mess was not created by this Government but, as in all too many cases right now, they have been left with the difficult task of clearing it up.

There is no easy solution, but the findings of the ombudsman's report provided a critical assessment of the way the previous Government handled the pension age changes. The report confirmed what many of us had long suspected: that the communication of these changes was inadequate and misleading. Those findings underline the need for a fair and swift resolution to ensure that the WASPI women are not left to bear the consequences of these failures alone.

I commend the excellent work of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, and encourage Members across all parties to continue to work with it. It remains a vital forum for dialogue and understanding.

There is still time to deliver a fair and equitable compensation package for these women. This is the time to right this wrong. The way forward is continued collaboration, where Ministers keep the door open to those who have legitimate concerns and wish to find a

[Michelle Scrogham]

fair resolution. Ongoing dialogue is essential to ensuring that the affected women are heard and that a fair and just solution is found. There are many WASPI women in my constituency. I pledged to back those women, and I will stand by that pledge until justice is served.

5.52 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I thank the Petitions Committee for bringing this important debate before us today, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on her excellent opening remarks. In my constituency, there are almost 6,000 women in the age group affected by these pension changes. We have heard that only 43% of women knew that their pension age was changing. That translates to 3,416 women in North East Hampshire who were unaware of the pension changes, which impacted them significantly in the following years.

The Government at the time failed to inform women affected by changes to their pension age. As we have heard, many people have harrowing stories. One of my constituents, now in her 70s, was a victim of this maladministration. She is forced to continue working to supplement her income, due to the lack of notice regarding her retirement age. Like many others, had she received clear, timely communication from the Department for Work and Pensions, she would have been able to make informed life choices and plan accordingly. If a private pension provider failed to inform someone about when they could start to receive their pension, that person would rightly expect compensation for decisions made based on incomplete information—in this case, they would be budgeting with the wrong number. The situation should be no different for those affected by Government errors.

The Government should be ashamed that they have rejected the financial payouts recommended by the ombudsman. North East Hampshire has one of the most significant gender pay gaps, heightened by the fact that men work disproportionately more in full-time jobs than women. Inequality in salary and employment opportunities then worsens the disparity at the point of state pension. That has led to women being less financially independent and increasingly vulnerable in their later years.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): My constituent, Carol, worked as a learning assistant throughout her adult life and was planning for a happy retirement—until she found out, with just a few months to spare, that she had another five years to work. That caused significant mental health challenges for her, and ultimately a stroke, which she attributes to the stress she endured during that difficult time. Does my hon. Friend agree that 1950s-born women experienced dreadful workplace injustices throughout their careers, such as lower pay, which she just referred to, and that this Government have a unique opportunity to undo one of the injustices they face in their retirement?

Alex Brewer: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I absolutely agree.

Let us be very clear: this generation of women faced discrimination at work—more discrimination than women today, with a larger gender pay gap, more glass ceilings,

fewer promotion opportunities, lower pensions and lower savings. This generation of women did the vast majority of unpaid housework and caring responsibilities, and worked more hours for less pay for their whole lives, only to find that the goalposts were moved at the worst possible moment. The ombudsman's reports have rightly said that WASPI women should be compensated fairly.

As a member of the APPG on state pension inequality for women, I have been part of the calls on the Government to address this injustice. We should not be living in a society in which promises are a campaign tactic abandoned at the first instance of power. We saw Labour MPs meeting many WASPI campaigners and expressing their heartfelt support before July. We know that maladministration occurred and that WASPI women have been harmed by this injustice. It is now time for the Government to act.

5.57 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for her passionate speech. My friend, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), made a very pertinent point earlier: the fundamental issue here is Government accountability—the ability of this place and citizens to hold the Government to account when they get something wrong. What we are seeing today is that accountability mechanism—that framework—being demolished before our very eyes. If the mechanisms that have been developed to hold Government to account are rendered impotent, which is what has happened to the ombudsman, that damages the very heart of democracy itself. That is how important this issue is.

The ombudsman was clear: these women suffered injustice, and compensation was owed to them. It was also clear that the Government should act on that, and it made the very rare decision to place its report, not before the Department for Work and Pensions, but before this place. It did that because it felt that the Department—under all Governments, not just this Government—was not capable of delivering justice for the women affected. And it was right, because what we have seen is a complete dismissal of the injustice that these women have suffered. Now, I do not believe that that is the intention of the Minister or of the Government, but they have the opportunity now to change course.

There is a very real prospect of a High Court judicial review. That will result in significant legal costs on the part of the Government—legal costs that they will have to justify to the taxpayer, given that the ombudsman's report was very clear that compensation was owed. So will the Minister now look again at the case for compensation?

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Sir John Hayes: I rise for two purposes. The first is to put it on the record that the hon. Lady, alongside others, has made an outstanding contribution to this campaign; she has been a notable figure in this process. The second is to make a suggestion that she might put to the Government: why do the Government not meet a small delegation of MPs from all parties with a group of WASPI women? Let us see if we can thrash this out

in a way that allows the Government to get off the hook and allows the WASPI women to receive the satisfaction they so richly deserve.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree with the right hon. Member. The all-party parliamentary group on this issue has extended an invitation to the Minister. We will of course widen the invitation to include women's groups in accordance with the right hon. Member's suggestion. The invitation is there. That would be a very good starting place because ultimately the only justice that can be secured is justice that involves the women themselves. To listen to what they want to propose to the Government would be a good starting place.

I want to ask the Minister a few questions. Given the prospect of a High Court judicial review, presumably when issuing the decision not to compensate, the Government must have carried out, if they were acting diligently, a legal risk assessment of the prospect of the success of potential future legal action. If that is the case, will the Minister place before the House a copy of that legal advice so that we can see what the Government considered at the time? Does he accept the ombudsman's proposal that Ministers and MPs intervene to ensure justice is delivered, and does he agree that it would be prudent for the Government to make time for a parliamentary debate so that MPs across this House can have a vote on the issue on a non-partisan basis, as was intimated by the ombudsman?

Finally, will the Minister look again at the case for compensation? As I have stressed, I do not believe it is his intention to undermine democracy; nor is that the intention of the Government. Given the prospect of legal action, now would be an opportune time for the Minister to meet the groups that are campaigning on behalf of women and look at the different compensation mechanisms and mediation proposals that have been suggested.

6.2 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Last November, as a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I asked the Secretary of State when we could expect to see a decision on compensation for WASPI women. She replied:

"There is lots of information to go through. We need to get it right but I want this resolved as soon as possible."

I asked about a timescale and she said:

"If I gave you a date then I would have sorted it, and it needs to be sorted, but I will do it as soon as humanly possible."

No one would have suspected that "sorting" the issue meant an outright refusal. So where did this shock handbrake turn of a decision come from? I suspect it has more to do with the Treasury than with any objective measure of fairness.

In justifying her decision, the Secretary of State made repeated reference to one particular statistic: the DWP survey from 2006 found that 90% of women understood that the pension age was rising. She repeated the 90% figure like a mantra in her presentation to the House and the media, but the survey was based on a tiny sample of perhaps 170 women who could not possibly be taken as fair representation of the entire female population.

Furthermore, the survey was contradicted by multiple other studies conducted both before and after. Research from the following year found that half of women whose pension age had in fact risen to between 60 and 65 still thought it stood at 60. On what grounds did the Secretary of State put so much faith in the 90% figure, rather than the 50%? None that I can see, except that it was cherry-picked to support the conclusion that she always wanted to reach in the first place. What is more, it is clear that the DWP itself attached far greater weight to a later survey. An internal memo from April 2007 described the research findings as "depressing reading". It continued: "we still have 50% 'ignorance levels' with three years to go. [The Ombudsman's] first question will be what are you proposing to do about it?"

That turns out to have been a really prescient question.

To further justify their decision, the Government have argued that earlier warning letters would not have worked anyway, but writing letters is exactly how much of the Government communicate to this day. It is sheer nonsense to argue that the standard method of communication across all Departments would have been useless in this one circumstance of WASPI women.

I accept that there are financial pressures on the Government. They could have said: "We accept the ombudsman's findings, but we are not currently able to respond," or "not able to meet the full levels suggested." What is not reasonable is to undermine the ombudsman, which is a highly unusual and constitutionally worrying move, and to pick through the evidence to support the conclusion that they always wanted to find in the first place. Fundamentally, it was neither safe nor reasonable for the Secretary of State to rely so completely on the 90% figure, to the deliberate exclusion of multiple other statistics, which showed a much lower level of awareness. In my constituency, 5,000 women have been affected by this decision; many more of course have been affected nationwide. I call on the Government to respect the vital constitutional role of the ombudsman and think again.

6.6 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Both the ombudsman and the response of the Secretary of State back in December leave no room for doubt that the Government failed to adequately notify many 1950s-born women about changes to their pension age. This is maladministration and a scandal that has driven many to campaign for justice.

I invited the WASPI women in Falkirk to meet me after the statement from the Secretary of State, and the message I took from that meeting is that if we in this place believed that there was no injustice, compensation would never have been paid, regardless of fiscal circumstances, but if we recognise an injustice, as the Department has now done, we must deliver a form of the recommended redress of the ombudsman's findings. On behalf of the WASPI women in Falkirk, I will ask some of the questions that were raised at that meeting back in December. I would like a response, if possible, from the Minister, for my constituents.

[*Euan Stainbank*]

Why can the Government pick and choose when to implement ombudsman recommendations? Is the 90% figure derived from a study specific to women who would have been impacted by the pension changes? Is this decision based on cost or a genuine disagreement with the findings of the ombudsman? Further questions were asked, but those are questions on behalf of women who attended that meeting.

In the October Budget, the Government did not just promise, but delivered for victims of the Horizon scandal, of the infected blood scandal and of the mineworkers' pension scheme, and for LGBTQ+ veterans. That is a proud record. I put it to the Government that we should think again and deliver redress for the WASPI women as well.

6.7 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on introducing the debate so powerfully.

WASPI women faced inequalities in the workplace and in finance. Many entered the workforce before the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, which at least in theory introduced equal pay and made it possible for women to get credit cards, loans and other financial products without the support of a man. Statutory maternity pay was not introduced until after many had already had their children, and it was only in 1990 that their income was recognised for taxation purposes as their own, rather than their husband's.

The principle of an equal pension age is right. The issue is the lack of timely notification, denying WASPI women the chance to plan their finances in an informed way. That is yet another injustice for the WASPI women generation, and it is one that has had real consequences. For example, one of my constituents, born in 1955, found out that her state pension age was increasing to 66 just before her 60th birthday. It was too late to plan any differently, so she ploughed on, but she was forced by leukaemia to retire just before her 65th birthday, leading to financial hardship.

This was also a generation where caring responsibilities overwhelmingly fell to women. That is illustrated by another of my constituents, who was aiming to retire at 60, in part to help to care for her elderly mother. She was denied that opportunity due to the failure to communicate clearly the state pension age changes. As a result, she missed out on being able to care for her dying mother due to needing to work for longer. She told me how she would have welcomed a letter giving her enough notice about the changes, as that may have allowed her to plan her finances further ahead, to allow her more time with her mother. The impact that the changes have had not only on WASPI women themselves, but on their family and loved ones—who these women often care for as they get older—is an often overlooked factor. That concern will only grow as time goes by.

To conclude, there is clear evidence of injustice, and I urge the Government to listen to the ombudsman's decision and address that injustice as promised.

6.10 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on her powerful opening remarks.

According to the latest figures, there are 7,160 women in Scarborough and Whitby affected by the various Acts that made changes to women's state pension age. As a candidate standing in Scarborough and Whitby, I pledged to support WASPI women, and as an MP, I rise today to speak for them. I sympathise with their anger and frustration. In her statement to the House in December, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that most women knew that their state pension age was increasing. That may well have been the case—I have no way of telling—but I have been contacted by so many constituents who have told me that they were not aware of the changes to their state pension age, and the reasons are ones that I think we can all understand.

My constituent Kirsty was living in Spain when the letters were sent from the DWP, so was totally unaware of the pension age increase. Another of my constituents told me that she only heard about the changes through a friend while looking after her dad, who was suffering from dementia.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the whole House is probably aware, Women Against State Pension Inequality has received 7,607 requests and raised £132,000 for the judicial review. There are 77,000 WASPI women in Northern Ireland, and 6,000 in my constituency, who want justice. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be in the best interests of the Government and the Minister to meet those women to finally negotiate a satisfactory outcome, avoid the costs of a judicial review, and ensure that justice can be given to the WASPI women, who richly deserve it?

Alison Hume: As always, the hon. Member makes a powerful point for his constituents, and I support his wider call for the Government to think again.

Returning to my constituent who was looking after her father who suffered from dementia, had she been aware of the changes she would have increased her personal pension contribution and saved more money to enable her to retire sooner to look after her dad, who has since passed away. The carer's allowance was simply not enough to live on and pay for food and other essential bills. Her experience caring for an elderly parent is very common among women in their 50s and 60s; I have been there myself. It is extremely likely that many other women in that situation will have been preoccupied with coping with the day-to-day challenges that carers face and will not have known about the change to their state pension age.

Another constituent of mine had to sell her home of 36 years after she lost her husband, as she had planned for the future under the impression that she would receive her state pension at 60. Obviously, she acknowledges that even without the changes there is no guarantee that she could have remained in her home, but all the calculations that she and her husband did indicated that she would be all right. Many others had to work longer than they had anticipated or dip into their life savings and change their retirement plans after years of working hard and looking forward to life beyond work.

I acknowledge the action that the Government are taking to tackle the long-standing problems with carer's allowance, which previous Governments failed to address. The increase in the state pension this April will make a tangible difference to the lives of many women in Scarborough and Whitby. I also acknowledge that the previous Government failed to set aside a single penny for compensation, and left behind a black hole in the public finances, which I appreciate constrains the ability of this Government to offer compensation.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the implicit argument of Ministers in this debate—that they would rather spend the money on other issues—is producing an incredibly slippery slope when it comes to delivering justice for Government maladministration? Does she agree that it gives the impression that we might be moving towards a situation where we means test justice?

Alison Hume: It is important that as a Labour Government we recognise the impact on people, including my constituents, of the DWP's failure to communicate the change effectively. I urge the Minister to look again at giving compensation that will, in some way, acknowledge that WASPI women have lost out on so much more than money.

6.15 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Stringer.

Surely the abiding question that arises from this debacle is: what is the point in having an ombudsman if, when maladministration is found, it can be swept aside and ignored? Why have we an ombudsman? Governments make mistakes. Governments get things wrong. People think Governments get things wrong, so they want to complain. So what do we do? We set up an independent ombudsman. Why? Because Governments should not be judge in their own cause. That is the whole purpose and ethos of having an ombudsman. But in this case the Government want to be judge in their own cause.

We are not talking about some incidental, slight illustration of maladministration. Let us remind ourselves that the ombudsman found that

“some women lost opportunities to make informed decisions about their finances. It diminished their sense of personal autonomy and financial control”

and therefore led to injustice. We are talking about injustice—we are not just talking about maladministration—and injustice needs to be rectified. The Government say, “We apologise”—frankly, the sincerity of that apology is weighed in the balance of their refusal to compensate—but it is not just a matter of saying sorry. It is a matter of putting it right. That is what we do when we find an injustice: we try to put it right.

What have the Government done in this case? We had the most spurious attempt to repudiate the ombudsman's findings. The Government told us, “Oh, well, only one in four people actually read unsolicited letters from DWP.” What was the point in sending them then? They might as well have saved the postage.

It really is pathetic and appalling that the Government have reached the stage of saying, “Nothing to see here; nothing to do here; we're doing nothing about it” to women the independent ombudsman says were not just wronged but had an injustice visited upon them. I say to

this Government: it is not a sign of weakness to admit that you are wrong; it is a sign of strength. The Government would rise in the estimation of many if, rather than hide behind their huge majority in the House, they exercised the strength of saying, “We've got this wrong.”

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): The hon. and learned Gentleman is making an extremely powerful case about righting an injustice and about the importance for our parliamentary system of following the recommendations of an ombudsman. Does he agree that the Government revisiting this issue will strengthen our democracy? We have heard just how strong the cross-party consensus is; notably, that includes many Labour Members, as well as Members of other parties, referring to the pledges we made in the election. Is that not why it is so important that the Government think again to restore faith in democracy?

Jim Allister: This matter goes to the very heart of public confidence in our system of Government. I started by saying that Governments get things wrong, and people think they get things wrong, so the Government have an independent arbitrator. But we cannot have an independent arbitrator and then throw the findings in the bin, and that is what is happening here. It goes to the very heart of confidence in Government, whichever party is in power. If maladministration of this magnitude is found, there must be recompense for those against whom the injustice was wrought.

I say to the Government that many of their Back Benchers are saying loud and clear that it is time to rethink. It certainly is time to rethink, and in that there is strength. On behalf of the 77,000 WASPI women in Northern Ireland, who are with those in the rest of this United Kingdom, I say that it is beyond time for the Government to rethink. It is time to put right the wrong that was done to all these women.

6.21 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

I thank all those who signed the e-petition that led to this important debate. I have long supported the WASPI campaign and will continue to offer my support. The WASPI women have been repeatedly let down by decisions made under Conservative Governments, so I welcome the Government's apology for the maladministration that led to the delay in notifying 1950s-born women about the increase in the state pension age. Accountability and redress for those failings is essential.

A near-six-year investigation by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found an urgent need for a remedy and took the rare but necessary step of laying its report before Parliament. It is in our hands. I recognise that this is a difficult issue for a Government who inherited a country in deep distress, with public services and the economy in dire straits, so I have sympathy with the Government's argument that a flat-rate compensation scheme may not be justified. But I firmly believe there should be more effort to explore alternative remedies.

One of my constituents wrote:

“Acknowledgment and apology are of no use to us, and even less to the thousands of women who died during this process.”

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

After her pension age was moved once, she assumed that was the end, but in 2011 David Cameron moved it again, a year after she had planned to retire, and after she had already left work. The impact on her life has been significant, but WASPI women understand that any compensation would be for maladministration, not lost pensions.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): One of my constituents fully believed that justice would be done, to the extent that she planned to put the compensation money aside for her own funeral. Of course, compensation has not been given. I have more than 6,000 WASPI women in my constituency, and they all rely on me to speak up for them. I will continue to support them, look out for them and raise their stories in this place so that their voices are heard. Do you agree that we need to find a way to seek justice for these women?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. It is not up to me, in the Chair, to agree with you or not.

Lee Pitcher: My apologies, Mr Stringer.

Mohammad Yasin: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend's views.

The WASPI women support pension equity, but not the disruption of their retirement plans by Government maladministration. There is a strong case for offering compensation to the worst-affected women, given the severe hardship many have endured as a result of this failure. The pension triple lock does not address the losses faced by many 1950s-born women, who, due to familial responsibilities, often do not receive the full state pension, and thus benefit less than men.

An injustice has occurred, and it is now a matter of principle to uphold the remedy recommendations in the PHSO report. There is room for debate about what a compensation remedy would look like, and the women in my constituency, who I have supported on this issue for years, are open to alternative solutions. For instance, some would accept compensation payments over time through a scheduling agreement.

The WASPI women have been respectful, resolute and very patient, even when they are at the stage in life where there is more time behind them than ahead. For many, it is too late. Let us revisit this issue and find a remedy by focusing on what we can do, not on what we cannot.

6.26 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) and her stellar speech to launch the debate.

This is the first debate I have spoken in that has been triggered by a petition. The fact is that the petition has been driven forward swiftly by the force of nature that is the WASPI women. One can only acknowledge what excellent campaigners they have been over many years. Their patience has been worn thin. As colleagues have alluded to, sadly a WASPI woman dies every 13 minutes. That means that during this three-hour debate some 14 WASPI women will have sadly died without receiving the compensation they so richly deserve.

In my Torbay constituency, there are 6,930 WASPI women who deserve the support that the Government could give them. Across the United Kingdom there are 3.7 million WASPI women—that is over half a million people more than the population of Wales. An enormous amount of people could be benefiting from compensation that they so richly deserve.

I was reflecting on the fact that many of us in the Chamber are new MPs. When I got elected—I am sure a number of Members have also reflected on this—the most important thing we needed to achieve was to rebuild trust between the public and politicians. We see elsewhere, in western Europe and North America, what happens when trust is broken and extremists take power, so we must rebuild trust. We saw what happened under the previous Government, when many of us stayed at home and did the right thing while others partied at No. 10. That broken trust needs to be rebuilt, and the issue before us today is potentially part of that rebuilding.

Throughout the debate colleagues have highlighted many heartbreaking stories from around the United Kingdom, and the time has flown by. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) highlighted how the Secretary of State picked on an issue that held no water at all. I hope the Minister will return to that when he reflects on the debate.

Pam in my constituency believed that she was set to retire at a certain age. She spent time supporting a husband who was dying from terminal cancer and a mother who was elderly and frail. She has been let down—as many women have throughout the United Kingdom.

Let me now reflect on the ombudsman's report. People are currently queuing up to say that the DWP is broken and not fit for purpose, and the report highlights that that is the case. Quangos seem to be somewhat out of fashion with the Government at the moment, so is the ombudsman one that the Government will consider abolishing? If they are choosing to ignore it this easily, what is the point of it? I hope that the Minister can provide some reassurances on that. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions stood up in the Chamber, accepted that there was maladministration and apologised, but said she will not give compensation. That is bizarre in the extreme. We need to build trust with our communities again.

I am very much alive to the fact that, only this afternoon, WASPI women have lodged paperwork in the High Court for a judicial review on this very issue. That could take six months to come to fruition, or it could take 14 months, but why drag this out further? Let us not have the indignity of the Government being dragged kicking and screaming to the right decision. Do the right thing now, Minister.

6.31 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), my Wiltshire near-neighbour, for her powerful speech representing the many thousands of people who supported the petition.

I pay tribute to our visitors in the Public Gallery, many of whom I detect might qualify as WASPI women. I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) about the power of this campaign,

which demonstrates what people power can do to get the attention of Parliament. I hope they feel that this debate has advanced their cause—we will hear from the Minister shortly about whether that has happened.

I also pay tribute to hon. Members across the Chamber for their speeches. I agree with those of them who pointed out the cross-party nature of our efforts. It has been very powerful to see, in particular, the friendship between the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), which is a moving sight. They are the conscience and soul of their respective parties, and I hope that the Minister will listen to his hon. Friend just as I listen to my right hon. Friend.

I recognise that the question is a complex one and the Government have had a difficult time in thinking about what to do. It is true, as the ombudsman's report pointed out, that there was no direct loss of income to women from the maladministration. However, it is also true that the bad communication of the policy change led directly to people's income being impacted negatively and to their making decisions in the absence of full information from Government about their future income, as many hon. Members have powerfully expressed on behalf of individual constituents.

It is also true that the question of how to communicate with individual members of the public is a fraught one, but it is simply not credible to say that the communications with this group were adequate. As the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) powerfully pointed out, if the Government also say that there is very little point in sending letters because people do not open them, then what is the point in the Government communicating with the public in that way on any topic?

It is also true—this is the final defence of the Government, as it were—that dealing with 3.5 million people, all of whom have different circumstances, is a complex matter. I recognise how difficult that is, and how enormous the potential bill for the taxpayer could have been if every single one of those women received the maximum compensation.

I have said that this issue is very complicated, but it is also fundamentally very simple. Other hon. Members have made this point more powerfully than I can, but the fact is that Labour MPs campaigned to fix this problem, right the wrongs that had been done to the WASPI women and, if they won the election, see justice done. That has not happened. As hon. Members have said very powerfully, our democracy depends on us MPs fulfilling the promises that we make when we stand for election. If we do not do that, we will have a bigger problem than the injustice done to the WASPI women; indeed, our whole democracy will be in crisis.

I recognise that more could have been done by the last Conservative Government before the election. However, we were waiting for the ombudsman's report and the suggestion that we kicked it into the long grass is a little unfair. The fact is that the ombudsman's report arrived a matter of weeks before the general election was called. I am confident—my party made clear pledges to this effect—that we would have fulfilled our commitment to the WASPI women in light of the ombudsman's report. Exactly what we would have done, I cannot say. Sadly, no one will ever know because the public took a different view about who should take the matter forward.

Nevertheless, I can say with absolute candour and confidence that we would have done more than nothing, which is what the Labour Government have done.

Leaving party politics out of it, I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who said that this is a matter for Parliament. The report came from a parliamentary ombudsman and it is Parliament that decides on these matters. Like her, I take hope in the many excellent, powerful and brave speeches made by Labour Members here in Westminster Hall today, and by many other Members who have stood in public and pledged their opposition to the decision made by their own party leadership. I honour them for the commitment they are making to honour the pledges they made when they stood as candidates, and I very much hope that the Minister is listening to them.

Jim Shannon: I have been a Back Bencher all my parliamentary career; I have no wish to be anything other than a Back Bencher. I am very happy in the role that I play. The Government Back Benchers in Westminster Hall today are playing an absolutely magnificent role; they should be congratulated and they should be very proud of the stance they are taking. Every one of them has spoken in support of the WASPI women and we thank them for that—and more Members than those Back Benchers are committed to doing the same. I look to the Minister here today. I have seen him nodding in support of them; his head went up and down, so I think he was agreeing with what they were saying. If that is the case, does he agree that he can only do one thing—meet the WASPI women before the judicial review makes him do something that he may end up deciding he should have done long ago?

Danny Kruger: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is without a doubt the greatest Back Bencher in the House of Commons, and I very much agree with what he is saying. I reiterate my appreciation of and respect for colleagues across the House and particularly those Labour Members who have spoken today and in other places in support of the WASPI women.

Let me finish by putting a specific question to the Minister. When we were here in Westminster Hall a couple of months ago to debate this issue, it was his first day in the job. By the way, we should not be blaming him for coming up with this policy; he was a Back Bencher when it was conceived and he just had to come out and defend it, which he did. On that day, during the last debate on this topic, he said:

“We will work with the ombudsman to develop a detailed action plan identifying and addressing lessons from this and other PHSO investigations.” —[*Official Report*, 15 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 157WH.]

I would be grateful if he told us what progress has been made on this matter and what action plan we can expect. What update can he provide? As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) just said, I very much hope that he will work closely with the WASPI women themselves and their representatives to develop that action plan.

This battle is not over; as we have just heard, there is a case in the High Court about it. However, Parliament remains powerful enough, and has the authority and the ability, to right the injustice that has been done over

[*Danny Kruger*]

so many years to these women. I very much hope that the Minister—who, as I say, cannot be blamed for conceiving of this policy—having heard the powerful speeches from parties across the House and being aware of the strength of feeling in our constituencies, will feed back to his colleagues in the Government that a mistake has been made and that the opportunity still remains to right this injustice.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Mr Stringer, and I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for leading today's debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I look forward to hearing her closing remarks.

Questions about when each of us can draw our pension are hugely important and so are related questions about how we spend our latter years, including when we can retire. Therefore, it not surprising that this petition has garnered so many signatures, nor that this debate has brought so many spectators and hon. Members to Westminster Hall today. Of course, none of us needs to come here to have those conversations. We have them every week precisely because they matter so much.

I have declared an interest on this issue before: my aunt in Aberystwyth sees herself as a WASPI woman. Just two weeks ago, I met Georgina Kettleborough at Burlais primary school. She has supported children for over three decades in the canteen and throughout the school and is about to retire at the age of 69. I hope we can all join in congratulating her on that milestone, as we join my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) in congratulating his mother on her birthday.

Georgina's retirement comes several years after she was entitled to her state pension because working in the school is such a big part of her life. People will not be surprised to know, however, that she would have preferred to receive her pension earlier. Everyone will understand that. Who would not feel that way—especially women from a generation that suffered such significant disadvantage in the labour market and elsewhere, as the hon. Members for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) and for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) spelled out?

However, the ombudsman did not investigate the decision of the Conservative Government to increase the state pension age for women in 1995 or that of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government to accelerate those increases in 2011. I make that point because several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), have referred to the desirability of those original decisions. That is not to downplay the significance of those decisions—far from it. SPA equalisation was a very large and important change, and the acceleration was opposed by my party for the reasons set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson). But the ombudsman did not investigate the legality or merits of those decisions. Instead—I should note that the WASPI campaign is clear on this point—the sole focus was on how those changes were communicated by the Department for Work and Pensions.

The ombudsman looked at six cases that it said reflected the range of issues and the injustices raised. It concluded that the DWP provided adequate and accurate information on changes to the state pension age between 1995 and 2004. However, it also found that decisions made between 2005 and 2007 led to a 28-month delay in sending out letters to women born in the 1950s. The ombudsman says that those delays were maladministration, as almost every hon. Member who spoke today reiterated.

We respect the work of the ombudsman, its independence and the work it does, a point many hon. Members have raised. In this case, we agree that the letters should have been sent sooner. We have apologised and we will learn the lessons. However, as everyone in this room is well aware, we do not agree with the ombudsman's approach to injustice or remedy. Many hon. Members have asked whether that invalidates the role of the ombudsman, including my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey). My strong view is that it does not. It is, rightly, rare, but not unprecedented, for a Government to take that view.

Two important considerations when making that decision were that the evidence shows that sending people unsolicited letters can be ineffective, which is why it is part of a wider communication campaign on every issue where it is used today, and that the majority of 1950s-born women were aware of the fact that the state pension age was changing, if not of their specific state pension age. The ombudsman assumed that sending letters earlier would have changed what women knew and how they acted.

Seamus Logan: Can the Minister explain his assertion that the majority of women were aware of these changes?

Torsten Bell: I will come to exactly that point shortly.

The 2014 research was not properly considered by the ombudsman. The same research is now the subject of live litigation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) noted. In addition, there was considerable awareness that the state pension age was increasing. Research from 2004 used by the ombudsman shows that 73% of people then aged 45 to 54 were aware that the state pension age was going up. Further research from 2006 reinforced that finding and was given to and used by the ombudsman. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) focused on the widely used 43% figure, but that figure refers to all women, including some aged 16 at the time of the survey, not just those who were affected by the state pension age changes.

Christine Jardine: I take on board what the Minister says about the research, but the fact that 73% of people knew that there would be changes to the pension age does not tell us that 73% of women, or any percentage, knew that it would affect them. That is not what the evidence tells us.

Torsten Bell: The fact that people were widely aware that the state pension age was rising is indicative that it was not news to most people, even if they had not got the details on their specific circumstances. The 2006 research is now also the subject of live litigation, so I will resist the temptation to dive into the details, beyond directly addressing the point raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on the sample sized used in that survey. Returning to

my old expertise in this area, the confidence intervals provided in that survey are certainly small enough to make it clear that a clear majority were aware that the state pension age was changing, so I do not think it is right to cast aspersions on that survey.

Rebecca Long Bailey: One of the datasets that the Government rely on to make their assertions, specifically the 90% figure, actually includes women who were not born in the 1950s. Can the Minister give us an exact figure as to how many women in that 90% category responded to the survey?

Torsten Bell: The 90% figure refers to the age group that best overlaps with women born in the 1950s, so that is the best available figure from that survey.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Torsten Bell: I will make some progress because I have given the best answer that I can to my hon. Friend's question.

The ombudsman is clear that redress and compensation should normally reflect individual impact, but it also acknowledges the challenges of assessing the individual circumstances of 3.5 million women, as recognised by the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) a few moments ago. It took the ombudsman nearly six years to look at just six cases; doing so for millions would take years and thousands of DWP staff.

In answer my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), we considered a range of compensation options for women who lost opportunities as a result of the delay in sending letters. For example, we considered rules-based schemes, such as that which the Work and Pensions Committee suggested, and we also considered the possibility of paying limited compensation to a smaller group of women—for example, those on pension credit, as suggested by the hon. Member for Eastleigh.

However, many of those schemes would mean compensating women who were aware that the state pension age was increasing. Payments would not relate directly to the injustice in question but to benefit entitlement or the timeline for the policy change. Paying a flat rate to all 3.5 million women, regardless of whether they suffered injustice, would be neither fair nor proportionate. It would also not be affordable, as such compensation schemes would cost up to £10.5 billion. To directly address the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), the Government's decision was not driven purely by cost.

Andy McDonald: The Minister has listed a whole host of alternatives, but is it fair to ignore the ombudsman's clear conclusion that compensation ought to be paid? Is it fair to do nothing?

Torsten Bell: The Government have not ignored the ombudsman's report or its judgment. We have just come to a different conclusion for the detailed reasons—*[Interruption.]* I appreciate that I am not going to persuade many Members in the Chamber for the very reason that they have chosen to come today, but on the direct question asked by my hon. Friend, the Government

did not ignore the ombudsman's report. We have come to a different view for the reasons that I have set out, on the basis of the research that I have mentioned.

I have set out the grounds for the Government's decision. I appreciate that none of that is likely to change the minds of many Members here, or of the campaigners whose tenacity no one disputes, and to which the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) paid tribute. I fully recognise the challenges that this cohort of women have faced: working hard in sexist workplaces and often balancing that with raising a family. We have a responsibility to listen to their concerns. That is why my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), was the first Minister in eight years to meet the WASPI campaign.

Steve Darling: Has the Minister had a conversation with the ombudsman on what a just compensation system would look like?

Torsten Bell: My predecessor, who I just mentioned, did meet the ombudsman prior to the decision being announced by the Government. Parliament has been very engaged in this issue, as demonstrated today and in January's debate led by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). The Government have made their decision and it is right that hon. Members hold us accountable for it, as they have done powerfully today.

Jim Shannon: The judicial review is pending. It is like the sword of Damocles hanging over the head of the Government. Does the Minister fear the judicial review that will, perhaps, force the Government to give WASPI women the compensation and justice they deserve?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but I suspect that was a statement rather than a question. He knows that the Government will not comment on a live litigation. In answer to questions asked by other Members, I will, of course, be happy to meet with the chairs of the APPG, subject to the constraints of that live legal case. As a Department, we must and will learn the lessons from this case.

Christine Jardine: The Minister says that the Department will learn the lessons of this case. Does he accept that the whole point of this debate was not, as he said, to change the minds of Members who have spoken or the women who have come to watch the debate, but to change the mind of the Government? That is the lesson we would like him to learn.

Torsten Bell: I fully understand the motivation of those who have come here today. Members are not just keeping their constituents happy in making their cases, but I have set out why the Government have come to a different view. That is the nature of a Government making a decision and then rightly being held to account for it. That is what hon. Members have done today and what I have endeavoured to engage in, which I think is the right way forward.

6.51 pm

Dr Savage: It has been an honour to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. This issue affects women from across the country, and the debate has been enormously encouraging. I hope I speak on

[Dr Savage]

behalf of the WASPI women in commending Members from the length and breadth of the United Kingdom and from all parties for speaking out with one voice today. We have unanimously called on the Government to do the right thing morally, and what may turn out to be legally, in compensating the WASPI women for the injustice they have suffered. I commiserate with the Minister, who has been sent out to defend the indefensible and to put the Secretary of State in the best possible light. I applaud his efforts.

I want to finish today's debate by thanking the petitioners, as we are here today on their behalf. Without them, this powerful campaign would not have gained such widespread

public support. I hope that today's debate has shown the WASPI women that they have the support of many Members from both sides of the House. We are committed to supporting them beyond this debate—until justice is done and seen to be done.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 700765 relating to compensation for women affected by state pension changes.

6.53 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 17 March 2025

TREASURY

New Approach to Ensure Regulations and Regulators Support Growth

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government are today publishing an action plan, setting out a new approach to ensure regulations and regulators support growth.

Improving regulation in the UK, ensuring that it enables growth and does not unduly hold back investment, is an essential part of this Government's growth mission and delivering on the plan for change.

When used effectively, regulation provides a mechanism to address economic, societal, and environmental risks and deliver positive outcomes in our communities, for example it safeguards employees from harm at work and it can uphold vital standards in building safety.

However, under our current system, businesses tell us that regulation can be too complex and duplicative, stifling progress and innovation. Businesses endure slow processes and a lack of predictability, and our regulatory approach has become too risk averse.

These challenges manifest themselves in costs on business, which means that they have less time and money to invest and create jobs. Over the last 20 years, billions of pounds of regulatory costs have contributed to our economy being less attractive for new investment. Previous studies suggested that the impact of red tape costs could be as high as 3% to 4% of GDP.

The Government will reform the regulatory system to ensure the UK's position of global competitive leadership and go further and faster to secure and sustain growth, supporting the objectives of our new industrial strategy and the wider growth mission.

This action plan builds on the Prime Minister's (Keir Starmer) commitment last week to cut bureaucracy for business, reducing administrative costs of regulation for business by a quarter by the end of the Parliament. It sets out a vision to overhaul our regulatory system so that it:

Supports growth. We want a regulatory system that not only protects consumers and supports competition, but also encourages new investment, innovation, and growth. When regulation is designed well, and when it is implemented well by regulators, it can protect consumers while supporting investment and growth.

Is targeted and proportionate. We should regulate only where necessary and allow space for discretion and good behaviour, in most cases, businesses operate in a responsible and sensible manner. The current system too often focuses on regulations and regulatory practices designed to prevent a few bad actors, or very low probability events, rather than trusting and helping most businesses that want to comply.

Is transparent and predictable. To foster the certainty essential for investment, it is vital that our regulatory regime is stable, predictable, and consistent. Regulation will need to change where it is not fit for purpose; but we must be clear about where that is the case and give business the necessary time to adapt to new rules.

Adapts to keep pace with innovation. Our approach to regulation must allow the UK to take advantage of new technologies and innovations, including artificial intelligence, digitalisation, decarbonisation, and increased automation. Effective regulation can create the environment and clarity for innovation to take place. Regulators attuned to the challenges facing business should also be able to adapt to new industries and to the challenges posed by new technologies and avoid disproportionate risk averse behaviour.

To reset the UK's regulatory landscape and achieve this vision, the Government will implement a package of reforms over the Parliament that focus on:

Tackling complexity and reducing the burden of regulation, including that the Government will commit to reducing the administrative costs of regulation for businesses by 25% by the end of this Parliament; that the Payment Systems Regulator will be consolidated primarily within the Financial Conduct Authority; that the Government will work with regulators to improve areas where regulation is most complex starting with environmental and planning regulation.

Reducing uncertainty across our regulatory system, including that the Government will simplify the duties of key regulators including through the reviews of Ofgem and Ofwat; that it will work with regulators to strengthen transparency, so that business and the public can see how regulators are performing; and that the Government will bring forward packages of reform, including, if necessary, legislation to improve the effectiveness of environmental regulation.

Challenging and shifting excessive risk aversion in the system, including that the Government will overhaul accountability, formalising and strengthening performance reviews which will be conducted by all sponsoring Government Departments, and setting out the next stage of commitments secured by the Regulatory Innovation Office, working alongside Departments and regulators.

The reforms in the action plan are relevant to regulators across sectors such as business, finance, energy, and the environment. Though there is not currently a legal definition of a regulator, the reforms will apply to all bodies exercising regulatory powers and functions.

The Government have worked with a set of key regulators over the past few months to develop measures which will have a tangible effect on driving growth and investment and are implementable within the next 12 months, listed in the action plan. Some of them, such as the Competition and Markets Authority, have already taken substantial action such as taking forward applying the "4Ps" across its digital markets work.

The Government will continue working with industry, regulators, and Parliament to ensure that the regulatory system protects consumers and supports competition, but also encourages new investment, innovation, and growth.

The full action plan is available on gov.uk:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-new-approach-to-ensure-regulators-and-regulation-support-growth/new-approach-to-ensure-regulators-and-regulation-support-growth-html>

A copy will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS528]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Legislation: Codes of Practice

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today the Government are launching a consultation on our revised codes of practice to schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000 (TACT) and schedule 3 to the Counter-Terrorism and

Border Security Act 2019 (CTBSA). These powers are key components of the UK's national security infrastructure, providing examining officers—accredited constables and immigration and customs officers—with the power to stop, question and, when necessary, search and detain individuals who pass through the UK's borders, for the purpose of determining, under schedule 7, whether that person is, or has been, involved in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism and, under schedule 3, to determine if they are engaged in hostile activity. These powers are non-suspicion—officers may stop and question a person whether or not there are grounds for suspecting that the person is or has been concerned in terrorism or hostile state activity.

The codes of practice set out the processes and safeguards governing the exercise of schedule 7 and schedule 3 powers by examining officers. They provide detail on how the power should be used, including examples where relevant, and are intended to ensure the highest standards of professionalism and compliance with these important powers.

The Government are proposing several changes to the codes of practice to clarify use of the powers, clarify the rights and protections of individuals subject to the powers, and impose additional modest safeguards. These include responses to recommendations made by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation.

The consultation will run for six weeks, until 27 April 2025. The Government will publish their response thereafter, and will then amend the codes through secondary legislation at the next available opportunity. A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and made available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS526]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Spelthorne Borough Council: Best Value Duty

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): All hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning local councils which provide essential statutory services local residents rely upon. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent and this Government are aiming to fix the foundations of local government. Today I am updating the House on the statutory inspection of Spelthorne borough council and the steps I am proposing to ensure a focus on reform and recovery, alongside and within the wider context of having invited proposals for unitary local government in Surrey.

Best value inspection report

It is a matter of public record that Spelthorne borough council has significant debt leverage. Spelthorne's debt stands at nearly £1.069 billion—as of January 2025—which is 62.2 times its total service expenditure and is the second highest level of debt for a district authority in England, after Woking.

A capital review by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) highlighted concerns around governance and decision making. Following this,

on 8 May 2024 the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Michael Gove, commissioned an inspection of the council and its compliance with its best value duty. He appointed Lesley Seary as lead inspector, alongside Mervyn Greer, who were later joined by Peter Robinson and Deborah McLaughlin. Inspectors were asked to report their findings by 31 July 2024. The deadline was subsequently extended to 31 January 2025. The inspectors completed their inspection and submitted their report to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and, as statute requires, provided a copy to the council. I am grateful to the inspection team for their thorough work, and to the council and all participants for their co-operation.

The report identifies some positive features at the council, such as strong resident engagement and positive local partnerships. The report also notes that the council has already taken positive steps to make improvements, including against recommendations made in the CIPFA review, such as the suspension of the planned housing developments and cessation of further borrowing for this initiative after determining it was no longer viable. However, the report documents serious concerns across a number of areas which I consider to be against its best value duty:

On Continuous Improvement: The report describes the council as having a “poor record” of adequately addressing recommendations from external reviews and the inspectors have no confidence in the council's ability to make the changes “without significant external support”.

On Leadership: The report highlights that the council lacks consistent leadership, strategic direction, constructive challenge and a robust corporate plan. Optimism bias clouds officers' awareness of risks, and to some degree the council has been “blindsided” by the financial situation.

On Governance: The report concludes that the council's “poor, late and incomplete reporting, together with a lack of audit and a reluctance to accept and act on challenge” has “severely undermined informed decision-making” and there is a culture of secrecy.

On Culture: The report describes member and officer relationships as poor and deteriorating, with both sides describing a culture of mistrust and broken relationships which are “hindering constructive discussions” on key financial, housing and asset issues. Members and officers do not share an understanding of their respective roles. Inspectors consider the council to be insular and in denial of the situation it faces.

On Use of Resources: The report concludes that a lack of long-term planning, risk management and an “overly-optimistic reliance” on property markets has led to the authority's financial strategy being unsustainable.

Compliance with the best value duty

I have carefully considered the report and other relevant material, including findings from the CIPFA review, recent reports from the council's external auditors, and the corporate peer challenge conducted by the Local Government Association. I am satisfied that Spelthorne borough council is failing to comply with its best value duty in relation to continuous improvement, governance, leadership, culture, and use of resources. I am therefore minded to exercise powers of direction under section 15(5) and 15(6) of the Local Government Act 1999 to implement an intervention package that ensures the council's compliance with its best value duty. The proposed intervention includes the appointment of commissioners to exercise certain and limited functions as required, for five years.

The commissioner team, if appointed, would consist of a lead commissioner and commissioners with expertise in finance, commercial investment and governance. The council will be directed to prepare and agree an improvement and recovery plan to the satisfaction of the commissioners. I would like the commissioners to report on progress against this plan after the first six months, and then at six monthly intervals. I need to ensure the council's compliance with its best value duty: the commissioners' assessments will provide assurance to residents and strategic partners. The council will also be directed to actively engage with the commissioners while reviewing and implementing any proposals for unitary local government.

Representations

I am inviting representations from Spelthorne borough council on the respective inspection report and on the proposed intervention package by 28 March 2025. I want to provide the opportunity for members and officers of the council, and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Spelthorne, to make their views on the proposal known.

I made clear in my written statement of 5 February that potential proposals on unitary local government must demonstrate how local councils have sought to work together in coming to a view that best meets local needs and is informed by local views: given the potential implications for the proposals currently being developed by councils in Surrey for unitary local government, I

have taken steps to ensure that this report will be seen by all relevant parties across the area. I will carefully consider all representations and any other evidence received, before deciding how to proceed with the council.

Conclusion

The proposal to intervene in Spelthorne borough council is not taken lightly. The proposed intervention package is designed to strengthen and accelerate the improvement work needed at the council. I am confident that the proposal will address the failings identified and is necessary to ensuring the council's compliance with its best value duty. I hope that with focus and oversight, improvement will come at pace and that it will not be necessary for the commissioners to use their powers. However, they must be empowered to do so if they consider that the required improvement and reforms are not being delivered.

I am committed to working in partnership with the council to provide the necessary support to ensure its compliance with this duty and the high standards of governance local residents and service users expect.

I will deposit in the House Library a copy of the inspection report I have referred to, which is also being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS527]

Petition

Monday 17 March 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Respiratory Syncytial Virus Vaccine Eligibility Criteria

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that extending the eligibility criteria for the free Respiratory Syncytial Virus vaccine and the Shingles vaccine dose to individuals who are 80 years of age or older would bring considerable health benefits; notes that the former illness can cause acute respiratory infection, influenza-like illness, community-acquired pneumonia and lead to death and the latter illness can cause decreased vision or permanent blindness; and notes that vaccine doses for the Respiratory Syncytial Virus and Shingles virus are recommended to all individuals 80 years of age and over in the United States of America and in the European Union.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to seek a reallocation of funds to ensure that the provision of the free Respiratory Syncytial Virus vaccine dose and Shingles vaccine dose is extended to those individuals who are 80 years of age or older.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Bambos Charalambous, *Official Report*, 13 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 478.]

[P003045]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton):

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is the UK's expert committee that advises the Government on immunisation programmes. While the JCVI notes what takes place in other countries, its advice is specific to the UK.

In November 2024, the JCVI provided advice to the Government on eligibility for the shingles vaccination programme. This included advice that the Government should consider expanding the shingles vaccination offer to include older adult cohorts aged 80 years old and over. The Government will consider this advice when setting the policy on who should be offered shingles vaccinations and will update in due course.

The introduction of an RSV vaccination programme for adults aged 75 to 79 years was informed by JCVI advice. The JCVI considered that there was less certainty about how well the vaccine works in people aged 80 years and older, as there were not enough people of this age in the clinical trials to be able to see if the vaccines are protective in this age band.

At its October 2024 main committee meeting, the JCVI agreed that it would need to formally review the evidence for a potential extension to the programme for the very elderly and for those in risk groups. RSV was also discussed at the JCVI meeting on 5 February 2025. Minutes are usually published within six weeks of the meeting.

The Government will continue to take account of JCVI advice when setting immunisation policy.

Written Correction

Monday 17 March 2025

Other Correction

GIDEON AMOS

Crime and Policing Bill

The following extract is from the debate on the Crime and Policing Bill on 10 March 2025.

Gideon Amos: In Avon and Somerset, the former Conservative police and crime commissioner cut PCSOs by a further 80 last year—a massive 28% reduction—and closed our Taunton police station.

[*Official Report*, 10 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 717.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos):

Gideon Amos: In Avon and Somerset, the former Conservative police and crime commissioner cut PCSOs by a further 80 last year—a massive 28% reduction—**following the closure of our main** Taunton police station.

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PETITION

Monday 17 March 2025

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