

Thursday
20 March 2025

Volume 764
No. 111



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 20 March 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fly-tipping

1. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help tackle fly-tipping. [903287]

5. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [903291]

7. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [903293]

14. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [903301]

16. **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [903303]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Happy spring equinox and happy World Sparrow Day to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in the House.

Fly-tipping blights communities, harms the environment and places huge costs on taxpayers and businesses. Councils dealt with over 1 million incidents in 2023-24, some 6% more than in the previous year. This Government will crack down on fly-tipping by establishing clean-up squads comprised of those very individuals who dump rubbish in our communities. We are also tackling litter by introducing a ban on single-use vapes from 1 June this year and a deposit return scheme for drinks containers.

Paul Waugh: Rochdale council has removed 6,500 fly-tips this past year alone, the equivalent of 50 tonnes of illegally dumped waste every month, at a cost of £400,000 to local taxpayers. But my council tells me that there is a real failure in the courts issuing consistent and tough enough fines. Does the Minister agree with me that it is time to crack down harder on fly-tippers, put much tighter regulations on waste carriers and treat the fly-tippers like the criminals they are, by crushing their cars and putting points on their licences?

Mary Creagh: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend—[*Interruption.*] I hear enthusiasm for his comments from both sides of the House. Rochdale council has an exemplary record on fly-tipping, with 26 fixed-penalty notices and 12 prosecutions, which is admirable. Last week, the Environment Agency worked with the north-west regional organised crime unit to arrest two men in Manchester for fraud and money laundering, following an extensive investigation into packaging export notes used by law-abiding firms to export waste that were unlawfully sold for £747,000. Our message to the waste criminals is clear: we are seeking powers in the Crime and Policing Bill, and we are going to track them down.

Rachel Hopkins: Fly-tipping is a scourge on local communities and a drain on council resources, be they rural councils, like Central Bedfordshire, or town councils, like Luton, in my constituency. Most recent figures show that there were over 10,000 fly-tipping incidents in Luton alone in 2023-24, but does the Minister agree that we need a co-ordinated approach between the Department, local authorities and the police to deliver a holistic strategy to tackle fly-tipping?

Mary Creagh: It is clear that my hon. Friend is right. Luton has a particular problem with fly-tipping, but the council has been doing good work, with 263 fixed-penalty notices and 32 prosecutions. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs chairs the national fly-tipping prevention group, and we work with a wide range of interested parties, including councils, the Environment Agency, the National Farmers Union and the National Police Chiefs' Council to disseminate good practice, and I urge Luton to join us in that endeavour.

Warinder Juss: Although City of Wolverhampton council is to be congratulated on introducing a range of initiatives to tackle fly-tipping, including deploying drones, raising the fine for fly-tipping to £1,000 and rewarding those who identify culprits with gift cards, fly-tipping in my constituency of Wolverhampton West costs Wolverhampton taxpayers around £300,000 a year and involved some 2,714 incidents during 2023-24. Does the Minister agree that we need stronger disincentives to discourage those who fly-tip, so that that £300,000 can be redistributed to where it is really needed?

Mary Creagh: I am interested to hear about the work my hon. Friend's council is doing with drones. We use CCTV, but there could be lessons for other councils. In our manifesto, we committed to forcing fly-tippers to clean up their mess. We are seeking powers to issue statutory fly-tipping enforcement guidance so we have a consistent and effective approach, but it is clear that the waste carriers, brokers and dealers, and the exemption permitting regimes, are not fit for purpose. I have asked my officials to look at everything we can do to strengthen both of those.

David Williams: Fly-tipping is a blight on our communities, but in Stoke-on-Trent, our Labour-led council has worked tirelessly to turn things around. Under the Conservatives, residents were waiting for over a month for waste to be removed, but under the leadership of Jane Ashworth and Amjid Wazir, that response time is now under one week. However, councils cannot tackle the issue alone, so will the Minister outline

what more the Government can do to support local councils to clamp down on fly-tipping, get tough on those who blight our streets, and create cleaner, greener communities for all?

Mary Creagh: It is interesting what a difference a change in council leadership makes. I commend Councillor Ashworth and Councillor Wazir on their excellent work. This Government will introduce mandatory digital waste tracking from April 2026, and I will update the House on progress in May 2025. If people want their streets to be cleaned up, the answer is clear: vote Labour.

Mr Forster: Fly-tipping is a real concern in my constituency of Woking, but I understand that the previous Government introduced new powers that enabled Woking borough council and other local authorities to strengthen their actions against people who fly-tip. What impact have those measures had?

Mary Creagh: We have not assessed the impact, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman the latest statistics for his own council. There were more than 1,100 fly-tipping incidents, but just three fixed-penalty notices and no prosecutions. Local councillors are clearly making choices. We know that the latest statistics for fly-tipping show a rise of 6%, so it is clear that under the previous Government, this environmental crime was allowed to spiral out of control. I encourage all councils—of whatever colour—to make good use of their enforcement powers.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Alas, the last Government did not take up my suggestion that the offenders be garrotted with their own intestines. The first problem, however, is to catch them. Is there any way that local authorities can be encouraged to take advantage of the collapse in price and improvement in quality of internet-connected cameras?

Mary Creagh: I think there would be some human rights implications with the garrotting option, but I share the right hon. Gentleman's passionate hatred for these environmental criminals. He is a representative of the beautiful New Forest, where I have spent many happy holidays, and it really upsets me to see fly-tipping on ancient woodland run by the Forestry Commission. These are precious and irreplaceable areas. We have not looked at that part of his suggestion, but I am very happy to join forces with him and make it a cross-party mission that we sort the messes out once and for all.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Conservative-run East Sussex county council has introduced a booking system for the local tip in Eastbourne that will make it even more difficult for many people to get rid of their waste. Many local campaigners are concerned that it will result in increased fly-tipping, specifically in areas such as Upperton in my constituency, and we have already seen it in Hartfield Square and Upperton Gardens. How might the Minister be able to influence East Sussex county council to U-turn on its unpopular decision and to keep our community clean and free from fly-tipping?

Mary Creagh: All councils have been given an uplift under this Labour Government, so they have more money to be able to deal with the priorities of their

local communities, and I encourage them to think about where that money is spent. There is also a really important equality issue here: if people do not have access to the internet in East Sussex, due to blackspots, they might not be able to digitally book in, so I would look at digital exclusion. The people who are least able to afford the internet should not be forced into dealing with unscrupulous rogues.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We know that fly-tipping is an expensive and dangerous nuisance. Local authorities such as Conservative-led Walsall council are taking a really proactive and determined approach to tackling it, but with bin strikes on our doorstep under the neighbouring Labour-led Birmingham city council, we fear more fly-tipping, particularly in the communities that border Birmingham. Alarming, we are hearing of rats the size of cats in Britain's second city, and these squeaky blinders are definitely not welcome in Aldridge-Brownhills. What specific support can the Minister provide to neighbouring authorities in these specific circumstances, and what can she do to bring the bin strikes to an end?

Mary Creagh: Obviously Birmingham city council's bin situation is a matter for the council, but, as a neighbouring MP in Coventry, we have not seen any of the fly-tipping that the right hon. Lady talks about seeing in Walsall. Both sides need to get round the table and sort this out for the benefit of the people of Birmingham.

Sewage Discharge Reduction: Water Company Investment

2. **Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with Ofwat on encouraging water companies to increase investment in sewage discharge reduction measures. [903288]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): My officials and I have regular conversations with Ofwat and other regulators. As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, last year water companies discharged record levels of sewage into our waterways, which is why the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 gives the regulator tough new powers, including the ability to ban the payment of unfair bonuses to polluting water bosses. The Government have also secured a record £104 billion that will include improvements to more than 3,000 storm overflows and significantly reduce sewage spills over the next five years.

Jeremy Hunt: I wish you a happy World Sparrow Day, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In Bramley in my constituency in 2023, sewage was spilled into the local river for 59 hours. In Godalming, the figure was 83 hours; in Chiddingfold, it was 410 hours; and in Cranleigh, it was 691 hours. That is the equivalent of nearly two hours every single day—it is totally unacceptable. As a result, last year, after pressure from me and others, Thames Water agreed to invest £400 million by the end of next year. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the chief executive of Thames Water to see whether that money is actually being spent?

Steve Reed: The situation that the right hon. Gentleman describes is absolutely outrageous, and Members across the House will recognise similar situations in their own

areas. We need to completely reset the water sector so that these situations cannot continue, which is why Sir Jon Cunliffe is leading a water commission. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and other Members are taking the opportunity to feed their experiences and those of their constituents into his call for evidence, and I would be happy to arrange for the right hon. Gentleman to meet an appropriate Minister to discuss his concerns.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I get so many people in North West Leicestershire telling me about the toxic sewage pouring into their waterways, such as in the brook near Donington le Heath. Will the Secretary of State assure me that, unlike the previous Government, when he says that he will hold the water bosses to account, he means it?

Steve Reed: Absolutely. That is why we have passed—and my hon. Friend will have voted for—the Water (Special Measures) Act, which gives the regulator the power they need to hold those water bosses to account so that instead of paying themselves multimillion-pound bonuses they do not deserve, that money is spent where it should be spent: on fixing our broken sewage system, so that we can cut the sewage flows that are polluting our rivers up and down the country.

Agricultural and Business Property Reliefs

3. **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of farmers affected by changes to agricultural and business property reliefs. [903289]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Around 500 claims each year will be impacted. Our reforms will mean that farmers will pay a reduced inheritance tax rate of 20%, rather than the standard 40%, and payments can be spread over 10 years interest free. Farm-owning couples can pass on up to £3 million without paying inheritance tax. In our view, this is a fair and balanced approach, and should be seen against the backdrop of the Government committing £5 billion for farming over two years—the largest budget directed at sustainable food production and nature’s recovery in our country’s history.

David Reed: I am starting to feel like DEFRA Ministers are purposefully ignoring me and Devon’s farming community. I have given the Secretary of State since early December to answer my letters and my invitations to meet with Devon’s farming community, in order to explain how changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief are going to affect them. At the last DEFRA questions, I called out the Secretary of State for not replying to any of my requests. The Minister for food, farming and fisheries replied from the Dispatch Box that

“I would love to meet farmers in Devon, so I am happy to add him to the list for my grand tour across the country to reassure people that there is a strong plan to ensure that farmers have a viable future”.—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 909.]

So far, those platitudes have gone unrealised. With less than a month until these changes take effect, Devon’s farmers are still in the dark about how the changes are going to affect them. If this is how Ministers treat

fellow MPs, is it any wonder that farmers up and down the country feel completely abandoned by this Labour Government?

Daniel Zeichner: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s complaint, but I have been to Devon in my role before, and I will come to Devon again. I am always happy to meet farmers. I have spent quite a lot of time at this Dispatch Box answering questions from Conservative Members, so perhaps fewer questions will mean more time to go out and meet farmers.

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

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Back in November, the farming Minister unbelievably said from the Government Dispatch Box that it was striking how many people were coming up to him at farming events and saying, “You’re right to be making these changes to APR and BPR.” Conservative Members have been out and about all over the country; indeed, I was in Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Shropshire yesterday, and I have not found one farmer who thinks that he is right. In fact, the level of anger and sheer disbelief among our farming community is immense as this Government’s attack on our farming cash flows continues through the dramatic reduction in delinked payments, the sudden stop of the sustainable farming incentive and the rise in employer’s national insurance contributions—I could go on. Business confidence is at an all-time low, so can the Minister provide the name of just one farmer he has spoken to who thinks he and his Government are right to be pursuing these changes?

Daniel Zeichner: I suggest that the shadow Minister goes out and speaks to a few more people, because I was stopped in a local village just this weekend and encouraged—[*Interruption.*] I am not going to name names, but he should check with some of his Conservative candidates in elections. They said, “Keep on going, you are doing the right thing.” The situation is not as the shadow Minister describes. He might do well to look at the figures for projected farm business incomes for this year, which show that in many sectors, those business incomes are doing rather well. That probably explains why people are not as exercised about it as him.

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

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Is the Minister aware that some of the farmers who will be worst hit by the APR changes are those who farm in severely disadvantaged areas in the uplands around our country, where typically property values are high and incomes are extremely low? When the change was made just last week with people being excluded from the sustainable farming incentive, 6,100 people had entered the SFI in this session, and only 40 of them were hill farmers. Is he also aware that his own Department’s figures show that at the end of the transition, the average hill farm income will be 55% of the national minimum wage? Does he not understand that his changes are bringing harm to the poorest farmers in the prettiest places, such as mine? Will he undertake to look at the Liberal Democrat proposal to bring in an uplands reward so that we do not plunge into poverty those people who care for our precious landscapes?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman always speaks with passion about his constituents, and I absolutely understand those concerns. He is right to say that the schemes we inherited did not reward those areas as well as they should. That is why in our announcement a few weeks ago, we increased the higher level stewardship payments by £30 million, which will be of particular advantage to people in his area. I agree with him, and the schemes we inherited were not good enough. That is why we are revising them.

Flood Defences: Hartlepool

4. **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve flood defences in Hartlepool. [903290]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): After 14 years, the Conservatives left our flood defence assets in the worst condition on record. That is why this Government are investing a record £2.65 billion over two years to improve flood resilience. We will build, maintain and repair flood defences to better protect 52,000 properties by March 2026.

Mr Brash: The flood defences in and around Greatham creek in my constituency of Hartlepool date back to the 19th century and are coming to the end of their usable life. I am campaigning to secure the funding we need to realise the Environment Agency's ambitious multimillion-pound plan to upgrade these defences and create a new habitat that extends biodiversity in that area. Will the Minister commit to delivering that funding for Hartlepool?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue and for his recent letter. He is right to be angry about the poor state of his flood defences, and I am sure his constituents value him as a local champion, raising that in the Chamber. To rebuild after Conservative failure, we have had to urgently move £36 million into maintenance funding this year. As I have mentioned, the projects to receive funding in the next financial year are being agreed and will be announced shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Under the previous Government there was, prior to 2019, a strategy from Westminster to address flooding and coastal erosion across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. All the regions were able to benefit from that, including my constituency of Strangford, where coastal erosion is a massive thing, taking away some of the major roads and thoroughfares. Will the Minister consider renewing that strategy and starting it again, looking at all of the United Kingdom as one job lot? That would thereby help us all to get the benefit in addressing coastal erosion and the flooding that the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) referred to.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Member for raising his concerns about coastal erosion, and he is right. It is a huge problem, and with climate change it is only set to get worse. I completely recognise how it is impacting coastal communities. His suggestion to bring together the different devolved Governments to discuss this issue is really interesting, so let me take that away.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: The questions have to relate to Hartlepool's flood defences. I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The people of Chesterfield have great empathy with the people of Hartlepool, as we face exactly the same issues. A new report by Public First shows that each year of flood events causes decade-long downward pressure on the economy worth up to £6 billion. I am grateful that the Minister will shortly visit us in Chesterfield to see flood projects and vulnerabilities, but does she agree that there is acute need for projects like the one we require on the River Hipper, and the one required in Hartlepool? It endangers the Government's growth mission if we are not able to get these projects going.

Emma Hardy: I think we all have empathy with Hartlepool, so I encourage more people to ask questions on this issue. I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend's constituency to find out more about the projects he mentions. He is quite right to say—this is an argument that I hope we will all pursue ahead of the spring statement—that tackling flooding is a good, value-for-money investment, because it helps to protect our economy and ensure that we can have growth.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Wera Hobhouse, who I know is now anxious.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Like people in Hartlepool, we in Bath recognise that the Conservative Government left our flood defences in a poor state, and we welcome the extra funding that the Bath flood defence scheme has received. However, we worry that it has come too late in a lot of cases. Is there a timeline for when my Bath constituents will actually see improvements?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. As I said, we are delivering a record £2.65 billion investment in building, maintaining and upgrading flood defences, and that money will be spent over the next two years. We will shortly announce some of the projects that are going ahead in the next financial year, and next year we will announce even more. There will be an announcement this year for the next financial year, and an announcement next year for the second half of the two-year record investment. That shows our commitment to building, maintaining and improving flood defences up and down our country.

Flood-prone Communities: Cumbria

6. **Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): What steps he is taking to protect flood-prone communities in Cumbria. [903292]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): As I may have already mentioned, we are putting in a record £2.65 billion investment to build, maintain and improve flood defences up and down the country, which shows this Government's commitment to making sure that our communities and our farmland are protected from flooding.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I thank the Minister for her answer. Communities in Cumbria have seen many devastating floods over the last two decades, but flood action groups in Keswick have worked hard with United Utilities to develop a scheme that uses Thirlmere reservoir as a storm water store, helping to prevent flooding in the town. All agree that more could be done. Although I applaud their work, I note that there is no statutory requirement for water companies to use their assets as flood defences. Will the Minister look at how water companies' assets can be used to prevent flooding across the country?

Emma Hardy: I am grateful not only for the work that my hon. Friend's action flood group does, but for the work that flood action groups do right across the whole of his constituency. He raises an incredibly important and interesting issue. In the Sir John Cunliffe review, we are fundamentally looking at the management of water right across entire catchment areas. When we think about water management, we need to consider not only whether communities have enough water to meet their needs, but whether they have protection from flooding and drought. A holistic way of dealing with some of the challenges we face is certainly one of the answers going forward. My hon. Friend has given a great example, and I would be happy to explore it further with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): The Conservative Government protected over 600,000 properties from flooding, introduced the £100 million frequently flooded allowance and committed to a £5.2 billion investment in flood protection. However, we know that the mental health impacts of flooding remain long after the waters subside. Rural communities face unique challenges, including outbreaks of diseases such as avian influenza and foot and mouth—a clear and worrying threat, given the recent cases in Germany and Hungary. Unfortunately, this Labour Government are exacerbating such stresses with their family farm tax and by scrapping the farming resilience fund, which supports mental health. Can the Minister confirm, for the sake of mental health, what support will be offered to rural communities in place of the scrapped fund?

Emma Hardy: That all started so well—we nearly managed to get through the question with me agreeing with the hon. Gentleman. He is quite right about this issue, which he has mentioned before. I am in complete agreement with him about the impact of flooding on mental health, and I know that we all take it seriously. We are investing £500,000 in mental health charities to support rural communities, but I completely recognise the devastation that flooding causes, and I am always happy to work with Members from across the House on how we can support people's mental health.

Environment Act 2021: Deforestation Due Diligence

8. **Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab):** If he will take steps to implement the provisions of the Environment Act 2021 on deforestation due diligence. [903294]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): The biggest driver of deforestation worldwide is agricultural expansion,

particularly the production of a small number of commodities such as soy and palm oil. This Government are considering the approach to the deforestation regulations, and nothing has yet been ruled in or out.

Anna Gelderd: I thank the Minister for her answer. Tomorrow is the International Day of Forests. The Environment Act 2021 was passed over three years ago, with strong public and cross-party support, yet the due diligence provisions to prevent the import of commodities linked to illegal deforestation remain unimplemented, causing uncertainty for UK business. Will the Minister provide a clear timeline for when the secondary legislation will come into force, and will she meet me, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global deforestation, alongside other Members, to discuss how we can strengthen and accelerate its implementation?

Mary Creagh: The UK strongly supports global efforts to protect forests, and we are advocating for the international commitment to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030, while at the same time supporting forest dwellers and economic development. As I say, nothing has yet been ruled in or out, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Prioritising British Produce: Public Bodies

9. **Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to encourage public bodies to prioritise the purchase of British produce. [903296]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The new national procurement policy statement sets out requirements for Government contracts, and favours high-quality products that we believe British producers are very well placed to supply. This will support our ambition to ensure that half of the food supplied for public sector catering comes from local producers, or those certified to higher environmental standards.

Noah Law: I welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring that 50% of public procurement is of British produce. Given the significant £5 billion of bargaining power that this represents, what steps is he taking to ensure that this leads to fairer prices for farmers and supports the fundamental operating profitability of the sector?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful for the question from my hon. Friend. We are absolutely determined to make the best of this opportunity, not least because the previous Government did not know how much we were actually buying. The Secretary of State has announced that we will monitor the food bought in the public sector, and that will inform our policy of making sure that British farmers make the most of the opportunity for public procurement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Secretary of State, in her speech to the Oxford farming conference, spoke about the plan for change,

which was going to include a commitment to public sector procurement, but that was in January, and we are now in March. With the closure of the basic payment scheme and the ending of the sustainable farming incentive, farm incomes are under real cash pressure in the here and now, so when will we hear more detail about the very welcome commitments that the Secretary of State made at the Oxford farming conference in January?

Daniel Zeichner: As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law), the first thing we needed to do was establish how much we are actually buying, and that is now in progress. I absolutely get the point about the urgency. The question is why doing this took the previous Government so long when they shared our ambition. We are determined to make this happen.

Communities Vulnerable to Flooding

10. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps he has taken to help protect communities that are vulnerable to flooding. [903297]

12. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to help protect communities that are vulnerable to flooding. [903299]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Repairing and rebuilding our flood defences is a priority for this Labour Government, and we are investing at a record level to improve flood resilience, better protecting 52,000 properties by this time next year.

Patrick Hurley: The Environment Agency allocates its budgets to carry out work on flood defences on the basis of a funding formula, but that formula does not give sufficient weight to agricultural land. Will the Minister undertake a review of the formula, so that agricultural land gets the flood defences it needs?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I completely agree that the previous flooding formula did not work for rural communities, which is exactly why we are consulting to change it. The consultation will be announced shortly, and I encourage him and every Member across the House to get involved in shaping the formula, so we can make sure it delivers the right outcomes for everybody up and down our country.

Jo Platt: First, I thank the Minister for visiting Lilford in Leigh after the devastating new year's day flooding. We had a public meeting on Saturday, and three months after those floods, residents are still struggling to get any real progress from their insurance companies, while others face extortionate premiums and excess fees. What discussions is the Minister having with the insurance industry on improving how they support residents?

Emma Hardy: It was a pleasure to see my hon. Friend and see how tirelessly she was championing and supporting her local constituents after such a devastating flood. Concerns around flood insurance have been raised, so the floods resilience taskforce is setting up an insurance sub-group, through which some of its members will

deep-dive into the challenges and opportunities for improvement on flood defences. If she has any further evidence that she would like me to look at, it would be very helpful to receive it.

Thames Water: Financial Viability

11. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What discussions he has had with Thames Water on its financial viability. [903298]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I am of course having conversations. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the company remains stable, and that the Government are closely monitoring the situation.

Clive Jones: Data published this week in *The Guardian* revealed that 50% more raw sewage was discharged by Thames Water last year than in the previous 12 months. Thames Water is racking up billions of pounds of expensive extraordinary debt, while continuing to pump tonnes of sewage into our rivers. Despite bold targets and kind words, there is simply no action on cleaning up our rivers. What will the Government do to improve Thames Water's performance?

Steve Reed: The Government are taking steps to improve the performance of all water companies, including through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which I spoke about earlier. Sir Jon Cunliffe is leading a review of the entire sector, so that we can reform regulation and, if need be, the regulator, to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

Topical Questions

T1. [903331] **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Our rivers, lakes and seas are awash with pollution. The public are rightly furious about leaking pipes and sewage spills, and we have not built a new reservoir in this country for well over 30 years. After years of failure, this Government are turning the tide. The Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 is creating stronger regulation to hold water companies to account. We have secured over £100 billion of private sector investment—the largest such investment in the water sector in its history—to upgrade our infrastructure. Last week, the water Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy)—and I toured the country from Windermere to the Wye, from Hampshire to Yorkshire, and from Suffolk and Northumbria to Somerset, to see where that investment will build new homes, create thousands of new jobs and boost local economies. This is a cornerstone of our plan for change. Things can only get cleaner.

Sarah Bool: In February, Lucy Manzano of the Dover Port Health Authority came before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and warned that if funding was not confirmed before the new financial year, checks at our borders would stop. With the new financial year fast approaching and another case of

foot and mouth in Europe, will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have finally secured that funding, or will we be more at risk in April?

Steve Reed: We take border security extremely seriously. That is why we have the BTOM—border target operating model—system, which we are very closely monitoring to make sure it is doing the work that it needs to do, and why we are investing money in the National Biosecurity Centre in Weybridge to ensure it does not fall into dilapidation, which is where it was heading under the previous Government.

T2. [903333] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): The Conservative party allowed the rivers and lakes in my constituency to be polluted with raw sewage while water bills rose and rose. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that, as he just said, after 14 years of Conservative neglect, things can only get cleaner?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Over the past 14 years, things only got filthier. This Government will turn the tide. Things will get cleaner thanks to the investment this Government are bringing in.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State back to the Chamber. He has been in hiding for a week. We were so worried about him that we were going to start a “Where’s Wally?” competition. The reason he has been in hiding is that he is ducking scrutiny of his dreadful decision to stop the sustainable farming incentive farm payment scheme immediately, without warning. Conservative Members have been inundated with messages from farmers saying that businesses will not survive this latest assault by the Government. How many farmers will be bankrupted as a result of the SFI stoppage?

Steve Reed: There were, unfortunately, record levels of bankruptcies of farm businesses under the previous Government, in which the right hon. Lady was a member of the Cabinet. Under this Government, we have more money in the hands of more farmers through SFI than at any point under the previous Conservative Government. This Government understand that when a budget has been fully allocated, you stop spending. The party of Liz Truss prefers instead to keep spending, bankrupting the economy and sending mortgages spiralling. That is not good for farmers, for the economy or for anyone.

Victoria Atkins: The Secretary of State cannot find his way around a farmyard; he is certainly not speaking to farmers. We Conservatives know that if the Government continue to tax, tax, tax businesses, they will break. His answers show why we have seen cold fury in the countryside at his impotence in standing up to the Chancellor on compulsory purchase orders, the massive cuts to de-linked payments, the stopping of capital grants and SFI and, of course, the family farm fax. Ahead of next week’s emergency Budget and spending review, and given that *The Guardian* seems to know more than he does, will the Secretary of State guarantee that his Government’s Budget will not face further swingeing cuts?

Steve Reed: The problem facing farming is that it became unprofitable because of the actions of the previous Government, who undercut farm businesses in trade deals, undercut farmers on welfare and environmental standards and raised barriers to exports to the European markets, causing exports to plunge by 20% since 2018, which led to record numbers of bankruptcies. This Government have a plan for change that involves turning farming into a profitable set of businesses, including by backing British businesses through public sector food procurement and ruling out trade deals that undercut farmers in the way the previous Government were happy to do.

T3. [903334] **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cats. The Animal Welfare Committee’s report in September highlighted an urgent need for further regulation around the breeding of cats, after it uncovered the deeply concerning trend in demand for cats and other animals that are bred with extreme characteristics. Will the Minister set out how many of the report’s recommendations the Government have taken up, and what their timeframes are for implementation?

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I am sure that my hon. Friend’s cats, who I am told are called Clem Cattlee and Mo Meowlam, will be delighted to hear that the Government are looking very closely at the Animal Welfare Committee’s opinion on the welfare implications of current and emergent feline breeding practices. I can assure them that we are carefully considering the committee’s recommendations.

T4. [903335] **Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): Farmers in North Norfolk are an incredible bunch who have shown resilience through tough times and are still innovating and diversifying, but there are more tough times ahead. What one thing does the Secretary of State think my farmers should be doing to secure their future in the face of so many challenges?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Looking ahead, the future can be very exciting for farming, but as the Secretary of State said, we have to establish farming as a profitable sector. We will work with the hon. Gentleman’s farmers to ensure that vision is realised.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): My constituents in Burghfield Bridge have suffered for years with the devastating effects of flooding, and are rightly frustrated that nothing is being done. Will the Minister meet me to discuss flood resilience and better join-up of local agencies in Burghfield Bridge and across my constituency?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I thank my hon. Friend for raising concerns around flooding; we have today heard about those concerns up and down the country. I would, of course, be happy to meet her.

T5. [903337] **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): After many years of rising costs for Scottish pubs, they now face being unfairly caught up in

the double jeopardy of extended producer responsibility, as bottles going to pubs are being classed as household waste by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, even though almost no glass bottles delivered to pubs end up in household waste. Given the extremely tight margins on producing bottled beer, the situation threatens to cause serious harm to this part of the industry. Will the Minister consider an EPR exemption for pubs and other hospitality venues, or some kind of easement to help the situation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): We are introducing the biggest set of changes to the regulations in 20 years. We are looking at the issue of dual use, but the real prize with glass is, of course, to get to a reuse system, instead of a recycling system. I have been in touch with the drinks companies to look at how we speed up the start of that.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Labour-led Nuneaton and Bedworth borough council has bucked the national trend in fly-tipping with a reduction in the borough of more than 10%, while total reported incidents have fallen by 200 on the previous year. Meanwhile, neighbouring Conservative-led North Warwickshire borough council served only one fixed penalty notice in the year 2023-24. Does my hon. Friend agree that the actions taken by Nuneaton and Bedworth borough council demonstrate that councils can reduce fly-tipping incidents, and that North Warwickshire must do more to stop the scourge of fly-tipping on our country roads?

Mary Creagh: I have travelled along those country roads near Coventry many times. My hon. Friend is right: this is a political choice that councils can make. I urge people in the upcoming elections on 1 May to vote for more Labour county councillors, who will take this scourge seriously.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Last month, more than 4,000 litres of diesel spilled into the River Wandle from a Transport for London garage in the Secretary of State's previous constituency. Will the Secretary of State meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) to discuss what can be done to restore the wildlife and to ensure that that cannot happen again?

Steve Reed: I agree that what happened on the River Wandle is shocking; it runs very close to my constituency as well, so I am aware of the situation. The Environment Agency is investigating and, if there was inappropriate behaviour, there will be swift action. I would be happy to arrange an appropriate meeting for the hon. Gentleman.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): For far too long, the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme have had to live with the consequences of Walley's Quarry landfill site. With the operator, Walley's Quarry Ltd, now in liquidation, may I urge the Minister to do all she can to make sure that those who caused the mess are forced to pay to clean it up?

Mary Creagh: We are disappointed that Walley's Quarry has entered administration. The Environment Agency has attended the landfill site, assessed it and

decided that it does not pose an immediate risk, but, of course, we are liaising with specialist contractors to look after the site and we are in close contact with the Environment Agency to recoup those costs.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): May I first congratulate the new councillor, Ian Campbell, on his by-election win yesterday? The team got a great result in my part of the world.

Many in my constituency are concerned about the newly coined grey belt, which will be used as an excuse to destroy our land irreversibly. What calculations have the Minister and his Cabinet colleagues made about the impact on the environment of over-development on unspoiled green-belt land?

Daniel Zeichner: This is why we will be introducing a land-use framework—to ensure that we can make rational decisions about how land is used to best effect.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): We are blessed to be nestled between the beautiful River Adur and the sea in my constituency, but that leaves us prone to flooding. Last year, my constituents in Shoreham found their homes and businesses flooded. I welcome the Government's £2.65 billion for flood defences and must stress the importance of East Worthing and Shoreham getting its fair share of that funding. Will the Minister confirm when the Government will announce funding allocations for local flood defence projects?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. We are taking decisive action to halt the steady decline in the condition of flood defences that we saw under the previous Government, including shifting an extra £108 million into maintenance. We will announce further projects in due course.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I recently visited New Sheepfold Farm in Ingleby Greenhow to see the great work that the Day family are doing to diversify their farm, help nature recovery and improve enjoyment of our rural area. They did this with the help of the North York Moors National Park Authority and the farming and protected landscape scheme, which I am glad the Government have extended for a further year. Does the Minister agree with me about the importance of family farms, such as that of the Days, in landscapes such as the dales and the moors, and will he ensure that they remain at the forefront of Ministers' minds?

Steve Reed *rose*—

Daniel Zeichner *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Secretary of State.

Steve Reed: We are fighting to have the honour of responding to the former Prime Minister! Of course I agree with him. Our focus on farm profitability is precisely so that family farms up and down the country can have a bright and secure future. Any sector that does not make a profit is not going to attract investment and will not have a future. We want farming to succeed in his constituency and in every constituency across the land.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecution Rates

1. **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates in cases of violence against women and girls. [903320]

2. **Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates in cases of violence against women and girls. [903322]

3. **Matt Turmaine** (Watford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates in cases of violence against women and girls. [903323]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): Earlier this month, we marked International Women's Day, and it was very moving to hear the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), again record in this House the names of women and girls who were killed in the past year. The scale of violence against women and girls in this country is completely intolerable, which is why, under our plan for change, this Government have already taken concrete steps to tackle it, including the introduction of Raneem's law to put domestic abuse experts into 999 control rooms.

Matthew Patrick: I thank the Solicitor General for her answer. Yesterday, I spoke to one of my constituents. When she was 14, she was raped by an adult whom she should have been able to trust. She woke up to him raping her. She has been carrying that with her for decades. Two years ago, she reported what happened to her and she has been fighting for her day in court all of that time. Can the Solicitor General please set out what the Government are doing to fix the broken system that is failing to deliver justice, and will she meet me to discuss how we can better support victim survivors such as my constituent?

The Solicitor General: I am very sorry to hear of the case that my hon. Friend raises. As he knows, this Government inherited a criminal justice system in crisis with a record Crown court backlog, meaning that far too many victims such as his constituent are waiting too long for their day in court. As part of the domestic abuse joint justice plan, in his local area the Crown Prosecution Service is trialling an enhanced partnership between Merseyside and Cheshire police and CPS prosecutors, to ensure that charging decisions, including in rape and serious sexual offence cases, are made more swiftly and stronger cases are brought from the outset, with a view to quicker and more successful prosecutions.

Irene Campbell: As a former chair of North Ayrshire Women's Aid, I know how low the prosecution rates are in cases of violence against women and girls, and how they can discourage people from coming forward at all. Victim withdrawal from prosecutions is also very high, for myriad reasons from poor treatment to long waiting times for court dates. What work is being done to make

women feel more comfortable to come forward and report such cases, and to support them throughout the whole process?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in this area. She is right to raise the extremely important point of victim attrition, which is unacceptably high right across our United Kingdom. That is why we have taken swift action in England and Wales, through the CPS victim transformation programme, appointing victim liaison officers to support victims throughout the legal process. The Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar has also pledged to make this issue a priority as part of his new direction for Scotland.

Matt Turmaine: Controlling and coercive behaviour is an insidious form of abuse. Will my hon. and learned Friend please outline what the Government are doing to deal with it?

The Solicitor General: Insidious is the right description. We fully recognise just how damaging that form of abuse is, and that it can follow a pattern of escalation that can lead to violence. That is precisely why the joint justice plan is underpinned by a commitment to tackle all forms of domestic abuse, ensuring that police and prosecutors can jointly tackle coercive control. The Court of Appeal recently increased two sentences for controlling and coercive behaviour by way of the unduly lenient sentence scheme, which I hope sends a very strong signal about just how seriously such conduct will be taken.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can the Solicitor General confirm that it is imperative that prosecution rates for all cases of violence are increased, and that she is not suggesting to the prosecuting authorities that they should discriminate on the grounds of gender?

The Solicitor General: I can confirm that this Government and the CPS take seriously prosecuting all crimes, including the most serious ones. Equality before the law is a fundamental principle that underpins the rule of law and is foundational to this country.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Many victims are so traumatised after an assault that it takes them some time to come forward. That causes delays and allows perpetrators to erase their traces. What more can we do to encourage any victim of assault to come forward as quickly as possible, knowing that they will have support as soon as they report something?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member raises an important point. The CPS is working right across the country to ensure that victims feel more able to come forward and that its service to victims improves. She will understand that the court backlog is key; unfortunately, we inherited a record court backlog from the previous Government, and we have to tackle it. The Lord Chancellor is taking a range of measures to get it down, so that victims will have the confidence that when they come forward they will have their day in court and justice will be done.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): In Surrey alone there are 1,500 cases waiting to be heard in our Crown court, including 166 sexual offences against women and

girls. Prosecutors have been telling victims that they have between two and five years to wait to get their day in court. That is appalling. Will the Solicitor General talk to the Ministry of Justice to reopen Woking's court complex, which was closed by the Conservative Government, to provide greater legal capacity in Surrey?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member is right to suggest that the root causes of the backlog are a direct result of Conservative choices and inaction. The previous Government closed more than 260 court buildings—in one year alone the Tories closed 84 magistrates courts—which clearly led to this considerable court backlog. I am pleased to say that the Lord Chancellor is taking action on that backlog by funding 108,500 sitting days in the Crown courts and increasing magistrates courts' sentencing powers.

Criminal Justice System: Technology

4. **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to use technology to help improve efficiency in the criminal justice system. [903324]

The Solicitor General: New technology has the potential to bring transformative benefits to the criminal justice system, as indeed it does to public services more broadly. The Government recognise that technology has the potential to radically enhance the way in which public services are delivered to the benefit of all of us and the public purse. For example, the Serious Fraud Office is trialling technology to improve the speed and quality of its disclosure work. The results have been promising. The tech identifies relevant documents 40% more quickly than traditional methods. I am pleased to say that it will be rolled out to more cases in the coming months.

Lee Pitcher: My constituency is home to three prisons: Lindholme, Hatfield and Moorland. Given the challenges faced in our local criminal justice system, particularly in managing caseloads in prisons and capacity, will the Solicitor General outline what specific technological innovations are being prioritised to speed up court processes and improve access to justice for victims and defendants?

The Solicitor General: The work to improve our public services has to include the better use of technology. The Government are taking decisive action to enable law enforcement agencies and prosecuting authorities to harness innovative and cutting-edge technologies to reduce the court backlog, improve efficiency in the criminal justice system and lead to better outcomes for victims. I am pleased to say that the Government Legal Department is providing leadership in this area through its artificial intelligence centre of excellence, which offers expert support to colleagues across Government.

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

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): With shameful vandalism of buildings in Eastbourne's Gildredge park and the torching of park benches in Shinewater park reflected across the country, we clearly need more tools to tackle such crimes in Eastbourne and beyond.

Technology is one of those tools. Will the Solicitor General share with my constituents what tech the Government are set to deploy to help us address those crimes more efficiently through the criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. As I outlined, tech is incredibly important to help the entirety of the criminal justice system function better. The CPS, for example, is committed to delivering more technology-enabled ways of working, including piloting digital jury bundles, which will help speed up the court process. I have already mentioned the Serious Fraud Office, which is trialling technology in a number of different areas, including its case management system, and I have also spoken about the Government Legal Department. The key is better use of technology to enable better ways of working across the entirety of the criminal justice system, including in the courts, and especially by the CPS, to enable more prosecutions.

Prosecution of Serious and Violent Crime: Huddersfield

5. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of serious and violent crime in Huddersfield. [903325]

The Solicitor General: The Government's priority is to keep our streets safe and to crack down on the serious and violent crime that unfortunately plagues far too many communities right across the country. As well as committing to more police officers and police community support officers on our streets, we have taken swift action to tackle knife crime by creating new offences and penalties to deter the possession and sale of these barbaric weapons. Our flagship Crime and Policing Bill will go even further with the biggest package of measures on crime and policing for decades.

Harpreet Uppal: Making sure that town centres such as Huddersfield's are safe and thriving is important to our residents, local businesses and the night-time economy. How is the Solicitor General ensuring that the CPS works effectively with local law enforcement to bring offenders to justice and make our residents feel safe in our towns?

The Solicitor General: I know my hon. Friend has raised those important issues on the Floor of the House previously. I also know how hard she is working to ensure the safety of residents in her area.

Too many town centres and high streets are plagued by antisocial behaviour and shoplifting. Those crimes are too often dismissed as low-level, but communities have to deal with the consequences. This Government are taking action: we are putting an additional 13,000 police and PCSOs on our streets and introducing respect orders to ensure that disruptive antisocial behaviour is eradicated from our town centres. I have been visiting local CPS units around the country and have seen at first hand their hard work to ensure that crimes are successfully prosecuted and that perpetrators are put behind bars.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): The independent review of the Southport attacks condemns the CPS and police's "near-silence" following the attacks and establishes silence as a catalyst for media disinformation and public distrust. It states that silence

"in the face of horrific events of major public interest is no longer an option."

Does the Solicitor General accept that Government secrecy fuelled conspiracy theories and thus eroded confidence in our justice system, or is the independent King's Counsel wrong?

The Solicitor General: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will not be surprised to hear that I completely reject the allegation of Government secrecy. Certainly, when it comes to Southport, those murders were some of the most harrowing in our country's history and it was absolutely right that due process was followed to allow for the successful conviction. It was vital that justice was done in those cases.

The shadow Solicitor General will know that there are issues around contempt, which the Law Commission is looking at. The Law Commission has agreed to a request from the Home Secretary to speed up that review and it is vital that we get the results of that review as soon as possible.

Helen Grant: The independent review warned that government silence

"risked far more prejudice to any trial"

than transparency. Indeed, as is often said, the truth can be the best disinfectant. Will the Solicitor General therefore agree to greater transparency around major events in future and to implement Jonathan Hall's recommendations on the provision of information to the public to ensure that that never happens again?

The Solicitor General: The shadow Solicitor General refers to Jonathan Hall and the terrorism review. Terrorism is, of course, something that the Government take extremely seriously. Jonathan Hall's review has now concluded and it is right that his report—coupled with the contempt review—is considered in full by the Home Secretary, as an important step in addressing all those questions.

Crown Prosecution Service: Ensuring Effective Functioning of the Courts

6. **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): What steps she is taking with the Crown Prosecution Service to help ensure the effective functioning of the courts. [903326]

9. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps she is taking with the Crown Prosecution Service to help ensure the effective functioning of the courts. [903330]

The Solicitor General: This Government unfortunately inherited a record Crown court backlog, with the human impact felt most severely by victims. Lengthy delays are much too common and victim attrition much too high. The Lord Chancellor has set out swift action to address that, including by increasing the number of Crown court sitting days and increasing magistrates courts' sentencing powers to take pressure off the Crown courts.

Ben Obese-Jecty: The effective functioning of the courts relies on sound and sensible sentencing guidelines. In just 12 days, such guidelines will no longer exist and a two-tier sentencing system will come into force on the Solicitor General's watch. This is the fourth time that the issue has been raised by the Opposition; I hope we will have more luck in securing a direct answer from the Solicitor General. Does she agree with the Justice Secretary that the guidelines will bring in a two-tier sentencing system, and can she confirm once and for all what is being done to stop those sentencing guidelines from coming into force?

The Solicitor General: I remind the hon. Member that the Conservative Sentencing Minister at the time wrote to the Sentencing Council making it clear that they welcomed the new guidance. Equality before the law is core to the application of the rule of law in this country and a foundational principle of our legal and judicial systems. I am sure that colleagues will welcome the fact that the Lord Chancellor met the chair of the Sentencing Council last week, and they had a constructive discussion around the guidelines.

James Wild: Justice delayed is justice denied. Will the Solicitor General confirm that the court backlog is rising rather than falling, and can she explain why the Lord Chancellor has not maximised the number of sitting days so that victims of rape and other serious crimes do not have to wait unduly for their cases to be heard?

The Solicitor General: The criticism would carry a little more weight were it not for the fact that the Conservatives spent the last 14 years driving up the record court backlog. The root causes of the backlog are a direct result of the Conservatives' choices. The previous Government closed over 260 court buildings, and the record court backlog now stands at 73,000 cases. As we have said, the human cost of those delays is considerable—victims are waiting years for justice. The Lord Chancellor is taking robust action. She has increased the number of Crown court sitting days, increased magistrate courts' sentencing powers and asked Sir Brian Leveson to lead an independent review of our criminal courts to look at options for longer-term reform. The previous Government did not act; they drove up the backlog. This Government are taking action.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): As the Solicitor General says, the Lord Chancellor has substantially increased sitting days. The lack of a judge is only one reason that courts stand empty. In the first nine months of 2024, 368 Crown court trials were rendered ineffective because the prosecutor failed to attend. What discussions has the Solicitor General had with the CPS on improving prosecutor attendance, so that Crown courts can sit closer to judicial capacity?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The shortage of counsel is, indeed, a problem and has contributed to the record Crown court backlog. The Crown Prosecution Service is widening their panel, including for rape and serious sexual offences counsel. I have had regular discussions with the chair of

the Bar Council around its work to try to ensure that criminal practitioners continue to stay in that line of work. I am also conscious that Ministry of Justice colleagues are very much committed to the sustainability of the Bar and are having regular discussions.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): The previous Conservative Government presided over a justice system where 60% of rape victims abandoned their cases, primarily due to the delays in court proceedings. This Government have prioritised victims by allocating a record number of sitting days. Does the Solicitor General agree that despite Opposition Members' expressions of outrage, their Government failed to tackle the backlog and deliver timely justice to victims?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have said a number of times, the root causes of the backlog lie with the Conservatives not taking action. It falls to this Government to take action, and it is action we are taking.

Prosecution of Serious and Violent Crime: West Ham and Beckton

7. **James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of serious and violent crime in West Ham and Beckton constituency. [903328]

The Solicitor General: We are taking strong action as part of our plan for change to tackle the serious and violent crime on our streets. Our new Crime and Policing Bill will back our police and prosecutors by giving them enhanced and tougher powers to keep our streets safe, to tackle antisocial behaviour and to crack down on knife crime. I know my hon. Friend will also welcome the record £1.16 billion investment in the Metropolitan police from the Home Secretary and the Mayor of London, which will help deliver this Government's safer streets mission in my hon. Friend's constituency.

James Asser: My constituents in West Ham and Beckton are extremely concerned about knife crime. We have had a serious number of incidents over the last few years, including in the last few weeks. Could my hon. and learned Friend reassure my constituents on the work that the Government are doing to take a stronger approach on prosecuting knife crime and the work being done to support victims?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important issue. This Government have already banned machetes. We are introducing legislation that will clamp down on the sale of dangerous knives online, and we are committed to banning ninja swords, too. I recently met the CPS's victim transformation programme and heard how the CPS is fundamentally transforming the way it provides support to victims to ensure that they get the assistance they need at every stage of the criminal justice process.

Prosecution of Serious and Violent Crime: Luton South and South Bedfordshire

8. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of serious and violent crime in Luton South and South Bedfordshire constituency. [903329]

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that question. The Government are taking decisive action to crack down on serious and violent crime right across the country, and to ensure that perpetrators of such offences are put behind bars. As such, I welcome her strong support for the Crime and Policing Bill, which contains tough measures to tackle knife crime and other crime.

Rachel Hopkins: Sadly, Bedfordshire police recorded some of the highest knife crime rates in England in the year ending March 2024. A robust and quick CPS response is key to delivering justice for victims and their families. How are the Government ensuring that we increase prosecution rates for those serious offences to keep dangerous offenders off our streets?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises a critical issue that affects communities in Bedfordshire and across the country. An important part of the Government's mission to make our streets safe is our commitment to halving knife crime in a decade. We have implemented our ban on zombie-style knives and machetes, and we are moving forward with our plans to ban ninja swords later this year. We know that more needs to be done to tackle the sale of knives and offensive weapons online, which is why we have recently announced Ronan's law, which will include stricter rules for online knife sales.

Business of the House

10.41 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall. The business for the week commencing 24 March includes:

MONDAY 24 MARCH—Second Reading of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

TUESDAY 25 MARCH—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Non-domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Great British Energy Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, followed by motion to approve the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2025.

WEDNESDAY 26 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make her spring statement, followed by remaining stages of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

THURSDAY 27 MARCH—General debate on St Patrick's day and Northern Irish affairs, followed by general debate on the 10th anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 28 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 31 March includes:

MONDAY 31 MARCH—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by remaining stages of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 1 APRIL—Second Reading of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [*Lords*].

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Jesse Norman: Thank you very much indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that you and the House will excuse me if I start on a very personal note.

Almost exactly 24 hours ago, my father, Torquil Norman, died at the age of 91. He was an extraordinary man. He flew Seafires and Sea Furies during his national service in the Fleet Air Arm. He created Polly Pocket, a toy that has brought unbelievable joy to many young people around the House and around the world. He rebuilt the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm in London, not just as an incredible performing arts centre, but as a creative centre for young people from whatever background to be able to find their way into jobs.

The reason I mention that now is that my father stood for values that bear a wider consideration in this House and in our own lives—values of positivity and creativity. He always said that the secret to success in the toy business was to have a mental age of seven and an eye for detail. He had incredible energy but also amazing resilience and focus on the long term. "Turn up at the finishing line" was one of his maxims. Even in his 80s, he was building and creating a new enterprise to

develop flat-pack trucks, if you can imagine such a thing, Madam Deputy Speaker, that could be sold to countries around the world at low cost, supporting businesses and people.

I think the whole House would agree with me that we need these values today. At a time of difficulty, stagnation and international conflict, we need these values of creativity, ambition, drive, respect for others and, above all, capability—a focus not just on the head, but on the hand and the heart as well. That is something I feel very strongly about. We are trying to build a new specialist technical engineering college in Hereford, precisely to bring those different aspects of the human personality together in the service of better jobs and better possibilities.

I also think that it encourages us all, as a House and as a Parliament, to ask the right questions and to support long-term solutions, even when those questions and solutions may not be ones that we are ideologically or politically drawn to. We are in a world where welfare costs are rising higher than anyone could have wanted; civil service effectiveness is perhaps not as great as we would like; productivity in the NHS is not what we would all want, for whatever reasons that may be, over a very long period; and we need a rapid boost to our defence and security. Those are crucial questions that we, as a House, will need to continue to develop and discuss over the next few years.

I want to ask the Leader of the House whether we and other Members of the Modernisation Committee cannot expand our thinking about those long-term issues and try to push for more scope for co-operation between the parties on them, more consultation and debate on key legislation before it is brought to the House, and more ways to develop closer personal engagement between Members, so that we can build respect and co-operation across the House for the longer term. One of my father's maxims—you will have discovered that he had many—was, "The secret to success is to take a large bite and then chew it." I think that we could perhaps do that more as a House and as a country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the Leader of the House responds, I wish to put on the record my condolences to the right hon. Gentleman, and my love and prayers. He and I spent some time together in a Department. He was a top gentleman to work with, and his father will have been very proud.

Lucy Powell: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for that tribute to his father, Torquil Norman. I did not know him, but he sounds like a wonderful father—someone who invented children's toys but also who had great wisdom and gave him great advice. We in this House should all live by those values of positivity, creativity and resilience that the right hon. Gentleman so fondly shared with us. I send him and his family my very best wishes, as I am sure the whole House does, as he comes to terms with that in the coming days.

I want to congratulate Newcastle United—I would not normally, but they did win their first silverware in 70 years. It is also great to see that the Tour de France in 2027 will start in Edinburgh and make its way through England and Wales.

As international events yet again dominate, I am sure we all look with horror at the unfolding situation in Gaza in particular, with aid being withheld and the

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killing continuing. As the Foreign Secretary will set out to the House shortly, we want to see an urgent resumption of the ceasefire and the long-term peace talks continuing.

In the spirit of the right hon. Gentleman's contribution, I want to put on the record my thanks to him for the cross-party work that he and I do across the House, not just through the Modernisation Committee but on the House of Commons Commission, chaired by Mr Speaker, and the many other boards that we have to sit on for many hours indeed. He makes a really important point, and it is one of the reasons why I wanted to establish the Modernisation Committee. I could have come into this position as Leader of the House and just laid down motions—which I do on many days—to change the rules of the House, but that is not how I want to work.

I take very seriously my role as Leader of the House, and as such I represent the whole House and want to bring the House together. I want to hear from smaller parties and to work cross-party. I believe that in this place we work best when we work together cross-party, on Select Committees and on issues that unite us. Many of those issues are raised regularly with me in Business questions, and I join the right hon. Gentleman in saying that we could definitely do more to tackle the big issues that this country faces, whether that is our defence and security, the welfare reform that is needed, jobs of the future or social care—that might be raised with me again today. Long may that continue, and we should strive to do more of it.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I add my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. Polly Pocket is still going today—my granddaughter is a Polly Pocket fan, and my daughter still has all of hers.

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating North Tyneside council, the Football Foundation, the Rugby Football League and other key partners that are supporting the new multimillion pound sports hub in Wallsend, which officially opened earlier this week and will serve as the headquarters for Northumberland FA and, at long last, provide a clubhouse for Wallsend rugby football club? Does she agree with the CEO of the Football Foundation that such facilities have a

“transformative impact on physical and mental health, and play in important role in bringing people together and strengthening local communities”?

I also thank the Leader of the House for her congratulations on our wonderful Newcastle United.

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in again congratulating Newcastle United, as well as the work that is being done in her constituency to create sports facilities for grassroots football, rugby and other sports. She is absolutely right; those things are vital for our communities and young people. That is why we are reviewing the school curriculum and putting more money into local government. It is also why we are introducing a football regulator Bill to ensure that grassroots football is protected across the country.

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

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I extend my condolences, and those of my party, to the shadow Leader of the House on the passing of his father—he sounds like an amazing man who will be missed not just by the right hon. Gentleman, but by many across the country.

Yesterday, in response to a question about welfare reform from the Mother of the House, the Prime Minister highlighted the importance of getting young people into work. He said:

“I think that one in eight young people not being in education or training...is a moral issue.”—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 348.]

I could not agree more about the importance of education and training, but I gently suggest that some of the Government's own policies are fighting against that.

Anglia Ruskin University has a campus in the heart of my Chelmsford constituency. Its relatively new medical school is doing fabulous work teaching the doctors and medical professionals of the future—members of the workforce that we desperately need in our NHS. It is doing that in new ways. When I visited ARU just a few weeks ago, I met three of the 25 apprentices taking part in the only medical doctor apprenticeship of its kind in the country. That apprenticeship is aimed at getting more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into medicine, and it is structured in such an innovative way that those apprentices will remain in their local area to complete their foundation training. That means that they will have a familiar local support system around them as they progress. It is an excellent programme, and exactly what we need to recruit, train and retain young medical professionals. But it is a level 7 apprenticeship, and the Government are scrapping them. As this is clearly a moral issue for the Prime Minister, will the Leader of the House ask the Government to think again, and provide hope that brilliant programmes such as that can continue?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that question, and for passing on her condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. She is right that getting young people into work is a priority for the Government, and it is important for the country that we do so. We need to reform the apprenticeship system so that more apprenticeships are available for young people, but that is not the system we inherited. In the system we inherited, the apprenticeship levy was underused and underspent, and apprenticeship starts were falling. That is why we are creating Skills England and reforming the apprenticeship levy, so that the young people she talks about can get the help they need.

Notwithstanding the case the hon. Lady raises, I am sure that she will recognise that the vast majority of level 7 apprenticeships were being used by people later in their careers, who already had degrees and who wanted management training, so we have had to look at whether that is sustainable and right. However, she raises an important point about a scheme in the university in her constituency. We need to get more young people into medicine, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and I will ensure that that particular offering is looked at and that she gets a full reply.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I, too, offer my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House? I concur with what he said: as a Parliament, we are better when we collaborate.

I want to raise a constituency issue. Trade union reps do a fantastic job representing their colleagues, communities and professions. However, a rep at a school in York has been suspended for carrying out trade union activities and raising employment rights. Will the Leader of the House raise this grievous matter with Cabinet colleagues? Our reps working in public services should not be suspended for raising concerns about issues such as funding across our education system. Can pressure be put on the multi-academy trust, which is completely unaccountable, to reinstate this representative?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the case my hon. Friend raises. She is right that our trade union representatives do an important job in our workplaces, providing a link between employer and employees, and ensuring that people have the standards and rights that they are entitled to at work, and that they are working in healthy and safe environments. I will ensure that the case she raises is looked into. We are taking steps to ensure that academy chains are held to account in the same way as local councils.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I note that the Leader of the House did not announce whether time on Thursday 3 April would be allocated for debates determined by the Backbench Business Committee. If we are given that date, we will have a statement from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on children in temporary accommodation, followed by debates on the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy and on access to sport and physical education in school.

If we are offered time on Tuesday 8 April, the last day before the recess, we will have a debate on the reward of a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne—and I advise the Leader of the House never to cross Jim Shannon. There will then follow a debate on matters to be raised before the Easter Adjournment.

In Westminster Hall, next Tuesday there will be a debate on the retrospective accountability of the construction industry, which is vital. Next Thursday there will be a debate on the prevention of drugs deaths and a debate on the first anniversary of the Hughes report on valproate and pelvic mesh, which has been raised at business questions many times. On Tuesday 1 April there will be a debate on eating disorder awareness. On Thursday 3 April there will be a debate on waste incinerators, followed by a debate on Government support for Thames Water. On Tuesday 8 April, the day before the Easter recess, there will be debate on the persecution of Christians.

In addition, it would be much appreciated if we could be advised of the dates for the estimates day debates in May. Unfortunately, House business seems to completely disrupt the meetings that we are meant to have, but I sent a letter to the Leader of the House about potential opportunities for 90-minute general debates when Government business is likely to finish early.

Last week I hosted a meeting in this place of Rotary International representatives on the eradication of polio across the world. We heard from Dr Hamid Jafari from Amman, Gulcheen Aqil from Pakistan and Aziz Memon from Pakistan, as well as Dr Sir Emeka Offor from Nigeria.

We have invested millions of pounds in trying to eradicate polio across the world. Unfortunately, the new International Development Minister was not able to attend because of short notice of the change of Ministers, and we understand that. We also know that there is a reduction in overseas aid, which I make no comment on. However, we want to see a statement from the International Development Minister on which programmes will be preserved and which ones will be cancelled. At the moment, there are only two countries in the world—Afghanistan and Pakistan—where polio is still rife. If we cut those programmes, the risk is that polio would rear its head again across the world and all the money we have invested would be wasted. Can we have a statement next week on that particularly important subject?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Blackman, you are the last person I should be chiding for using a Member's name, not their constituency, in the Chamber.

Lucy Powell: Obviously I would never cross the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—of course not. His criticism or praise is very important to me.

As ever, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) outlined some really important debates that the Backbench Business Committee is facilitating. I will look very kindly on Thursday 3 April and on the Tuesday before the recess in the usual way, and I hope that our meetings can be rearranged very soon.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of the eradication of polio and for all his great leadership and work on this issue over many years. It is an issue close to my heart: my mum had polio as a youngster, and she suffers from the consequences of that even today. The Government strongly support global efforts to eradicate polio. As he will know, decisions on the future of the overseas development aid budget are subject to the spending review, but I will absolutely ensure that his powerful and strong representation has been heard as part of those conversations.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): My condolences to the shadow Leader of the House and his family.

As a physiotherapist prior to being elected to this place, I was delighted to welcome members of all 14 allied health professions to a roundtable in Parliament this week. They account for about a third of the NHS's entire workforce and work tirelessly to improve patient care. Fundamentally, they all agree that allied health professions are sidelined and that their roles are often misunderstood. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that we should have a debate in Parliament on the importance of AHPs and the crucial work that they do in the NHS?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a really important matter. It is good to see that she is taking her experience from her previous job as a physiotherapist and providing strong leadership here in the House on those issues. She is absolutely right that AHPs provide a huge contribution to our NHS. Without physiotherapists and others, we would not be able to get people well, fit and healthy again and able to continue with their life and their work, so I absolutely support her request for a debate.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My condolences to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

(Jesse Norman). Interestingly, his comments and his eulogy to his father at this particular time bring into stark relief the absence in too many families of positive male role models for many young boys growing up. We all ought to be concerned about that.

We have a real problem at the moment, because we have not really debated the use of slave labour in products in the UK. There is a really interesting point here, because in America right now companies that have failed to interrogate their own supply chains are being sanctioned—not knowing is not good enough. Many of them are actually in use in the UK, including three in particular. A parent company, Donghai Jaisolar Technology, is being used at the Ministry of Defence; Hongyuan Green Energy, which has been sanctioned by the USA, is in use over here, and so is Jiangsu Micoe Solar Energy. Other companies, such as Jinko Solar and Canadian Solar, are ever present, and they are all essentially guilty of the use of slave labour. Can we have a proper debate about how we can stop that, as the Americans have been doing for some time? Surely we now need to sanction companies that use slave labour to get cheap advantage.

Lucy Powell: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman raises an issue that I know he has long campaigned on and its implications for the UK. He is absolutely right to raise it. We should not tolerate slave labour being used in any of the products on sale or being used in this country, and we need to do more to expose and have transparency around that. I think that would make a very good topic for a debate, but I will certainly ensure that relevant Ministers update this House on how we can have the economic security and transparency to ensure that that does not happen.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): I too offer my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House—Torquil Norman sounds absolutely great.

Parc Bryn Bach women have recently won the Welsh cross-country championships, beating the likes of Cardiff and Swansea running clubs to lift the trophy. Will the Leader of the House please join me in congratulating this small club from Tredegar on its achievement? Those runners have made their fellow club members, including me, very proud.

Lucy Powell: I thought my hon. Friend was inviting me on a cross-country run there—the answer would have been a clear no. I join him in congratulating the cross-country club from Tredegar of which he is a member on winning the Welsh championships.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I add my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. I agree that at a time when boys and young men are lacking role models, the memory of his father is a powerful example of why dads matter.

King Edward's school in Bath came third in the national reading champions quiz. I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating that school on its wonderful achievement, but reading for pleasure is now at an all-time low. Can we have a debate in Government time on how to improve reading proficiency among children of all ages?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating King Edward's school. We discussed many of these issues last week, as it was World Book Day when we met in the Chamber—we shared powerful testimonies about the importance of reading, access to school libraries, book schemes, and all the literacy work that goes on. I absolutely support the hon. Lady's call to make sure that reading for pleasure is central to our education.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Across my constituency, in towns such as Corbridge, Ponteland, Prudhoe, Haltwhistle and Hexham, people are very passionate about the environment and the natural world, so they will have been disappointed to hear the Leader of the Opposition junk her party's environmental commitments. Does the Leader of the House agree that moderate Conservative candidates should do some soul-searching and tell the people of Northumberland whether they plan to put planet before party?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I think we saw the Leader of the Opposition go to a whole other planet this week—Planet Zog, maybe, or I am sure there are many others. My hon. Friend is right that not only is tackling climate change important for the future of our climate, but it is vital to providing the jobs of the future that we need in this country and the energy security that will protect us from the likes of Putin in the future. It also means that all of our constituents will have lower bills over the longer term, which is why the Leader of the Opposition's announcement this week was a completely mad thing to do.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I send my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. His father sounds like an incredible man, and I certainly loved playing with my Polly Pocket, so I thank him for that lovely memory this morning.

Aplastic anaemia is a life-threatening blood disorder. Although it is rare, it can affect hundreds across the country, but there is no information about it on NHS England's website. Sadly, the constituent who brought this issue to my attention, Mr Jenkins, has passed away from the condition, but I promised his wife that in his memory, I would continue to raise aplastic anaemia and ensure that it gets listed on the NHS website, as it currently is on NHS Inform in Scotland. In light of NHS England being disbanded, can the Leader of the House raise with Cabinet colleagues the question of how we can ensure that rare conditions are recognised? Those conditions cause great distress and isolation, and I want to make sure that does not happen in the future.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent's passing from that rare condition, and congratulate her on bringing this issue to the floor of the House on behalf of his wife. She is absolutely right: rare conditions, which are often raised with me at business questions, often do not get the attention or the signposting that they desperately need. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a full response.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): May I too extend my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House? His father sounds like a wonderful man.

I recently visited Chase Recovery in my constituency. It is a community-based, peer-led rehabilitation programme, designed for those who experience substance misuse

and are seeking a new abstinent life filled with meaning and purpose. I met Paul and Cara while there, and their passion for their work is inspiring and infectious. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating them on the work they do, and will the House hold a debate on the importance of innovative, community-based services when it comes to sustainable, long-term recovery from substance misuse?

Lucy Powell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Paul and Cara on the work they do on rehabilitation in her constituency. She highlights once again the important role of prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation to ensure that people are healthy and successful in life in whatever way. Often those services are delivered by fantastic volunteers.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The shadow Leader of the House referred to his admirable father's national service in the course of his tribute, and that took place during a cold war that was prevented from turning into the third world war by the presence of American forces in NATO, led by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Up to now, that has always been a senior US army or other officer. Reports are now saying that in the Trump Administration's latest move away from the security system that prevented a third world war until the collapse of the Soviet empire, America is proposing to give up the post of SACEUR and allow a European or Canadian—prior to annexation—to take it over. May we have a statement about what the Government are doing to prevent such a dangerous and foolish outcome from proceeding?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that our strength and security in this country, in Europe and across the world come from our very strong alliances with Europe and with America through NATO. Our commitment to that is unwavering, and that has been a critical component of peace and security around the world over recent years. I am sure he will appreciate that I will not provide a running commentary on the Trump Administration, but he will recognise that the Defence Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and indeed the Prime Minister have been incredibly forthcoming with updates and providing details to this House, and I will ensure that they continue to do so.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My sincere condolences go to the shadow Leader of the House.

Hundreds of thousands of households across this country live on unadopted estates. They can be in that status for a great many years—I am hearing up to 10 years. In my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, I have estates where certain streets have been built, for example by Taylor Wimpey, and residents are just charged council tax, but on other streets, perhaps built by Persimmon, residents are being charged not just council tax but a monthly fee. Fortunately, my local Labour councillors are campaigning against companies such as FirstPort, because they see that as an absolute outright scam. Can I therefore urge the Government to allow a meeting with the Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), or indeed a debate? I fear that this issue is being felt right across the country, and it is an absolute scandal.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that this issue is being felt right across the country. We have called it fleecehold, and that is for a reason. It is why we want to end these leasehold estates for good. We have already ended leasehold for new housing, and we will be ending new leasehold for flats, too. We are bringing forward the commonhold White Paper and, later this year, the draft leasehold reform legislation. We look forward to working with him and his local councillors to end fleecehold for good.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I offer my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House.

Plans to install electricity pylons across my constituency are causing huge concern to many of my constituents. We have a Pencader-based cable-ploughing company, ATP, which specialises in the innovative spider plough technique. It has a low impact on the environment and has laid underground power lines all over Europe, including here in the UK. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating this local success story, which offers an efficient, ecologically friendly, environmentally friendly and, most importantly, efficient way of addressing our energy infrastructure needs?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises an important matter, and I know that the building of new pylons is an issue of concern for local people in many constituencies. We need to build the energy infrastructure of the future, which includes new pylons, but we are bringing forward measures to ensure that those who live near new pylons will receive £2,500 off their energy bills in the coming years. Putting cabling underground is an innovative approach, and the example that she gives is one that I am sure the Secretary of State will be keen to look at.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): May I, too, offer my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House?

Women's rights have come a long way; indeed, we have had three female Prime Ministers, and we now have our first female Chancellor and a female Leader of the House. However, many women and girls in the UK are still being denied the right to feel safe in their communities, on the streets, in their homes and even online. Although charities and Governments continue to work tirelessly to combat sexual violence—indeed, our Government have a landmark mission to halve violence against women and girls—some of my constituents say that many agencies, including the police, still do not take sexual violence seriously, respect victim-survivor testimonies or take serious action to stop the harm. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We really do have to have shorter questions. Can the hon. Gentleman please get to his point?

Jas Athwal: Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on how state agencies can work to protect victim-survivors better?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Tackling violence against women and girls is a national emergency, which is why this Government have a really ambitious mission to halve the levels of violence against women and girls within a decade. That will take a huge

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effort. We have already taken a number of steps, such as banning sexually explicit deepfakes and taking action on stalking and spiking. We are introducing many other measures in forthcoming Bills, and I look forward to debating them with him.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. I have spent many happy hours looking for lost Polly Pocket pieces.

The Leader of the House has had many invitations to the Scottish Borders, and I extend an invitation for her to come to the Langholm Common Riding, which is a fantastic event where the cornet leads a cavalcade of horses to check the town's boundaries. But if she were to come to Langholm right now, she would find that people are very unhappy about a proposed cull of feral goats on the moorland surrounding the town. A company called Oxygen Conservation took over a large part of that moor for the purpose of rewilding, but local people are dismayed that its first action was to propose a cull of goats. Whatever the merits or otherwise of such a scheme, does the Leader of the House agree that it is important that organisations such as Oxygen consult local people and do not just ride roughshod over their views?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the invitation to his constituency. I have had many invitations to the region, and I hope to come good on them one day.

This has become a very big issue in his constituency. I understand that a petition about this matter has garnered much support, and he is absolutely right: rewilding or nature preservation organisations really ought to work with local people to ensure that their wishes are considered.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I hope the spring equinox has put a spring in your step this morning, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Every Saturday, people from all around Bedworth join the weekly parkrun in the Miners' Welfare park. After the run, the Mayor's Café and the garden centre, run by People in Action, are often full, but the town centre remains relatively empty. Bedworth is receiving £20 million from the plan for neighbourhoods, so I have launched a survey to see what residents feel their town centre needs. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on support for businesses on our high streets and in our town centres?

Lucy Powell: Well, Madam Deputy Speaker, I certainly do not feel like a spring chicken any more, that's for sure.

I am really pleased to hear that Bedworth is receiving £20 million from the Government's plan for neighbourhoods. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a really important scheme to make sure that our town centres and village centres get the regeneration support they so desperately need.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I, too, add my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House and his family. His father—from defending our country

to improving our children's happiness and increasing our cultural awareness—had an incredible life, and one of which I am sure he can be proud.

The Government's new Crime and Policing Bill promises significant reforms to policing in this country. However, it is concerning that no money motion was passed for the Bill, especially when the need to strengthen community policing to ensure the successful implementation of these reforms is urgent. Will the Leader of the House commit to moving a money motion that specifically allocates funding for community policing—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It may be helpful if I point out that policing measures, as criminal justice matters, do not require a money resolution, as I have just been advised by the Clerk. I am not sure if that is of assistance either to the hon. Member or to the Leader of the House. I call Luke Taylor if he wants to complete his question.

Luke Taylor: It seems you may have pre-empted the end of my question, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I would very much appreciate some clarification.

Lucy Powell: I am happy to answer the question anyway, because the hon. Member raises a really important matter. This is a big Bill, with lots of good and important measures in it. It is one of my favourite Bills, not least because it will give the police the powers to seize quad bikes and off-road vehicles, which is very popular in business questions, as well as many other popular measures. However, he is absolutely right that, unless we have the police officers on the street to operationalise these powers, our constituents will not feel the benefit. I can assure him that these measures are fully costed, and we are committed to 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers alongside them.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I associate myself with all the words of condolence to the shadow Leader of the House, despite all the hours I have spent trying to find bits of Polly Pocket to placate my children.

My right hon. Friend is aware that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority published its timetable last week for paying out compensation to the infected and the affected. Following that, Sir Brian Langstaff, the chair of the infected blood inquiry, made it known that he intended to write a further report in response to the complaints he has received from the victims about the timetable for the compensation process and the adequacy of the Government's response. Can she update us on the promised debate on infected blood on the Floor of this House?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which I know he has campaigned on for a long time. I am sure he recognises that, certainly in recent years, the process has been too slow for many of those infected and affected by this terrible scandal. That is why we moved at pace after the general election, when we first came into office, to establish the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. Funds are now going to the infected, and the statutory instrument to take that forward is being considered upstairs on Monday. We have had two debates so far since the election and three statements to this House, but I will, as ever, ensure that

the relevant Minister is totally open with this House and that we have plenty of opportunity to debate these important matters.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): A short while ago, I met members of the Brewwood and Codsall dementia support group in my constituency, and they raised the issue of the increasing number of people being diagnosed with early onset dementia and the difficulties of supporting them. Could we have a statement or a debate in Government time on how we can support those with early onset dementia, including earlier access to pensions because such people's life expectancy is so much shorter?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Member raises a good point. Dementia gets raised a lot in business questions and, I know, in Health questions. We are committed to early diagnosis and to getting up the diagnosis rates. He raises a particular issue about access to pensions that I think requires further consideration, and I will certainly raise that with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Being deaf should not be a barrier to sport. I am so pleased that Macie White, a Derby North constituent, has been selected to be part of GB's deaf women's football team competing in the Deaflympics in Tokyo later this year. Macie has to fundraise to cover the costs of her expenses. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the GB team good luck? May we have a Government statement on how we can encourage participation and sponsorship for deaf sports at both grassroots and elite level?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has taken the opportunity to draw attention to a really important issue. I join her in congratulating Macie White on making the GB deaf women's football team and wish her well. I hope that in raising it today, the team maybe gets the extra sponsorship and support it so deserves.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): My constituents will be concerned by reports in the media this morning about a Government report that shows the cost of net zero will: impact negatively on GDP by 2030 by some 10%, increase national debt, increase the risk of a financial crisis, and hit the poorest the hardest. Given that the report was suppressed from the Department for Business and Trade by the previous Government, and given this Government's enthusiasm for transparency, will the Leader of the House confirm that the report will now be released to the public to enhance debate on this issue?

Lucy Powell: First of all, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman: I think he has a new role as chief adviser to the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), because they seem to be on the same page this week. Like her, though, I am afraid he is wrong on this issue, because we cannot ignore net zero. It is not just important for the climate, but absolutely critical to lowering bills, creating jobs and creating the energy security we need. Not taking action on net zero will actually cost us a lot more in the long run than taking the steps we are taking to invest in the jobs and lower bills of the future.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I extend my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. It says a lot about him that he is here in this place doing his duty today.

Last month, the mayor of the ancient and loyal borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Councillor Barry Panter, tragically died in a traffic accident. Although we were from different political traditions, he and I got on well and he was always very kind indeed to me. Last night, members of the borough council met to pay tribute to Barry. Sadly, the chair did not have enough time to read out my tribute. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House join me and my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) in mourning his loss, extend our collective condolences to Barry's wife Beatrice on behalf of His Majesty's Government, and give thanks for his noble service to our armed forces, the South Wales police force and our community in Newcastle-under-Lyme?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in passing on the Government's condolences and pay tribute to Barry Panter for his contribution to public life, both as a former police officer and dedicated public servant. My hon. Friend has served his constituents very well today.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I, too, offer my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House on the loss of his father, who sounds like a very fine gentleman indeed.

The Leader of the House will, I am sure, welcome the visit to the United Kingdom this week of the new Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney. Canada is, of course, a great friend to the United Kingdom and the new Prime Minister is very welcome. However, the Leader of the House must surely see that the UK economy is suffering from growth flattening, inflation above target and unemployment on the up—all as a result of the economic model adopted by the Chancellor and endorsed by the former Governor of the Bank of England, who was one of her advisers before the election, no less. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate to discuss how printing money, raising taxes and adding more costs to businesses has driven up prices and damaged jobs? Will she accept that former Bank of England economists and Governors seem to have little clue about how the economy actually works, which is bad for Britain and bad for Canada?

Lucy Powell: I would gently remind the hon. Gentleman—I can see he knows what is coming, because he is grimacing already—that under his Government we saw inflation go to 11%, the economy crashing, taxes raised to their highest in 70 years and debt out of control. We have had to come along and put the economy back on a stable footing, and that has meant taking difficult decisions. We need to invest in our public services and put the economy back on a stable footing. I am afraid we will not be taking lectures from the Conservatives on that.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I pass on my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House, whose father sounds like a modern-day Father Christmas.

As a child, together with my mother and sister, I experienced a period of homelessness. It was an incredibly difficult time for all of us. Thanks to the kindness of

[Lee Pitcher]

family and friends, we had a support network to get us through it, but sadly, that is not the case for everybody. This Friday, I will be joining residents from across my constituency at Doncaster Rovers football club for the Snooze in the South Stand event—an initiative that gives participants a powerful insight into the daily reality faced by too many people who are fighting homelessness in our communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising those organising and taking part in this important event and recognise the steps the Government are taking to reduce and eventually get rid of homelessness altogether?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for using his own experiences to highlight the important issue of homelessness. I join him in wishing well everyone taking part—including my hon. Friend himself—in the forthcoming Snooze in the South Stand event. He is right: we have to tackle the root causes of homelessness. We have put more money into tackling homelessness, we are ending no-fault evictions and we are absolutely committed to one of the biggest house building programmes, including in social and affordable housing, that this country has ever seen.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I add my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. As of today, while ultrafast broadband is available in Chester, only 19% of premises have access. Villages in my constituency that are within a few miles of Chester city centre, such as Waverton, Littleton, Christleton and Rowton, have an average download speed of just 10 megabits per second, as against the UK average of 69.4 megabits per second. These villages did not qualify for Project Gigabit, as they were classed as urban rather than rural, despite being in the countryside, and they are outside the boundaries of the city of Chester, so are not included in urban-focused projects. Would the Leader of the House consider providing an opportunity for the issue to be properly addressed in the House in the form of a debate on broadband speeds in rural areas?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the roll-out of fast, full-fibre and gigabit broadband has been too slow, especially in rural areas such as those in her constituency, which sound like they are between urban and rural. This Government are committed to that roll-out by 2030, but I will absolutely ensure that she gets an update on what is happening in her constituency.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): May I pass on my own personal condolences to the shadow Leader of the House? He and I have known each other ever since he entered this House. He made a fitting and moving tribute to his late father.

Every family in Rochdale, including mine, has a relative or friend who has benefited from the superb end of life care provided by Springhill hospice. I want to pass on the hospice's thanks to the Government for providing £111,000 in new funding just this month as part of a £100 million investment in hospices across the country. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Greater Manchester hospices provider collaborative, which visited Parliament this week to show the NHS just how much innovation and expertise hospices can provide to the palliative care movement?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I was sorry I could not join my hon. Friend and other Greater Manchester colleagues at the event with the Greater Manchester hospices provider collaborative earlier this week—I saw the photos—and I fully support his work on this. I will take this opportunity to thank Springhill hospice in Rochdale. I am really pleased it has had £111,000 of extra investment thanks to this Government, and I hope it will continue to flourish.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): May I also express my sympathy to the shadow Leader of the House? I knew Torquil, his father, very well for many years. I worked in the toy industry in competition with him and worked with him on many charities. He created some fantastic toys, not just Polly Pocket, but the big yellow teapot, the a la carte kitchen and the big red fun bus.

Jesse Norman: Hear, hear!

Clive Jones: Torquil Norman created all of those when he started the very successful public company, Bluebird Toys. He brought fun to millions of children across the world and, in doing so, he had the most wonderful life. The right hon. Member and his family will have much to celebrate in the coming weeks and months remembering him. All those associated with the toy industry will have been very sad to hear this news today.

For months, one of my constituents in Wokingham has been trying every morning at 6 am to book a driving test, but is left waiting in an online queue for half an hour with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency system, which suspects that he is a bot. Actual bots somehow get through, buying up test slots and selling them off at a premium. My constituent does everything right, but the system does not work for them. Can we have a debate in Government time on how to address the frustrating shortages of driving tests?

Lucy Powell: First, let me thank the hon. Member for his tribute to Torquil Norman. I am sure that if the shadow Leader of the House were able to respond to his question, he would want to do so by thanking him dearly for painting another lovely picture of his father.

Jesse Norman *indicated assent.*

Lucy Powell: I did not realise that Torquil Norman created Bluebird Toys, and all of the toys that that involved, so I think all of us owe him a great debt for inventing such fantastic toys.

The hon. Member raises an important issue about the DVSA on which we get many complaints. People are waiting too long to get their driving test slots. I know that other colleagues have raised that matter with me in the past, and will probably raise it with me today as well. Perhaps they might club together to get a Backbench Business debate on this important matter.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I was extremely relieved to see my constituent, Rebecca Burke, safely returned to her family in Monmouthshire on Tuesday after her ordeal in America. I am sure that all of us across the House would like to wish her well after her detention at the border for 21 days due to a mix-up with her visa. Although I am delighted that she is home, I was really disappointed and actually quite shocked to

hear that she was transported to the airport in the USA in chains despite doing absolutely nothing wrong and posing no risk. The family want me to convey my thanks to all those at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and at the consulate who helped to bring this awful ordeal to a close. I ask the Leader of the House to support me in securing a meeting between the Burke family and the Foreign Secretary so that they can feed back their difficult experience with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement to the FCDO and lessons can be learned.

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend's constituent, Rebecca Burke, has now safely returned home and I am very sorry to hear of the experience that she suffered in the US. I am glad that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office was able to help. The Foreign Secretary was in his place for the early part of her question, but he did not hear all of it. I will ensure that she gets a meeting with the appropriate Minister.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I join others in sending my deepest sympathy to the shadow Leader of the House for his loss.

I recently attended the awards for the Grimsby and Cleethorpes scout group, and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and I were glad to give up our Sunday afternoon to attend the event. When we go to such events, we can see not just how valuable it is for the young people concerned, but how important it is that the adults and the scout leaders give up their time to help develop the young people. I know that if I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on this matter in Government time, she will suggest that I go to the Backbench Business Committee. However, as a member of that Committee, I am aware of how heavy the demands are. Therefore, I join the Chair of that Committee in asking the Leader of the House for more time, so that I will not have to wait too long for my scout debate.

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking the Scouts for their work and all the adults who support them. The Scouts are vital for our young people, and I thank him for making time on his weekend to support them. As ever, I hear the strong representations of the Backbench Business Committee. The Chair and I are due to meet again soon to discuss perhaps more creative ways to find further slots.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We are expecting an important statement at midday, so if Members keep their questions short and the Leader of the House provides snappy answers, we might get everyone in.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Like 1% of the population, I suffer from coeliac disease, an autoimmune disease in which the gut attacks itself if the sufferer eats gluten. There is no treatment other than a gluten-free diet. The cheapest loaf of gluten-free bread can cost six times the price of one that contains gluten. Despite that, prescriptions for gluten-free bread are being restricted across England by integrated care

boards, leading to coeliacs facing economic hardship and putting themselves at risk of cancer and osteoporosis. This must be reversed. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the availability of gluten-free prescriptions across England?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has made a strong case—I did not realise that gluten-free products were so expensive. He is right to point out that they are necessary for coeliac sufferers such as him. I am sure that that would make a good topic for debate.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I recognise your request for brevity, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I offer my condolences and say how much I identify with the maxim “turn up at the finishing line”, having stood eight times to get here and having been successful twice.

Given the countless families in my part of Somerset who have adopted or are special guardians to children and young people, many of whom are living with significant challenges and trauma stemming from their treatment in early life, the adoption and special guardianship support fund is a lifeline for essential therapeutic support. I have written to the Minister, and I understand that applications for therapy that started this financial year can carry on into the next one, but there is no news yet on the future of funding, leaving many families in limbo. Can we have a debate to enlighten us on when the Government will make an announcement on the fund, and how they propose to support adoptive families to ensure that they can access therapeutic support when it is needed?

Lucy Powell: Adoption support is important. The uncertainty about the fund has been raised with me as a constituency MP, so I am well aware of it. I will ensure that when I get a response about it, I will pass it on to the hon. Lady.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Let me start by extending my deepest condolences to the shadow Leader of the House. Clearly, his father was a remarkable man.

Stoke-on-Trent has a rich history reflected in the architecture found across our six proud towns. As part of English Tourism Week, I was delighted to welcome colleagues from the national lottery heritage fund to our mother town of Burslem, where we discussed to how unleash the potential of our beautiful buildings with the right support. We must safeguard our heritage buildings, so will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the regeneration of our towns and how the Government can support them?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to hear of the work in Stoke-on-Trent to restore heritage buildings and my hon. Friend's work with the national lottery heritage fund. It is vital that industrial heritage is also considered heritage. I will support him in raising these matters.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The M5 motorway in Somerset is being closed ever more frequently and for longer durations. This causes great inconvenience to businesses and residents, occasionally gridlocking the town of Bridgwater. Can we have a debate in Government time on the policy of National Highways for when and for how long it closes our motorways?

Lucy Powell: I know how frustrating that kind of road closure can be on constituents and those travelling. Poorly planned roadworks and highway agency plans can be devastating. I will support him in raising these issues with Ministers and hopefully in the House.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I recently visited the fantastic Tilehurst junior youth club in my constituency, and even enjoyed a stint running the tuck shop. It is so important that people across our country have access to a safe place to play and socialise outside of school. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on the Government's plans for Young Futures hubs and improvements to services for young people?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are committed to the Young Futures programme, which, as she will know, is progressing well. I will ensure that the House is kept updated on it; that will give her a chance once again to praise the fantastic work of the youth club in her constituency.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): Sincere condolences to the shadow Leader of the House on the loss of his father.

Mass deportation of illegal migrants and foreign criminals must be our ultimate policy objective. Will it be logistically straightforward? Absolutely not. Is it necessary? Absolutely, yes. It is mass deportations or a mass amnesty, and I choose deportations. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time on how we can deport the numbers required on a rapid timescale that is acceptable to the British people, who reasonably expect our borders to be policed and the law to be upheld?

Lucy Powell: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that these matters are not as simple as he might suggest. The Government are absolutely committed to protecting our borders. In fact, we have returned more illegal migrants than have been returned in recent years, and the number is going up and up. We have introduced the Border Security Command, which is already taking action at source, and we need to work internationally to ensure that people do not want to come here illegally in the first place. We must take a range of actions; presenting some false easy solution does not do the issue any good at all.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Access to justice is a real issue in Cornwall, which is in effect a legal aid desert. In my previous life, when I first came to Cornwall, I ran an employment law clinic at Citizens Advice in Falmouth. Citizens Advice does great work, but it struggles with funding and recently had to stop its drop-in surgeries. Cornwall needs a law centre. Many urban areas have them, and I have willing volunteers. Will the Leader of the House please ask the appropriate Justice Minister to meet me to discuss the routes to getting such a centre, and finding the funding?

Lucy Powell: I will arrange a meeting for my hon. Friend, who is right that the availability of law centres—I am lucky enough to have one in my constituency—is vital to ensuring that people get the justice they deserve.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Following Santander's disappointing decision to turn its back on Ilkley and close the bank branch there, Link has

recommended that our town gets a full banking hub, which I have long campaigned for. That is welcome news, but it should not have taken the last bank closing for us to get one. Meanwhile, in Keighley, bank branch after bank branch has closed, but there is no sign of us getting a banking hub. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on getting banking hubs open without our waiting for an area's last bank branch to close? Will she ensure that banking hub services are accessible, with full cash access?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member will know that in recent years—since long before we came to government—we have seen a huge acceleration in the closure of banks on our high streets because of banks' changing practices and decisions. The Government are committed to bringing in 350 banking hubs. We have allocated 200, and 100 are already open. I will ensure that he gets an update on the banking hub for his constituency.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Potholes have plagued motorists in Buckinghamshire for too long, damaging cars and making drivers, pedestrians and cyclists less safe. I welcome the Government's commitment to delivering more than £20 million in funding to Buckinghamshire council to fix those potholes, and I am working hard to get Labour councillors elected on 1 May to ensure that the investment delivers results. Will my right hon. Friend reaffirm the Government's commitment to our road infrastructure, and ensure that it keeps getting priority in Parliament?

Lucy Powell: Filling our potholes is a really important action that the Government are taking. We want to fill another 7 million potholes over the course of this Parliament. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is working with her council, and with the councillors whom she is hoping to get elected later this year, on getting the potholes fixed in her constituency.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I valued the comments of the shadow Leader of the House, and of my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones). I offer my condolences, and my time, on a separate occasion, to discuss the ideas for the future that the shadow Leader of the House set out.

BT has threatened to close down the K6 telephone box in Sharrington, in my constituency, which is a vital lifeline for an area with a poor mobile signal. Indeed, just a few weeks ago, an ambulance driver used the phone box to make an emergency call. Last Friday, we rallied 50 locals to queue outside the phone box to make calls and prove its importance to BT. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate in Government time about the importance of phone boxes to rural communities, and the protection of vital rural services?

Lucy Powell: Phone boxes remain important for many of our villages and towns across the country, as well as in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He has taken the opportunity this morning to mention the phone box in his constituency, and I will ensure that he gets a good reply about it.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Many of my constituents, particularly in the parish of Willaston and the town of Nantwich, have been in touch about

significant delays in receiving mail from Royal Mail. They often go weeks without receiving a single piece of mail, and then receive a whole stack of letters weeks later. As I am sure my right hon. Friend appreciates, that results in my constituents missing important correspondence, including about hospital appointments. When might we have a debate on Royal Mail's performance?

Lucy Powell: I can absolutely identify with what my hon. Friend describes because I have had many similar issues in my constituency. I know that there are systemic problems in Royal Mail to do with staff morale and systems that it uses, which mean that people do not get a service that they can rely on. I advise my hon. Friend to raise that directly with Royal Mail—and perhaps with the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), as I did on behalf of my constituents, because the Committee holds regular accountability hearings with Royal Mail.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I, on behalf of my party, offer my condolences to the shadow Leader of the House on the loss of his dad? My dad died 10 years ago, and there is not a day when I do not think about him. I am sure the hon. Member will be the same.

The Chinese Communist party's long-term strategy for Tibet through to 2049 involves tightened rules for religion, in order to deliberately suppress Tibetan Buddhism and religious identity. The aim is to bring religion totally under the control of the state, to ensure that religious views and feelings are supplanted by loyalty to Chinese cultural nationalism. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to commit to raising with counterparts in China the urgent need for additional

protections to safeguard the human right to freedom of religion or belief, and will she ask the Foreign Secretary to ensure that these concerns remain central to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's diplomatic engagements with China?

Lucy Powell: Those issues absolutely remain central to our diplomatic relations. The Foreign Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), are here, and they will have heard the hon. Gentleman's question. We stand firm on human rights; we make that very clear in our discussions with China, and with anybody else.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We have a very important statement coming in just one minute. Final question: Chris Webb.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Blackpool pleasure beach in my constituency was named the best seaside park at the UK theme park awards. World-class attractions such as the pleasure beach brought an estimated 23 million people to Blackpool last year. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the pleasure beach and all the attractions in Blackpool, and encourage everyone to have a staycation in the UK this year?

Lucy Powell: I can absolutely encourage everyone to go to Blackpool, have fish and chips on the promenade, and perhaps go on the Big One, which I am too scared to go on. I look forward to joining my hon. Friend there soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for her responses this morning.

Conflict in Gaza

11.53 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With the permission of the House, I shall make a statement about the conflict in Gaza. In January, I outlined to the House the deal agreed between Israel and Hamas. It was a moment of huge hope and relief. In the weeks that followed, hostages cruelly detained by Hamas were reunited with their families, and aid blocked by Israel finally flooded into Gaza. A path out of this horrendous conflict appeared open. It is therefore a matter of deep regret that I have to update the House today on a breakdown of the ceasefire and yet more bloodshed in Gaza.

On the night of 18 March, Israel launched airstrikes across Gaza. A number of Hamas figures were reportedly killed, but it has been reported that over 400 Palestinians were killed in missile strikes and artillery barrages. The majority of them were women and children. This appears to have been the deadliest single day for Palestinians since the war began. This is an appalling loss of life, and we mourn the loss of every civilian.

Yesterday morning, a UN compound in Gaza was hit. I can confirm to the House that a British national was among the wounded. Our priority is supporting them and their family at this time. Gaza has been the most dangerous place in the world to be an aid worker, and I share the outrage of the UN Secretary-General Guterres at this incident. The Government call for a transparent investigation, and for those responsible to be held to account.

The UK is working closely with partners, such as France and Germany, to send a clear message. We strongly oppose Israel's resumption of hostilities. We urgently want to see a return to a ceasefire. More bloodshed is in no one's interest. Hamas must release all the hostages, and negotiations must resume. Diplomacy is the one way to achieve security for both Israelis and Palestinians. The House will know that the ceasefire in Gaza had lasted for almost two months—the result of dogged efforts by Egypt, Qatar and the United States. The deal reached in January saw the nightmare of captivity for 30 hostages end, and the bodies of eight further victims of Hamas returned to their loved ones. We all remember the joy of seeing Emily Damari reunited with her mother and family. Desperately needed aid began to flow back into Gaza—food, medicines, fuel and tents. Children in Gaza had respite from relentless fear. The severely injured could cross the border again for treatment. Palestinians had begun to return to their homes, and to consider how to rebuild their lives.

In the first days of the ceasefire, the UK moved swiftly to invest in the peace. We released £17 million in additional emergency humanitarian funding for the promised surge in aid. We brought our total support this year for Palestinians across the region to £129 million. We accelerated work on the pathway to reconstruction, supporting our Arab partners' very welcome recent initiative. We worked at every level to support negotiations for a permanent ceasefire and the return of every single hostage in a backed extension to phase one of the current deal.

But negotiations have been gridlocked for several weeks. Hamas has been resisting calls for the release of further hostages in return for a longer truce. Israeli

forces did not begin to withdraw from the Philadelphi corridor as agreed, and on 2 March, the Israeli Government announced that they were blocking all further aid deliveries until Hamas agreed to their terms. For weeks now, supplies of basic goods and electricity have been blocked, leaving over half a million civilians once again cut off from clean drinking water and sparking a 200% surge in the price of some basic foodstuffs—a boon to those criminals who use violence to control supplies.

As I told the House on Monday, this is appalling and unacceptable. Ultimately, of course, these are matters for the courts, not Governments, to determine, but it is difficult to see how denying humanitarian assistance to a civilian population can be compatible with international humanitarian law. Although it is important to say that I could have been a little clearer in the House on Monday, our position remains that Israel's actions in Gaza are a clear risk of breaching international humanitarian law.

The consequences of the ceasefire's breakdown are catastrophic. For the families and friends of the remaining 59 hostages, including Avinatan Or, the agony goes on. Hamas's kidnapping of those people and treatment of them in captivity, the cruel theatre of their release, depriving them of food and basic rights—those are acts of despicable cruelty. Hamas must release them all now.

Palestinian civilians, who have already endured so much, now must fear a re-run and a return to days of death, deprivation and destruction. Civilians have once again been issued with evacuation orders by Israel. Only 4% of the United Nations flash appeal is funded—not even enough to get through to the end of this month. Health centres have had to close, even as the devastated Gazan health service has to treat another surge of those wounded in strikes.

Hamas can have no role in Gaza's future, but a collapsed ceasefire will not bring the hostages home to their families, an endless conflict will not bring long-term security to Israel, and a deepening war will only set back the course of regional normalisation and risk further instability, shortly after the Houthis resumed their unacceptable threats to shipping in the Red sea.

Since the renewed outbreak of hostilities, I have spoken to Secretary Rubio, to EU High Representative Kallas and to UN emergency co-ordinator Tom Fletcher, and I will shortly speak to my Israeli counterpart Gideon Sa'ar and Palestinian Prime Minister Mustafa. We and our partners need to persuade the parties that this conflict cannot be resolved by military means. We want Israel and Hamas to re-engage with negotiations. We continue to condemn Hamas, of course, for their actions on 7 October, their refusal to release the hostages, and their ongoing threat to Israel, but we are also resolute in calling on Israel to abide by international law, lift the unacceptable restrictions on aid and demand the protection of civilians.

Many months ago, only weeks into office, I concluded that there was a clear risk of Israel breaching international humanitarian law in Gaza. It was that risk, which I first set out in the House back in September, that meant that the Government suspended relevant export licences for items for use by the Israel Defence Forces in military operations in Gaza. The actions of last week only reinforced that conclusion. In the days and weeks ahead, we will redouble our efforts to restore a ceasefire, but we will also continue to work with our partners on the

security, governance and reconstruction arrangements. Those issues are not going away. There remains no military solution to this conflict. A two-state solution remains the only path to a just and lasting peace.

At this Dispatch Box in January I called the ceasefire deal

“a glimmer of light in the darkness”.—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 511.]

It feels like the darkness has returned. Former British hostage Emily Damari said that the resumption of fighting left her heartbroken, crushed and disappointed. I am sure that she speaks for the whole House. But we must preserve hope for the sake of the remaining hostages and their loved ones, for the people of Gaza, and for the future of two peoples who have suffered so much for so long. We will keep striving for a return to the path to peace. I commend the statement to the House.

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

12.3 pm

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

We all mourned the loss of innocent lives in this appalling conflict. The death of the UN aid worker and the injury to a British national are tragic, and our sympathies and thoughts are with their families. Will the Foreign Secretary provide an update on the direct engagement that he has had with key interlocutors in the region to ascertain the facts of what happened? Has he been updated by the Government of Israel on their investigation?

The onward transition at the end of phase 1 of the ceasefire agreement was always going to be challenging. This is a difficult and fragile moment for the middle east, but several basic truths remain unchanged, including the urgent need to return to their loved ones the 59 hostages captured by Hamas terrorists during the atrocities of 7 October. That is vital for achieving a sustainable end to this horrendous conflict. The incredibly brave families of those held hostage remain firmly in our thoughts, and we should be very clear that the onus is squarely on Hamas. Hamas could agree to release these hostages now and avert any escalation. This is the moment for the UK Government to show leadership with the international community and exert maximum pressure on Hamas to release these hostages.

We should all fully understand who we are dealing with here: a brutal Iranian-backed terrorist organisation that seeks the destruction of the world's only Jewish state, uses its own defenceless people as human shields and has ruthlessly eradicated fundamental freedoms in Gaza. Anyone who has read the shocking report from Lord Roberts on 7 October, commissioned by the all-party parliamentary group on UK-Israel, will have seen the harrowing details of the real-life consequences of Hamas's total disdain for human dignity, utter disregard for human life, visceral antisemitism and murderous intentions: their organised brutality, murder, rape and torture, indiscriminately targeting babies, children, women and the elderly. As the Prime Minister himself once said, Hamas bear responsibility. Is that still the Prime Minister's and the Government's position?

It is abundantly clear that Iranian-backed Hamas can have no role in the future of Gaza, and we have raised this many times in the House. What exactly are the

British Government doing at this moment in time to bear down on Hamas and work with partners to put an end to this brutal regime? What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of the capabilities of Hamas and the ongoing threat that the terrorists pose to peace and stability in the region? Do the Government support the US proposal for securing the release of hostages? What is his vision of the next steps? Does he believe that phase 2 of the ceasefire remains within reach, or is he considering alternative solutions?

There is too much at stake for Britain to be a bystander. We must be a proactive player with involvement. The Foreign Secretary mentioned his talks with France and Germany, but what discussions is he having with Egypt and other regional partners? We need Israel to continue seeing the UK as a trusted partner. The strength of Britain's relationship with Israel also matters for our wider influence in the middle east. If we undermine our relationship and influence with Israel, we also lose influence across the middle east.

Careless comments do not help, including the Foreign Secretary's remarks in this House on Monday, for which he has been rebuked by the Prime Minister. Will he apologise to the House and to Israel? The Foreign Secretary's focus should be on securing the release of the 59 remaining hostages, and this House should be united in that. Those hostages have been held by Hamas since the atrocities of 7 October, and their release is important for a sustainable end to this conflict.

Let us be clear: Hamas have no respect for international law, human life or human rights. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we must be unequivocal that there is no moral equivalence between Hamas and the democratically elected Government of Israel? We must have no more poorly judged decisions on arms exports designed to placate Government Back Benchers.

On the question of aid to Gaza—[*Interruption.*] On the question of aid to Gaza, which Government Back Benchers would perhaps like to take seriously, I have said from the Dispatch Box that we expect detail about the Government's practical response on the ground. How are the Government working to unblock the situation, and what is happening to British aid that is already in the region or en route? What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with Israeli counterparts in recent days? What is his assessment of the reports of Hamas stockpiling aid and the impact this has on distribution to civilians in need? Has he held discussions recently with the Red Cross on its important work on hostage release and aid delivery? Could we be doing more to support the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross?

On the region more broadly, as the parliamentary commission report makes crystal clear, we cannot ignore the role of the regime in Tehran, which has its fingerprints over so much of the inhumane suffering and bloodshed that we see today. We need action to deter Iran's malign agenda, so what options are on the table for tackling Iran and the flow of weapons and support to its terrorist proxy? What hard power options is the Foreign Secretary considering in respect of the Houthis? I did not receive an answer to that in the House on Monday. I also asked the Foreign Secretary on Monday whether Britain is in lockstep with the United States, but he did not answer that. Now is the time for him to provide clarity and clear answers.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, and let me make clear regarding the charity worker who was injured, that of course our ambassador and the Foreign Office are in touch with his family. As she would expect, we have made representations to the Israeli Government, and I will be speaking to the Israeli Foreign Minister in the coming hours.

The right hon. Lady talks about Hamas, and I have said at this Dispatch Box that the scenes of those young men in balaclavas with Kalashnikovs parading hostages are obscene, and I condemn them. I said in January that we would continue to stand with the hostage families, and we will. There are still dozens of families waiting, hoping, praying that their loved ones can return, but the right hon. Lady will also have seen overnight that many of those families are saying that this is not the way to bring them home. They fear that as a consequence of this resumed action, their loved ones will perish, and I thought that the tone of some of her remarks did not sit with what I see coming out of Israel at this time. No one could not be absolutely touched and affected by the gaunt and malnourished hostages paraded around in a sick propaganda exercise. We all condemn Hamas.

The right hon. Lady asks what we are doing. What we are doing, and what the previous Government did, is supporting the Palestinian Authority with reform. There has to be an alternative to Hamas, and that alternative is the Palestinian Authority. We must work with it; we have to give people hope and prospect that is not about terrorism, and that is about supporting Prime minister Mustafa in all his efforts. That is what we have been doing, and why we have been working particularly with the Arab Quint. She asked about how we are working with partners in the area, and there was to be a conference, a gathering, in Egypt this weekend. It has been postponed, but it will be important that we attend that gathering, and work with our Arab partners. I put on record our support for Egypt and Qatar in their conversations with Hamas. She knows that we do not talk to Hamas, but we do work with those partners who can.

The right hon. Lady asked about future operations in the Red sea, and she knows well that I would never comment from the Dispatch Box on operational issues in the Red sea. She asked me if there is any moral equivalence between Hamas and the Israeli Government. Of course there is no moral equivalence between Hamas and the Israeli Government, and none of us has ever suggested that that is the case. She asked, rightly, about the role of Iran. She is right about the malign affect of Iran in the region, and we will act to ensure that it does not get the nuclear capability that it is seeking to secure—I discussed that issue with Secretary of State Rubio and my counterparts in France and Germany.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his passionate and articulate plea for peace from the Dispatch Box. In doing so he speaks for us all, and I know that he has witnessed the suffering and feels it very deeply, as we all do. The renewed bombing in Gaza cannot be justified, the renewed siege of Gaza cannot be justified, and it is difficult to see how either of those things are compatible with international law. It will be for a court to decide, and there will be a reckoning.

The question, however, is what is going to happen now, because whatever it is that the British Government are doing in the region, it is clearly not working. What is plan B? Now that the Israeli Government have abandoned the fragile course of peace, what is plan B for the west bank, which still faces the threat of annexation? Following reports that the strikes may have American endorsement, what is plan B when it comes to uniting our international allies, to make sense of this senseless violation of the peace process? We must ensure that this is met not just with words, no matter how passionate or articulate. We have to do something internationally and with our allies. It is time to stop talking about it, and to do something.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I know that she was in the region recently, discussing these very same issues at the Knesset. I understand that the US envoy, Steve Witkoff, is flying into the region as we speak, and I hold out hope that we can once more get a ceasefire that gets us to the plan, which was to the end of the Passover period—I cannot give up hope on that. She says that we must have more than words, and she knows, as I do, that the business of diplomacy is words, conversations, and using our influence to bring this about. That is why we are working closely with the United States, with our Arab partners and, of course, with our E3 partners, in particular, and the European Union at this time, and I will do everything I can to get us back to that ceasefire.

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

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Israel's resumption of its military campaign in Gaza is heartbreaking for all Palestinians, for the remaining hostages and their families, and for the world. For two months, the fragile ceasefire provided space for the release of hostages and, until early March, the flooding of Gaza with vital aid to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians. The resumption of fighting now threatens the lives of Israeli hostages still held in captivity by Hamas, and of Palestinians, who have already seen their homes and communities devastated by 15 months of war. A new ceasefire must be secured as soon as possible. To that end, what discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with the Israeli Government on rapidly recommitting to a ceasefire?

Even before the resumption of military operations, the Israeli Government had cut aid routes into Gaza, as well as the supply of electricity. That was illegal and wrong, contravening Israel's obligations under international law. In this House on Monday, and today, the Foreign Secretary stated that Israel's aid blockade was a breach of international law. Will he outline what action he is taking to ensure that there are consequences to breaching international law? Hamas must now immediately and unconditionally release the remaining hostages, the treatment of whom while in captivity has been despicable. We are also deeply concerned by reports that a British bomb disposal expert has been injured in an explosion at a UN facility in the strip, and our thoughts are with their family. Will the Foreign Secretary update the House on his safety and condition?

Arab states have a vital role to play in supporting the transition back to a state of ceasefire. Their plans for the reconstruction of Gaza also provide a pragmatic

proposal for rebuilding the strip, particularly when compared with the reckless proposals put forward by Trump, who described his intention to remove Palestinians from Gaza. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that he has engaged closely with Arab partners in the region around their plans for reconstruction? As conflict returns to Gaza, we must also give Palestinians hope, and show them that we support their right to statehood. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the UK must now move to officially recognise a state of Palestine, as a vital part of a two-state solution that offers dignity and security to Palestinians and Israelis?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I can assure her that, since the outbreak of renewed hostilities, I have spoken to Secretary of State Rubio and to EU High Representative Kaja Kallas, and we are closely co-ordinating. Just last Friday I met the emergency relief co-ordinator, Tom Fletcher, in New York, where we discussed the issues in Gaza. Of course, I expect to speak to my counterpart Gideon Sa'ar, and to Palestinian Prime Minister Mustafa shortly. We are working particularly closely with our E3 partners, and the hon. Lady will have seen that there was a closed meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday, at which we made strong representations. She will also be aware that these issues were discussed, and she will have seen the communiqué that flowed from the G7 Foreign Ministers meeting last week in Canada.

As I have now said on 10 occasions since September, Israel's actions in Gaza are at clear risk of breaching international humanitarian law. The Government have been clear all along that we are not an international court, and we could not make a judgment as to whether Israel has breached international humanitarian law, but I made a decision back in September, based on whether there was a clear risk, and for that reason we have suspended those sales to Gaza, and they will continue to be suspended.

On the British charity worker who has been wounded, we are of course in contact with his family and I intend to keep the House updated.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for all the work that he and his team are doing behind the scenes on this horrific issue. It is quite shocking that the shadow Foreign Secretary appears unable to say the word "Palestinian". As someone who used to be an international aid worker and was in Gaza, let me say that the lives of Palestinian aid workers are every bit as valuable as the lives of international aid workers. More than 170 Palestinian children have been killed this week alone, and yesterday the Israeli Defence Minister threatened the ethnic cleansing of Gaza—[*Interruption.*]

Priti Patel: Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to set the record straight.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I will assist the shadow Foreign Secretary once the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) has finished her question. Please continue.

Melanie Ward: Yesterday, the Israeli Defence Minister threatened the ethnic cleansing of Gaza. What action is the Foreign Secretary taking to stop that and to hold the Government of Israel accountable for their actions?

Mr Lammy: Humanitarian aid should never be used as a political tool and Israel must restart the aid immediately. A lot of diplomatic activity is going on at this time. As I said, Steve Witkoff, the US special envoy to the middle east, has flown into the area and we are in touch with the US. I am working closely with the E3 and the EU. In fact, I will be speaking very shortly to my French counterpart. We have not given up hope. I sense that there has been a loss of hope that we can get back to the ceasefire from hon. Members in the Chamber, but I tell them now: this Foreign Secretary has not given up hope that we can get back to the ceasefire. It is my job to try and do the best to deliver that, and that is what I intend to do in the coming hours.

Priti Patel: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is the point of order absolutely relevant right now?

Priti Patel: I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the suggestion—a misrepresentation—that I have not spoken about the Palestinian Authority in this House, because I have done so from the Dispatch Box on a number of occasions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is a very sensitive and important debate. We need to ensure that language is temperate and respectful at all times. Our constituents are watching, as indeed is the world, so we must ensure that we in no way inadvertently misrepresent our colleagues. The right hon. Lady's point is noted. We will now continue because we have a lot of people to get through. I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree with everything the Foreign Secretary has said, in particular that we have to give hope to the Palestinian people. To be fair to the Israeli Government position, Hamas could solve the problem now by releasing the hostages. Having said that, does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is quite wrong for any member of the Israeli Government to say that the Gazan people could rise up against Hamas? If they did that, they would be tortured, at best, and probably killed. The people of Gaza are victims of Hamas as much as anybody, and it is quite wrong for the Israeli Government to inflict collective judgment on the people of Gaza: that will bring death, destruction, more radicalism and we will never get the hostages home.

Mr Lammy: The Father of the House speaks with tremendous authority. As I have said, none of us stands with Hamas; we all want to see Hamas removed, but an alternative to Hamas has to be provided. It seems to me that the alternative is the Palestinian Authority and working alongside people to undermine Hamas. We also have to see the end of Hamas. There are ways to bring that about—we did it in Northern Ireland, with de-arming—but they are best done through diplomatic and political solutions, not military endeavour.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The double standards and injustice we are witnessing on the international stage are truly appalling. It is obvious that Israel is breaking international law, as every serious legal expert on international law has pointed out. It is shameful, frankly, that the Government refuse to state

[Imran Hussain]

that about Isreal but will rightly do so about Russia's violation in Ukraine. I say to the Foreign Secretary that the concern and outrage that he expresses at the Dispatch Box is not ending the bloodshed. When will we get the scale of sanctions on Isreal that its war crimes demand?

Mr Lammy: The conflict has gone on for 526 painful days. I recognise the strength of feeling after more than 49,000 people have been killed in Gaza—a staggering number of people. My hon. Friend would not expect me to comment on any further sanctions from the Dispatch Box, but of course we keep those issues under close review.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It has been estimated that in the opening salvos of this appalling aggression, the Israelis killed 80 Palestinian children in the space of 51 minutes. There have been reports of children going through amputations without anaesthetics because of the blockade, and that leaflets were dropped across Gaza last night threatening extermination. Surely even for the Government, the Israelis have now crossed a monstrous red line. The Foreign Secretary talks about “equivalence”. I am assuming that he believes that the Palestinian civilians and their lives are equivalent to the lives of Israeli citizens, and are also equivalent to the lives of Ukrainian citizens. This morning, Ministers were on the airwaves offering British troops to keep the peace between Ukraine and Russia. What is it about the Palestinian people that means they are less deserving of that kind of protection?

Mr Lammy: A whole generation of Gazans are growing up in the most unbearable conditions, and I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been a champion for those children—children who we saw rummaging around in the rubble; children who are now orphaned; and the many thousands of children in Gaza who are out of school. It is absolutely right that he brings their plight to the attention of the House. But the way forward that we were shown back at the beginning of January was through a ceasefire, negotiations to get into phases 2 and 3 of that ceasefire, and a horizon for a two-state solution. That is what I will continue to fight for.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all share the Foreign Secretary's shock, anger and frustration at the breakdown of the ceasefire and the deaths that we are seeing in Gaza. As today's debate shows, words matter. I want to follow up on the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), given that we are now hearing reports of ground activities in Gaza, led by Israeli forces. Israel Katz, the Defence Minister, claimed that the “evacuation” of Gaza would resume and he is threatening “total devastation”. Those are not the actions of a Government who want peace; they are the actions of an increasingly authoritarian Government who are more interested in their own political survival than in the survival of any innocent civilian, be they Palestinian or Israeli. This is not what the hostage families want to see, and we should speak for them as much as for the innocent civilians in Gaza and the Palestinians whose lives are being lost. For the avoidance of doubt, will the Foreign Secretary be clear that we do not agree with but

condemn the words of Isreal Katz, as they are not going to bring forward the ceasefire or uphold international law if they are left unchallenged?

Mr Lammy: I do condemn those words and I would ask Minister Katz, who is very experienced, to withdraw them.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The language that we use in this conflict matters. We know what has happened and the Foreign Secretary has reminded us today: for weeks, supplies of basic goods and electricity have been blocked. To say that Isreal “risks” breaching international law for having done that is to say that this country does not see those acts as a prima facie breach of international law—that is how it will be heard in Tel Aviv. Is that really the Government's position?

Mr Lammy: The Government's position is based on the law that was set out in our export licensing regime, which the right hon. Gentleman supported in the last Parliament. The language of that legislation, if he looks at it closely, states that I, as a Minister and on behalf of the Government, have to make an assessment of clear risk. That is the language that I have used 10 times in this House since September. I stand by it, and so should he.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for his absolute commitment to the end of the fighting in Gaza, the return of the hostages and, ultimately, a two-state solution. I am contacted by constituents of all backgrounds, and of all faiths and none; they stop me in the street. They see the mutilated bodies of babies and the consequences of the blockade on humanitarian aid, and they say to me, “What are this Government doing about it? What are you doing about it?” Will he say to my constituents now what action the British Government will take in response to Israel's actions in Gaza and the west bank?

Mr Lammy: Let me make it clear that when my hon. Friend talks about the horrors in Gaza, she should reassure her constituents that the United Kingdom announced £129 million of funding for the occupied territories just in the last year, which included £41 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency; that we are very clear that humanitarian aid should not be used as a tool; and that UK support has meant that more than half a million people have received essential healthcare, 647,000 people have received food, and 284,000 people have improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene as a result of the British taxpayer.

In terms of what we are doing, I have been in this House for 25 years. My hon. Friend knows that this is about diplomacy. I wish that I could switch this off from this Dispatch Box. She knows full well that I cannot do that, but what I can do is engage in the issues in detail. It is a hard grind. I know that this is hard for many in this House, but that is how we bring about a ceasefire.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), mentioned the all-party parliamentary group's report on the atrocities committed on 7 October 2023,

which was brilliantly researched by Lord Roberts and a whole series of different individuals. The document is almost 500 pages long and contains the evidence of what happened not only on that day, but subsequently. I commend it to the Foreign Secretary to read, because in future it will be the definitive history of what happened on 7 October. Will he therefore look at the fact that 59 hostages are still in captivity? It is understood that only 24 of them are alive—probably only barely alive—and 35 are dead. The reality is that there is an opportunity for the deal, as proposed by the United States, for a ceasefire to continue, for the release of the hostages and for Hamas to lay down their arms. That is still open to the terrorists in Hamas to take up. If they do so, we can then all unite across the House and call for the end of death and destruction.

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning those hostages. The question now is: how do we get those remaining hostages home, and is the action that we have seen in the last two to three days likely to bring them home or to see more of them perish? I want to stand with the many hostage families who say, “Can we give the talks a chance to succeed?”, because I think military action is unlikely to bring them home.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): We have all been absolutely horrified to see the devastating impact of Israel’s military airstrikes. The Foreign Secretary rightly said that this is an appalling and unacceptable loss of life and that our Labour Government oppose the resumption of hostilities. Does he agree that there is no military solution to this conflict?

Mr Lammy: Let me state again: there is no military solution to this conflict. It is a conflict that has gone on for 17 months—had there been a military solution, it would have been found by now. The way forward is a political process and getting back to those ceasefire negotiations.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The inhumanity and depravity that we witnessed on Tuesday defies belief, but it shows that after 17 months, Israel understands fully what impunity is, because Netanyahu shattered that fragile ceasefire, killing 400 civilians sheltering in tents—mostly babies and toddlers—knowing that there would be absolutely no consequence for his action. Can the Foreign Secretary think of any other conflict at any other point in history when the UK would have accepted one of its closest allies and military partners designating babies and toddlers as legitimate military targets?

Mr Lammy: The whole House will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s language. I think the whole House also understands that this is one of the most complex of atrocities. There are atrocities on both sides of this conflict; I just remind him of the scenes of those murdered horrendously on 7 October. What we need now is more light and less heat.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): This ceasefire must be desperately salvaged for the 59 hostages—they and their families have lived through hell for 530 days now—and for the innocent people of Gaza, who need aid, safety and security and have themselves lived through

hell in that time. I worry that Hamas state that they want to repeat the actions of 7 October. They are committed only to endless war. What can this Government do to ensure that they have no role in the future of Gaza?

Mr Lammy: Reports have come in that Hamas have now started firing rockets into Israel and sirens are at this time sounding in Tel Aviv. I condemn Hamas’s rocket attacks. I want to reiterate that the only way through this is to get back to a ceasefire. It is unacceptable that Israeli civilians are running for cover and that Palestinian civilians are finding that the casualties are rising. There can be no place for Hamas in the future of Gaza, which is why we are doing everything to help the reform of the Palestinian Authority; we believe that they must play a role in Gaza’s governance in the months and years ahead.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Despite a huge investment in our relationship with Israel over so many years, we appear to be reduced to the position of spectators on a touchline, shouting at the players and being largely ignored. To what extent does the Secretary of State believe that our lack of leverage—if any—is a consequence of policy decisions taken in Washington?

Mr Lammy: I think it is clear that the efforts of US envoy Steve Witkoff and President Trump brought us to a place where we had a ceasefire. Sometimes it can feel futile; diplomacy can feel very hard. The words of parliamentarians can feel like they have no effect, but everything that every single one of us as Members of Parliament did in those 17 months also led to that ceasefire in January. We wish that we could have brought it about sooner, and now we must act to get back to that ceasefire as quickly as possible.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is obvious that saying that we strongly oppose hostilities and that we are appalled by Israel’s action is having absolutely no effect on Netanyahu, who said of the death of 400 Palestinians—most of whom were women and children—that it was “only the beginning”. It is not right that the ordinary people of Palestine should suffer because of the actions of Hamas. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we now need to send a stronger message to Israel and go further, perhaps by suspending all arms licences to Israel and recognising the state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: We are three days into a resumption of fighting. That is three days too long, and I have lamented the loss of life numerous times already in the Chamber, including in my statement. However, three days means that there is more diplomacy that we can deploy to get that ceasefire back, and that is what I intend to do over the coming hours and days.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It is never easy to come to the Chamber and make a statement on an issue as complex as this one. We all watched with horror as Israeli prisoners were released—not released in a sombre, dignified way, but paraded about as an example of the control that Hamas had. As far as Hamas were concerned, those prisoners were not human beings; instead, they were trophies of abuse and hate. Those scenes were etched

[*Jim Shannon*]

into the minds of people across the world. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, now as much as ever, Israel must show her strength and her friends, and show Hamas to be the murderous scum that they are? Will he reaffirm his pledge to support those who stand against the evil personified by the Hamas terrorists?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful for what the hon. Gentleman has said. Once again from this Dispatch Box, I condemn Hamas, condemn their activities, and condemn them for not releasing those hostages. That is the way out of this: release the hostages, let us get back to a political process and a ceasefire, and stop firing rockets into Israel.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary and his team for what I know are personal diplomatic efforts to play the UK Government's part in making sure that we can return to a ceasefire. However, in the past few days, hundreds more women and children have been killed in Gaza. We have now had confirmation from the Foreign Secretary that a British national UN aid worker has been wounded, and aid continues to be blocked. For Palestinians, hope is moving far away. Will the Foreign Secretary further reiterate his commitment to the Government's diplomatic efforts, and will he also give us a sense of what the UK Government are doing at this moment—in which there is such darkness for the Palestinian people when they think about what may be coming in the coming days—so that we can quickly return, not only to a ceasefire, but to longer-term hope for that region?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend asks what we are doing. I refer her to the communiqué that my G7 partners and I released, which contained a lengthy section on the situation in Gaza, discussing it with seven of our closest partners. I then flew to New York to meet Tom Fletcher to discuss the situation on the ground. I met our colleague in the European Union, Kaja Kallas, just this week to discuss these very issues, and I know that she intends to be in the region to discuss those issues face to face with Israeli counterparts. My hon. Friend will have seen the work of our UN ambassador, Barbara Woodward; there was a closed session at the UN, during which these very same issues were of course discussed with intensity. I want to reassure my hon. Friend that all efforts are being made, and of course we are supporting the reform of the Palestinian Authority. That is why I will be speaking to Prime Minister Mustafa a little later today.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is a tragic fact that wherever they occur, military conflicts result in the death of innocent civilians, among them many children—we witness this day in, day out on our TV screens. Israel has an absolute right to take action to recover the hostages, but I agree with the Foreign Secretary that the continuing bombardment of Gaza will not achieve that of itself. Does he agree that one thing it does achieve is to risk radicalising the younger generation to become the Hamas supporters of the future?

Mr Lammy: That is a huge concern, because we want to provide hope for those people, and we want to provide an alternative to Hamas. I repeat that there

have been 17 months of bombardment, and if that was going to work, it would have worked. It has not worked, and going back to that means—as night follows day—that at the end of any military exercise, Hamas will still be there and we will still come back to a political process. Let us continue with the political process and the ceasefire talks now; let us extend phase 1 to the end of the Ramadan-Passover season, and let us work hard to get to phase 2.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): As the Foreign Secretary mentioned, the ceasefire provided a glimmer of hope for the innocent civilians fleeing the constant bombardment and bloodshed, and for the innocent hostages waiting desperately to be reunited with their families. For Israel to breach that ceasefire is indefensible—the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure should not be justified under any circumstances. I thank the Foreign Secretary for the work he is doing and the personal efforts he is leading behind the scenes, including on the recent statement by the UK, German and French Foreign Ministers. As he knows, leadership requires honesty with our friends and telling things how they are. Will he commit to the UK showing leadership in providing international clarity to end this cycle of violence, and clarity on the really serious issue of international law breaches?

Mr Lammy: I commend my hon. Friend for bringing her moral clarity to the Chamber this afternoon. Of course I can confirm that we will continue to do all we can, and we stand by the judgments that we made back in September when we assessed that there was a clear risk of a breach of humanitarian law.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Israel is committing war crimes in Gaza—blocking the entry of humanitarian aid, cutting electricity that is essential for drinking water, the forced displacement of civilians, and now indiscriminate bombing that is killing and maiming many, many children. Those are not just clear risks of a breach of humanitarian law; they are clear breaches, and it is just not enough to say that we do not like it. I want to ask the Secretary of State a very specific question: has he explicitly asked the Israeli Government whether any UK-made arms or arms components were used in the mass air strikes in recent days that broke the ceasefire and have caused untold suffering to civilians?

Mr Lammy: In making our assessment of a clear risk of a breach of humanitarian law, we suspended arms sales to Israel, and I stand by that decision.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Of the 170 children killed in Israel's deadly day of bombing in Gaza on Tuesday, three of them were brothers. They were sons of Karam Tafeek Hameid: Hassan, who was nine, Mohammad, who was eight, and Aziz, who was just five. Their father told the BBC:

“They used to play around, have fun...They wanted to be doctors, teachers.”

I am also the father of three sons, and it disgusts me that Israel's actions seem to treat Palestinian children's lives as somehow more expendable or less precious than those of Israeli children. Is it not time that we had a diplomatic coalition of the willing—maybe starting with

the E3 countries of the UK, France and Germany—to call out Israel’s appalling crimes in Gaza, not just through words but through actions?

Mr Lammy: As the father of an adopted child, I feel personally the plight of the many, many children in Gaza who have been orphaned, and who are subject to exploitation as a result of the fact that they now have no parents. It breaks my heart that more horrors could have been deployed against those who are now injured or bereft—who have lost their parents—so I understand the strength of my hon. Friend’s feeling. That is why I am doing all I can, particularly with E3 partners, to try to halt this behaviour.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Have the Government received any indication or formed any view about what the current Israeli Government would do if—admittedly against all expectation— Hamas were to release all the hostages forthwith?

Mr Lammy: That is a very good question, and it is certainly a matter I have discussed with the United States envoy, Steve Witkoff. Indeed, I have discussed it with the Israeli Government. The right hon. Gentleman will know that there is a lot of politics in Israel, and it is my sincere hope that these judgments are not being guided by political calculation when they cut to the core of human life. I say to those in Israel: listen to the hostages’ families and listen to the way out of this. Let us get back to a ceasefire, because I am quite sure that at the end of any military exercise, the risk is that fewer hostages will be alive. Either way, the Israeli Government will have to get back to negotiation, because military endeavour will not see the end of Hamas.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I think we have all been shocked and horrified to see the escalation in Gaza over the past few days. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his words today. What work is he doing with the international community and directly with the Israeli Government to lift the blockade on aid and ensure that it can get to the Palestinian people, particularly given the escalations we have seen in recent days?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right. We have to lift the blockade on aid in particular, and that is why we have increased our funding at this time. We will be working closely with partners in the region to get that aid in. Let me also take this opportunity to say that I remember meeting the families of three British workers killed in the World Central Kitchen attack: John Chapman, James Kirby and James Henderson. It is nearly a year since that attack, and their families want and deserve justice. There are many other families and many Palestinians who have lost loved ones, with more than 350 aid workers killed in this conflict. We cannot see the continued killing of aid workers in any conflict, and we condemn it in this House.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I begin with a quote:

“Annihilate, smash, eradicate, erase, crush, shatter, burn, be cruel, punish, ruin, crush. Annihilate!”

That is the genocidal voice of the Israeli Government as posted on X only last night by Itamar Ben-Gvir as he was reappointed as a Cabinet Minister. The Foreign

Secretary recognised this week that Israel is in breach of international law. What further evidence does the Prime Minister need to recognise that, and for the UK Government to end their complicity in these crimes by stopping support for the Israeli Government committing atrocities against the Palestinian people?

Mr Lammy: If those are the words that were used last night, and I have not seen them all, then I condemn them categorically from this Dispatch Box.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his update. What we are seeing is clearly appalling. The signals coming from Defence Minister Katz are absolutely clear: the Israeli Government seek the total destruction of Gaza and they see the occupation of west bank as their objective. The leverage over Netanyahu’s Government is from Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, so my question is simple. Other than once again reviewing all the arms licences, and perhaps withdrawing them, and putting in place sanctions against Israel, what leverage do the UK Government have over Israel in this circumstance?

Mr Lammy: I cannot comment on future sanctions designations, but I refer my hon. Friend to the sanctions I announced back in October raising concerns in particular about settlements and settler violence, particularly in the west bank. I condemn the expansion. We have seen more expansion this year than in any other year. I want to reassure him that we keep sanctions closely under review.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Millions around the world saw in real time last night the destruction of life, the loss of children’s lives, more destruction and the Israeli attempt to annex northern Gaza, if not the whole of Gaza. That is clearly what the whole agenda is about. Israel continues to commit war crimes through the denial of food, water and electricity to the people of Gaza. Will the British Government confirm that they are in breach of international law? Secondly, will we cease all military co-operation with Israel, including arms supplies and the use of RAF Akrotiri as a staging point for the delivery of weapons?

Mr Lammy: I condemn any attempts to annex Gaza or the west bank. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this issue in the past. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on operational military matters, but I have been absolutely clear about our assessment. Under the legislation that he and I supported when it was put through this House under the last Government, the assessment is about there being “a clear risk” of a breach of international humanitarian law. I remind the House gently, as a lawyer, that that assessment of a clear risk is a low standard, but on the assessments that I have seen and continue to see, that is my assessment. I therefore think the right hon. Gentleman should be comforted that we are not assisting in what we are seeing in Gaza.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I correct my right hon. Friend when he uses the words “both sides”, since neither the Israeli Government nor Hamas represent the interests of the Palestinian people? We need to recognise that they do not have the voice necessary to bring them the protection that they need.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

However, I want to raise the definition of genocide. Many times, my right hon. Friend has rightly said from the Dispatch Box that it is for the courts to determine whether or not a genocide has been committed. Can he say what efforts he has made to ask the courts to make such a ruling?

Mr Lammy: As my hon. Friend probably knows, I meet from time to time with those who lead our international humanitarian law architecture, including the International Criminal Court in particular and the International Court of Justice. These are constitutional matters for them, and we must stand by the separation of powers, and therefore it is right that they get on and do their proper work. We as politicians make our judgments, but we are not courts. We cannot pronounce that from this Dispatch Box—certainly not on behalf of a Government. In a free democracy, Back Benchers are of course free to say whatever they feel in this House, and that is proper, but speaking on behalf of a Government, it must be right that courts make these determinations.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The latest scenes coming out of Gaza are truly horrifying. UNICEF says that the reported killing earlier this week of more than 130 children would be the largest single-day child death toll in the past year. As a mam and a mamgu—and just as a human being, actually—I find that truly abhorrent. Is the Minister comfortable with the possibility of UK arms being used by Israel against children and, if not, will he end, not postpone, all arms sales immediately?

Mr Lammy: I refer the hon. Lady to what I have already said, to my statement back in September and to my reassurance that we are absolutely not in the business at the moment of selling arms that could be used in Gaza under our licensing decisions—save, of course, for the decision we made on F-35s. That is because, in looking at the supply chain and recognising risks and conflicts in other parts of the world, including in the Euro-Atlantic, we had to make some serious judgments.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Failing to act in the face of Israel breaking the ceasefire in such a violent manner has consequences: it undercuts moderate voices in Israel, damages the UK's reputation internationally, and compromises our support for international law and the rule of law. Will the Foreign Secretary look again at Government policy on recognition, sanctions, trade and arms supply while the atrocities continue against Palestinian civilians?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of recognition, which I know is dear to him and others in this House. It is a serious issue. He knows that recognition, in and of itself, does not deliver a two-state solution. He knows that we want a two-state solution and the recognition of a Palestinian state, but that is best done as part of a process that actually gets us to two states. He will recognise that the decision by other partners to move to recognition has not alleviated the suffering before our eyes, which is why there must be a careful balance. I recognise that different Governments and Members will come to different judgments, but

I am holding out for two states—including an actual state for the Palestinian people, which is a just cause—and not just for a symbolic act.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Along with a billion Muslims around the world, I began my fast on Tuesday morning, having taken some food and water, with the screams of 400 innocent men, women and children ringing in my ears, as they were burned alive in their makeshift tents. I object to the resumption of the conflict and the cessation of the peace deal. The Israelis have continued to kill hundreds of people, including freezing babies, and to proceed with the Gazafication of the west bank through the removal of 40,000 people.

The Minister will be aware of the peace deal that was available in May 2024. According to President Biden, the hostages are not a priority for the Israelis—a sentiment that was echoed just the other day by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, which accused Mr Netanyahu of “complete deception”, and said that

“the Israeli Government has chosen to abandon the hostages.”

The fact is that the Foreign Secretary is aware of all this, as we continue to provide Israel with military support and the use of our air base in Cyprus, and to give it moral, economic and political support. I hope that he takes my sincere question as it is meant. He has spoken passionately about his heritage and his ancestors, who were shackled in the chains of slavery. To unshackle his own chains, will he immediately cease all arms licences? Despite the £6.1 billion-worth of economic ties between Israel and the UK, will he impose economic sanctions, and put in place a viable process for recognising the state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman brings powerful rhetoric to the House this afternoon. Notwithstanding the horrors of the conflict that has begun, we are three days into it. In the end, it is the ceasefire that will alleviate the suffering. It is my job to use all endeavours to get back to that ceasefire. That is my job, and that is what I intend to do.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): In recent weeks, I have heard my constituents express their relief, but also their fear that this exact moment would come. I thank the Foreign Secretary for all the work that he has been doing to secure a lasting peace, and I am glad to hear him speak of the need to send a clear message to Israel that the resumption of airstrikes is unacceptable, but I worry that this message will be heard only if it is conveyed through both words and actions. Can he reassure my constituents that he is looking at what further actions may be needed, including on sanctions, to get back on the path to peace?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her remarks. I cannot comment from the Dispatch Box on further actions or sanctions; I just pray in aid what I have already said about diplomatic efforts. I hope we can see the resumption of a ceasefire as soon as possible. All power to US envoy Steve Witkoff in the coming days, as he seeks to use US influence to bring that to pass.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for having made time to meet me, so that I could share some of the concerns

outlined by many people in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Nobody has a monopoly on decency and compassion; some Members of this House ought to keep that in mind.

The scenes from Gaza on our TV screens have been beyond horrifying. The breaking of the ceasefire has seen more innocent people killed. Without question, we need all hostages to be released, and we need this war to end now. What specific discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with his counterparts in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the rest about the noble aim of saving the lives of innocent people, and delivering the long overdue two-state solution that we desperately need?

Mr Lammy: I met many partners at the G20 a few weeks ago, and as my hon. Friend will know, I have also spoken to many partners, particularly from the Arab Quint, on the phone. I suspect that I will be in the region in the coming weeks as a consequence of what we are now seeing.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): This destruction and killing during the holy month of Ramadan is horrific and inhumane. Yesterday, with colleagues from this House, I met Palestinian students studying in the UK. One did not know if her family members were alive. Another could not attend because she had just heard that her father had been killed the night before. We must ensure that the international community works together to outline the consequences of the attacks for the Israeli Government. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the UK Government will abide by any International Court of Justice rulings regarding breaches of international humanitarian law in the region?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that, yes, we will.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Over 400 people have been killed, the majority of whom were children. Aid supplies have been blocked and aid workers killed, and the rhetoric from Israeli Ministers is getting worse. All this has happened under a ceasefire. I know these matters are complex, but at what point do we change our posture towards the Israeli Government?

Mr Lammy: When we are talking about Israel, we should remember that we stand alongside the Israeli people at this time, and we think of the many hostages who are underground and in desperate conditions in Gaza. Israel is a democracy, which is why we see people taking to the streets and making their voices heard. We see a heated debate in Israel as the best way forward.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the International Development Committee returned from Geneva following our inquiry into international humanitarian law. The message was very clear: the IHL framework is robust, but we are failing on adherence and compliance. Under IHL, aid workers should be protected. I welcome what the Foreign Secretary has said so far, but the death toll continues to rise in Gaza, and most of the aid workers are locals. Can the Foreign Secretary expand on what we will do to protect aid workers, including through the ministerial group for the protection of humanitarian personnel? We met representatives of that group yesterday.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. We continue to work with UN colleagues to ensure that aid workers are protected, just as we continue to work with our EU colleagues on that. We condemn the tremendous loss of life in the worst conflict for aid workers, and we continue to call for justice, particularly for those killed in the World Central Kitchen, and for a proper investigatory process in Israel that sees accountability for such acts.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for today's statement, and for all the work that he and his team have been doing over so many months to try to find a resolution. The actions of Hamas are both brutal and unacceptable, but for a democratically elected Government to bombard innocent civilians, and to deprive them of food, water and medical supplies, is totally reprehensible. The Foreign Secretary is quite right to say that words are the language of diplomacy, but sometimes symbols matter too. Given the fear that Israel's ground invasion is an attempt to separate the north from the south, leading to annexation, is it not time to recognise the state of Palestine and show that we stand with the people of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend, and I recognise the strength of feeling in the House about wanting to see, alongside Israel, a home for the Palestinian people that is safe and secure. However, as I have said to her before, we keep this issue under review, and we work with close allies such as France on these issues. My own judgment is that the moment will be right when there is a process that actually leads to two states. I had hoped that, as a result of the ceasefire back in January and our getting to phases 2 and 3, we were getting close to that process, and I will do everything I can to get us back to that place in the coming days.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Like many, I was horrified to see the resumption of airstrikes in Gaza and the loss of so many innocent lives this week. Civilians in Gaza and the remaining Israeli hostages, who were abducted in the appalling Hamas terror attacks of 7 October, desperately need a ceasefire back in place, and the hostages must be released. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in condemning comments from the Israeli Defence Minister, who threatened the total destruction of Gaza? Will he also be clear that the terrorists of Hamas can have no role in the future of Gaza?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I will.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for his relentless efforts to bring all parties back to the negotiating table. I think we have all been horrified by the scenes we have seen on TV, the resumption of the violence that has seen the loss of hundreds of innocent lives, and the blockade of lifesaving aid. We must never forget the hostages, who are waiting to come home, and their families, who are waiting for them, as well as the horrors they have experienced. Given the emails of concern that I have received from my constituents, I must say that people are now asking: what next? They are doing so because, despite all these efforts, we have reached a point of utter desperation and hopelessness. Can he give assurances that arms licences will continue

[Kirsteen Sullivan]

to be under regular review, and that sanctions will be actively considered? I hope that both those measures will bring people back to the peace table.

Mr Lammy: Arms licences are of course continually reviewed, and as my hon. Friend would expect, we always keep sanctions under review.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): In recent days, nearly 1,000 Palestinians have been killed or injured, and once again, many more are being displaced. The humanitarian situation is getting worse in Gaza, as Israel refuses to let through the aid trucks. The crossings have been closed for 18 continuous days, which is surely a breach of international law. More than 1 million people have been left without food parcels, and one in five pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers are malnourished. We need a return to the ceasefire and the return of the hostages, but the actions of the last week demand that the UK Government take further action. Israel continues to breach the terms of the ceasefire. We should not do a trade deal with Israel while the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is a real possibility. I urge the Foreign Secretary to consider sanctions against some of the key Israeli actors. What further actions will he take in the light of these recent escalations?

Mr Lammy: I have dealt at the Dispatch Box with much of what my hon. Friend raises, but let me say that although the UK has differences with the Israeli Government, we do not have differences with the Israeli people. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade has taken the decision to restart negotiations on a free trade arrangement with Israel. There have not been any ministerial meetings, but it is important that we do not act against the people of Israel, many of whom are taking to the streets at this very time.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Bombing civilians and preventing access to basic humanitarian supplies as a tactic of war is a war crime. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and for his tireless diplomacy. A call for a full, transparent investigation is welcome, as is a call to return to a ceasefire. However, given our strong opposition to the return of hostilities, and the bombing by the Israelis, we must now go beyond persuasion. Their actions are incompatible with international law. Is it not time to make a direct response beyond persuasion? What stronger options do the Government have, which would assist diplomacy? I know he cannot speak about specifics, but can he confirm that these options are being considered, so that we can send a clear message now, and help stop the bloodshed?

Mr Lammy: As one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, we of course have an arsenal of diplomatic tools, which we deploy as appropriate and keep under review. I want to reassure my hon. Friend that we are doing everything we can to get back to that ceasefire.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Many of my constituents have been in touch in recent days to express their horror and their devastation at the loss of life in Gaza after Israel resumed the bombing. The Foreign Secretary is absolutely right to say that diplomacy is the only way to end the bloodshed, but can I push him on the resumption of humanitarian aid? It is unacceptable that we have a continued blockade. What levers do we have to get Israel to end the blockade on aid, and what is the likelihood of aid going in in the coming days?

Mr Lammy: I know my hon. Friend's constituency well, and I can imagine that her constituents are reacting with real horror to what they are seeing at this time.

There was a lot of comment about humanitarian aid—the inability to get aid in and the barriers to getting aid in—that I heard from some colleagues in Israel, but when we got that ceasefire, the number of trucks crossing exceeded expectations and the aid suddenly got in. It has now been, I think, 16 or 17 days since the aid stopped, and there will be tremendous suffering as a result. Aid should never be used as a tool in any conflict, and that is why we want to see the resumption of aid. We now know how many trucks can get in, so let us get back to those numbers.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I would like to commend my right hon. Friend for all the hard work he has been doing to secure a ceasefire in Gaza, and indeed for maintaining accountability to this House, as he has done today, in so much detail. It is devastating that Israel has resumed the indiscriminate bombing of Palestinian civilians. While the ceasefire held, there were comments from those on the Treasury Bench about the possibility of a trade deal between the UK and Israel. Does the Foreign Secretary agree—surely he does—that a trade deal between the UK and Israel must be completely out of the question now that the ceasefire is over?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has made her views known. There have not been any ministerial meetings on any such trade deal. I always want to keep in mind the Israeli people—such a deal is not, as it were, for the Government; it would be done on behalf of the people of Israel—but Ministers will have heard, and the whole House will have heard, her remarks this afternoon.

Disabled People's Access to Transport

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Transport Committee. Ruth Cadbury will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not to the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may take part in the questioning.

1.19 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for me to make a statement to the House to mark the publication of the Transport Committee's first report of this Parliament. Our report is called "Access denied: rights versus reality in disabled people's access to transport". It brings to a conclusion work done by our predecessor Committee, on which I sat for a while in the previous Parliament, and for which we thank it.

The report first sets out the evidence we receive from disabled people about their experiences of using transport networks in this country. Their experiences will come as no surprise to most hon. Members, whose constituents tell us about rail stations that remain stubbornly inaccessible, taxi services that have refused carriage because of assistance dogs, and being left high and dry at airports or on trains when they have booked passenger assistance that just does not arrive on time. No mode of transport is free from problems, despite most notionally having accessible facilities and policies.

Those failures affect people with all kinds of disabilities and access needs. The needs of wheelchair users and people with sight loss might seem obvious, but the Committee also heard from people with health conditions who need easy access to toilets and from those with autism, who describe how overcrowded or unpredictable transport affects them. Perhaps most shocking of all, 60% of disabled people who responded to our survey said that almost every journey was beset with problems. More than a third said that more than once a week they decided not to make a journey because they knew it would be too complicated, too unsafe or that things were likely to go wrong. That is simply an unacceptable infringement of people's human rights to go to work, to access education, health care and family, to participate in society and just to have fun. Transport is not an end in itself. It is supposed to be an enabler. But far too often it is disabling people. Around one in seven in the UK population have a disability. One respondent to our survey told us:

"There's an assumption that disabled people's time is less valuable—that it's okay to make us wait for a rail worker to turn up with a ramp. I've been late to important meetings because of this, and it makes me feel like a second class citizen...I barely go to see my mum or friends at home because the transport is so bad for wheelchair users I don't know how I'd do it. It's affected my friendships, relationships and working life, and it's embarrassing. I just want to be able to use public transport like everyone else."

In theory, we have laws to promote accessibility and equality, but they are clearly not working. There is a raft of equality legislation and specific regulations about transport that, if implemented consistently, ought to guarantee access and freedom from discrimination. From the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty to the minutiae of vehicle regulations, we have the framework. On policy, in 2018 the Government adopted an inclusive transport strategy that aimed to achieve:

"equal access for disabled people using the transport system, with assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier, by 2030".

Ministers in the previous Government told the Committee they thought progress towards that goal was on track. The reality seems to be completely at odds with the rights and with policy aspirations.

Our report aims to set out why that is and what should be done about it. We set out examples of accessibility being deprioritised, often because it is seen as too impractical or costly to achieve it. Plans for implementing step-free access on the rail network, for example, have been beset by halting progress, and many of us are still awaiting an update on the Access for All step-free projects at our local stations. We argue that a certain level of failure seems to be deemed acceptable by transport providers, such as when providing Passenger Assist services. We describe how accessibility is not taken into account early enough in the process of policy development, such as when proposals to close railway ticket offices wholesale made it to consultation. The public said no, but they should not have had to. We discuss the vital role of sufficient staff who are well trained in how to support travel needs of people with different needs.

A change of mindset throughout the system, from the top down, is needed urgently. Failures should be vanishingly rare, not commonplace. Access to transport must be recognised as a human right, not as a matter of customer service. Concrete plans and real resources need to be put behind a new inclusive transport strategy, one that sets out a realistic pathway to achieving that goal of equal access.

The routine, everyday nature of access failures stood out in our inquiry, but it is punishingly hard to hold anyone to account for failures. Seeking redress, or even just reporting them to the responsible body, is a huge, exhausting and often thankless burden. In theory, individuals can take legal action under the Equality Act, but it is costly, risky and time-consuming, so few cases are brought. Even when cases are successful, lasting systemic change does not happen. More of the heavy lifting needs to be done by regulators and enforcement bodies. They currently often have neither the mandate nor the resources to involve themselves at a low enough threshold. Only long-standing, organisation-wide failures tend to be pursued, and only then when informal measures have been exhausted.

As a result, while individual disabled people often lose count of the number of occasions on which they have been failed, regulators can generally count on the fingers of one or two hands the number of formal enforcement actions that have been taken. We must bring that into balance. There have to be consequences for failure. That is why our report asks Ministers to move towards a more robust active enforcement regime. We invite Government to consider whether a single body, with expertise in and responsibility for accessibility across transport modes, would be a more effective model. We recommend a unified service to receive and triage

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

accessibility complaints, to ensure they reach the relevant operator or authority, to follow them up if not resolved and ensure that systemic issues are identified.

We also ask for a review of the legal framework to replace the patchwork that has grown up ad hoc over time. Users find it difficult to know what they are entitled to, operators find it difficult to know what they have to provide, and changes in technology and travel trends leave gaps in the law. In our report we invite the Government to consider whether a framework based on more explicit standards would be more effective, and that the framework's design and outcome must include disabled people at every stage.

To conclude, I thank not only our predecessor Committee for taking the evidence on which this report is based, and the Committee staff who worked so hard on the inquiry and the report, but, more important, those who gave evidence, especially about their own experiences of travelling as a disabled person and their expert analysis of what is going wrong. I particularly thank Claire Lindsey, and Alan Benson, a champion for disabled people's rights on transport who sadly passed away last year. Alan and Claire took me through London at the start of the inquiry and opened my eyes to the issues that affect people with autism, and those with restricted mobility, when travelling.

The words of disabled people, quoted throughout our report, are a call to action that we expect the Government to heed. Our Committee will hold the Government to account for doing so, and for bringing reality in line with rights. I commend our report to the House, and we look forward to receiving a considered response from the Government in due course.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee for the report, which is most welcome. I will read it with interest. She referenced the Access for All programme, which hit the buffers during the previous Parliament with fewer than half the promised projects coming to fruition. She said much about what went wrong. How confident is she that we can avoid such problems happening in future?

Ruth Cadbury: The report has 29 recommendations, but the last one is the most important: an overarching body with responsibility for standards enforcement across transport modes, which would replace the hotchpotch of laws, policies and processes that disabled people must navigate with a more effective approach to asserting the rights of disabled travellers.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for such a brilliant report. I welcome the commitment to an accessible road map as part of Labour's transformational Great British Railways reform. What positive role does my hon. Friend see this road map playing in improving accessible travel across the country?

Ruth Cadbury: I agree that the formation of Great British Railways provides an opportunity to bring together all the players in passenger rail, many of which have different standards, different policies and different training regimes. With a single commanding body, I think we

have a real chance of bringing those processes together. However, that does not stop rail operators carrying out their responsibilities day to day. It is not just about policies, but about how it works every day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have several minutes only, so questions and answers must be short.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I compliment the Transport Committee and its Chair on this report, which, from what I have read so far, is absolutely excellent. I have two very short points for the hon. Lady. In London, ticket offices were closed by Transport for London some time ago. Does the report include anything about the possibility of reopening those ticket offices or having better information available for people, particularly those with sight or hearing difficulties, going to stations? Secondly, there are still a large number of underground stations with no lift access whatsoever. What evidence has she had that Transport for London will bring forward a programme to make all underground stations fully accessible for everyone?

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Under our proposal, TfL would need to be part of that new process. Take the example of Vienna's 100-year-old U-Bahn system, where there is a programme to make every station accessible within 30 years. London is bigger, and it is a bigger challenge, but it is not impossible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Transport Committee member Laurence Turner.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, whose determination as Chair has meant that this important report from the previous Committee has seen the light of day. Does she agree that the reasonable adjustments framework under the Equality Act is the right one, and that the problem is the lack of implementation and awareness? If we had clearer statutory guidance, as exists in some areas, disabled passengers and other transport users would face fewer barriers.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my hon. Friend for the support he gave me in drafting the final parts of the report. He is absolutely right. Disabled people and operators currently use a system that is a hotchpotch of sometimes conflicting and very complex bits of legislation, some of which was brought over from EU law and some from the Equality Act. When that is addressed, it will be much clearer to bring forward more specific regulations.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank the Committee Chair for bringing forward this report. Access to transport relates not just to disabled people, but to parents with pushchairs, people with luggage and so on—it benefits us all. I am often contacted by constituents about the condition of lifts at Sutton station. A focus on accessibility—with investment not only in improving step-free access, but in maintaining it—is an opportunity provided by the reforms to transport under Great British Railways. Does she agree that the Government should focus not only on the roll-out of additional step-free

access, but on better maintenance and better programmes to ensure that the existing facilities remain accessible for as long as possible?

Ruth Cadbury: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. In addition, thanks to digital technology, we now have real-time knowledge of when a lift is working or not.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Transport Committee member Alex Mayer.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Our report highlights that the understanding of disabilities has changed since many of the relevant laws and regulations were put in place. This issue is about not only ramps for wheelchairs, for example, but conditions such as neurodiversity. Does my hon. Friend agree that making transport more accessible for those with hidden disabilities is important, not least because, for economic growth, we must use the talents of all?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, Claire opened my eyes to her needs, with things like having to find an access information point outside the station where she can summon Passenger Assist so that she does not have to go through the confusion, noise and crowds of a station, as well as the design of the walls in tube stations, which impact her ability to move through a station. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: hidden disabilities are as important as those we can see with a wheelchair or a white stick.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Londoners often complain about their train service, but actually it is pretty good, with the overground, the underground and Network Rail. However, it is barred to many disabled travellers—taking an example at random, Kew Bridge and Gunnersbury stations, which serve my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Select Committee Chair, need step-free access. What can we do to change feasibility studies into actuality in such places?

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for raising the issue of the two stations where both of our constituents need step-free access. I have not yet had an answer from the Rail Minister on the Access for All programme for those two stations, but I will keep chasing.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my colleagues on the Transport Committee for their work on this important report. I have been campaigning to make Atherstone station in my constituency more accessible, and I will be using this report to help achieve that goal. The previous Government recklessly overpromised on Access for All, misleading disabled passengers who have been left stranded for too long. Does my hon. Friend agree that disabled people have been let down over the past decade, and that this Government are right to tackle the situation now and improve services for the future?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the criticisms of the existing Access for All programme is the expense of the projects that have been delivered. Having a road map of the station upgrades to

provide certainty and consistency for contractors would speed up the delivery and reduce the cost of delivering lifts in the stations where they are so badly needed.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Chair for this excellent report and for shining the light on such an important issue. I can think of numerous times when I have been on a bus and have had to be very curt with the driver to argue on behalf of a disabled person in a wheelchair who wants to use the space, after the driver has blatantly told them to wait for the next bus. That sort of thing is unacceptable. Does she agree that we need to look at the enforcement of the equality legislation as it stands and at better training and awareness so that disabled people in wheelchairs can use public transport?

Ruth Cadbury: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who chairs of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. As I said, the culture change goes from the top to the frontline, and staff need both to be trained and to have the confidence that they will be supported if they do assert the rights of disabled people.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): As the parent of a wheelchair user with a severe sight impairment, I see many of the issues the report highlights on a daily basis. The report highlights the issues with aviation and the difficulties the Civil Aviation Authority has faced in enforcing regulations on behalf of wheelchair users and people with a severe sight impairment. Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Government to fully consider the recommendations of the aviation accessibility task and finish group when it reports in the summer, along with the principles of my Aviation (Accessibility) Bill, to finally make changes for disabled people on airlines?

Ruth Cadbury: I was happy to be a co-sponsor of my hon. Friend's Bill on aviation accessibility. I fear that one of our findings was that the CAA puts too much emphasis on what it calls "reputational enforcement", rather than proper enforcement. The relevant Minister in the previous Parliament said that the CAA needs additional powers, and I hope this Government will support those words.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and her Committee for a fantastic report. Will she join me in congratulating disability rights activists such as my former constituent, Sam Jennings, who I know is thrilled by the report, which I hope my hon. Friend would be happy to hear? It is important that we congratulate these activists, who have been looking for a report like this for a long time. Sam certainly opened my eyes to a number of different issues. If the Government accept these recommendations, which they should, it will be due to their fantastic activism.

Ruth Cadbury: People such as Sam are amazing activists. As I have said, they were major contributors to our inquiry, but they also need to be major contributors to the solutions.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Act: Finance Act 2025.

Backbench Business

Knife Crime: Children and Young People

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we begin the debate, may I remind Members of the House's rule on matters sub judice? Members should make no reference to live criminal cases in which a suspect has been charged.

1.40 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of knife crime amongst children and young people.

First, let me place on the record my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this time in the House of Commons Chamber. I also thank all those from both sides of the House who supported my application for a debate on this topic.

There are some issues that I believe rise above the Punch and Judy vaudeville that characterises so much of our political debate. I called for this debate because I believe it is a topic that Parliament needs to discuss bravely, honestly, frankly and robustly; I believe it transcends party politics and party lines; and I have been calling for it for several years—since long before I became a Member of Parliament.

I wholeheartedly welcome this Government's pledge to halve instances of knife crime over the next decade. The previous Government sought to tackle knife crime but, sadly, were unable to do so effectively. Although I do not doubt either Governments' intent and desire to achieve that aim, I am sceptical that this Government will fare much better than the last.

For all the hype and the fanfare, this is an issue that repeatedly falls by the wayside, until it is thrust back into the spotlight with the tragic death of yet another child. Put simply, I do not believe that Governments of any hue have shown the mettle required to tackle this with the resources, approach and focus that is required.

There are no easy solutions to this issue. The Government's most recent data shows that of 19,903 offences resulting in a caution or conviction for possession of a knife or offensive weapon, juveniles aged 10 to 17 years old were the offenders in 18% of cases. A community sentence was the most common sentence given to those 10 to 17-year-olds—61% of all knife and offensive weapon offences across that age demographic.

Over the past decade, 10 to 17-year-old offenders showed the biggest decrease in average sentence length, with a 25% decrease from 8.1 months in March 2014 to 6.1 months in March 2024. Around 70% of youth offenders were committing their first offence. In the 12 months to March 2024, 57 young people aged under 25 were murdered with a knife or sharp object, 17 of whom were children aged under 16. In 2023, the most recent year for which the data is available, just 6.5% of knife and offensive weapon offences resulted in immediate custody. With a 93% chance of not going to prison, why should anyone carrying a knife fear the law?

Before becoming the MP for Huntingdon, I spent a decade working in London and lived in Haringey, north London. At that time, Haringey had the second highest rate of knife crime in London. It is difficult to explain

what it is like to live in an area of London where murders and stabbings become so commonplace as to elicit little more than a shrug from local residents; where police tape closing a road or a local park is normalised to the point of merely being an inconvenience; where the murder of a child does not make the national news; and where five children being charged with murder does not make the national news, as with the case of the murder of taxi driver Gabriel Bringye in 2021.

This desensitisation is but one part of the problem. Over a three-year period, there were at least a dozen fatal stabbings within a mile of my front door. Several of those victims were children. Half of those arrested in connection with the crime were children, as were the perpetrators too. I remember the murder of 16-year-old Stelios Averkiou. He was stabbed multiple times by his assailant after he resisted his mobile phone being stolen in Lordship recreation ground. I was in the park shortly afterwards and saw the aftermath. I remember for weeks afterwards the handwritten posters on the trees around the park asking for anyone to come forward with information.

I remember the murder of 17-year-old Anas Mezenner, fatally stabbed near Turnpike Lane station in another fight over a mobile phone. The 17-year-old boy guilty of the stabbing had dozens of videos of himself on his own phone posing with large blades. While on remand, in a recorded phone call, he had stated:

"Just wanted my little chinging to get it, my first little juice on my blade. It's just gone in my man's arse...The whole 15 went in down his arse."

Anas died from a fatal stab wound to the buttocks from a knife with a 15cm blade. All five charged with the murder were children.

I remember the murder of 17-year-old Ali Baygoren, stabbed in the neck twice outside his home just across the road from the Tottenham Hotspur stadium. His murderer, a 16-year-old boy, was on bail having only nine months previously stabbed a 14-year-old boy in a dispute over a lighter, leaving a knife buried in his chest. That boy survived. There are dozens more.

On Tuesday, a 17-year-old boy was stabbed after a mass brawl involving young men armed with machetes erupted in Forest Gate, east London. On Monday afternoon, a 15-year-old boy was stabbed in broad daylight in Turnberry Park in Birmingham. On Saturday, a 15-year-old was stabbed in McDonald's in Southall, and two 14-year-olds were arrested. Last Friday, in Oxford, a 16-year-old boy was stabbed, and two 13-year-olds and a 12-year-old were arrested. Last Thursday, a 15-year-old boy was stabbed at the Bobby Moore Academy in Stratford. Three boys were arrested.

Last week in Yorkshire, a 15-year-old boy was found guilty of the attempted murder of a 14-year-old girl with a samurai sword on a camping trip last November. She suffered 10 wounds, including damage to a lung and her liver. The forensic pathologist's report said that she was lucky not to have been killed. The court heard claims that he had been offered £20 by a friend to attack her.

These are not isolated incidents, but a daily occurrence across the country. These are vicious, feral, deranged attacks that are traumatic for the victims and for those involved, yet they are often little more than a passing headline in a list of other, more newsworthy, tragedies.

We are all aware of the role that social media plays in this context and how its algorithms can facilitate a dangerous influence on young users. For children and young people, their world is small, often limited to their school, their friends and people they know in their neighbourhood, but with access to social media that changes. Their world remains small, but the issues within it are amplified—blown out of all proportion.

In its 2021 paper, “Knife Crime in the Capital”, Policy Exchange wrote that

“the frequency with which young people associated with gangs are confronted with violent videos on social media shifts their perception of normality, desensitising them and increasing the chance that they will react violently. It also reinforces the perceived need to carry weapons for protection.”

In the intervening period since that paper was written that same influential factor has rippled outwards to children who, although not associated with any gangs, exist in a very online world where it is all too easy to become seduced by the belief that carrying a knife is a normal and essential aspect of everyday life, that the threat of attack is ever-present, and that carrying a knife is a key component of self-defence.

Police forces have even now altered their approach to sharing images of weapons seized during operations, after feedback that this in itself contributes to the process of desensitisation and simultaneously makes young people feel that their local area is unsafe, thus encouraging them to carry a knife themselves. But we need look no further than the social media platforms that we ourselves use: Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok. I use YouTube every day, but scratch the surface and we can find harmful content, such as scoreboard videos outlining who has stabbed or killed whom in localised turf wars for gang supremacy. These scoreboard videos brazenly chase clout, highlighting those involved, outlining who “wetted” someone, who “burst” someone else, who “bussed their case”—got away with it in court—and who therefore remains dangerous and at large. This illustrates that those involved can often enjoy a degree of impunity.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for making such an impassioned speech. He has just outlined some of the role of the social media companies. Does he agree that the same rigour that we rightly use to catch some of the perpetrators of these crimes should be applied to the social media giants who refuse, in some cases, to take down really explicit and graphic images on their websites, saying that they do not breach their content policies?

Ben Obese-Jecty: That is a very valid point. The social media companies themselves know full well that this content is there and could easily create an ability to moderate it. These are billion dollar companies and if they wanted to take down this stuff, they could. It is about willpower. It is part of our responsibility in this House to make sure that that happens.

Fear of being stabbed or killed far outweighs any fear of the police. We only need to watch one of the videos I mentioned to see how an endless immersion into this world can cloud people’s judgment.

When I asked a Justice Minister whether such videos could be used as evidence to prosecute the Government’s new law of possession of a knife with violent intent,

I did not receive an answer, and I am not sure whether the Minister quite understood what I was making reference to. I ask the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire whether she could address that specific point in her summing up at the end of the debate.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on making an impassioned speech. He is talking about the dangers of social media influencing boys and young men. One of the key aspects of that is their role in society and the lack of clear role models. Will he join me in paying tribute to the former England football manager, Sir Gareth Southgate, who, in his Richard Dimbleby lecture this week, articulated the importance of role models and of boys and young men getting involved in active sports, so that they then become normalised in that setting and are not drawn into this dreadfully violent world?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I agree, and I will mention later the interventions to try to get people in a more collegiate and embracing atmosphere. Role models are a valid issue. Sadly, my speech is already long, but I would have loved to cover that in more detail, because it is a huge part of the reason why young men are drawn into this type of violent world.

Scoreboard videos are inextricably linked to drill music, which is a genre but also the medium by which various groups-cum-gangs are able to taunt their “opps”—the catalyst for multiple stabbings, often fatal. The line between gang and group is blurred to the point of irrelevance. Meanwhile, the media either does not know or does not care. Inner-city black youths are, consciously or unconsciously, expendable and interchangeable, overrepresented in statistics as both victim and perpetrator. The soft bigotry of low expectations makes black culture ripe for exploitation as a cheap way to appear edgy, irrespective of the upstream impact. Large media corporations, even the BBC, play their part in the creation of this milieu, leaning into it and giving it validation. The cynical valorisation of the most detrimental aspects of urban black culture and the celebration of criminality via musicians is one of the most toxic overarching influences in pushing this issue into the mainstream.

Irving Adjei, aka Headie One, went to prison three times as a teenager, including for dealing crack cocaine and heroin. In June 2019, Adjei was arrested for possession of a knife following a stop and search. While on bail, Adjei completed his UK tour, released his album, which reached No. 5 in the UK charts, appeared on Stormzy’s album “Heavy Is the Head”, played Glastonbury and was featured on BBC Radio 1. He was used in an advertising campaign for JD Sports alongside heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua, and fronted an advertising campaign for Adidas that December. That is the same Adidas that ran its “No More Red” knife crime awareness campaign alongside Arsenal FC just a couple of miles down the road shortly after that, but it is also happy to run an advertising campaign with a rapper on bail for possession of a knife. The hypocrisy of brands such as Adidas is off the scale.

Less than a month after launching the Adidas promo, Adjei was sentenced to six months for possession of that knife and went to prison for a fourth time. He was released that April. Six months later, his single was No. 2 in the charts, he had praise lavished upon him by

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

The Times, and he has never looked back. How does that convince anyone that there is any penalty whatsoever for carrying a knife? If anything, it has been an asset for someone like him because of the edginess that I referred to.

In September 2019, *The Guardian* published a piece about UK drill rappers OFB, who hail from the same Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham as Irving Adjei. It stated that the drill group OFB is

“trying to move the genre beyond the violence for which it has been demonised”.

The interview was with two of the three in the group: Bandokay aka Kemani Duggan—the son of Mark Duggan—and Double Lz. It casually mentions that the third, 17-year-old SJ, is “not around today”. Several months later it transpired that SJ, aka Jayden O’Neill-Crichlow, was “not around today” because he was on remand for his part in the murder of Kamali Gabbidon-Lynck seven months previously.

O’Neill-Crichlow was one of five young men, four of whom were teenagers, who received lengthy sentences of 20 years-plus after they arrived on Wood Green High Street on a Friday night armed with machetes, a handgun and a shotgun. They shot at Gabbidon-Lynck, missed and hit a packed Nando’s restaurant, and chased him down the street, eventually cornering him in a hair salon where he was shot and brutally hacked to death. For his part in the murder, O’Neill-Crichlow was sentenced to 21 years. I remember this because it happened 300 metres from my home.

I challenged the author of the piece about why it was appropriate to write a puff piece about a group who had one member on remand for murder. He cited that it was an editorial decision by *The Guardian*. Last year, Kemani Duggan was sentenced to five years in prison for possession of a Tokarev pistol and .22 calibre ammunition, with intent to cause fear of violence—the violence for which drill music has been “demonised”. That is precisely the type of irresponsible media valorisation that illustrates my point.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing to the House this horrific catalogue of embarrassing incidents—embarrassing to Members of this House and previous Administrations, because we have been asleep on the job. The legal authorities were able to stamp down on last summer’s riots in Southport so effectively by taking tough measures; does he agree that that is called for now? Talk about reducing the incidence of knife crime by half over 10 years is totally inadequate. Immediate action is needed to make an example of this type of crime and deter others from participating.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I agree. The law simply does not act as a deterrent to many of these people. They are far more scared of their immediate surroundings and the danger posed to them in everyday life than they are of being arrested by a police officer, knowing full well that they are unlikely to go to prison unless they have done something as heinous as some of the acts that I have described.

Ciaran Thapar, the author of the piece that I just described, appeared before the Youth Select Committee last December in his new role as director of public

affairs and communications at the Youth Endowment Fund. There, he explained how drill was an outlet for those involved to express the trauma that they have experienced in their lives. Adverse childhood experiences are a key part of fuelling the likelihood of vulnerable individuals becoming involved in knife crime. There is a broader question here about immigration, particularly from countries where experiences of trauma, brutality and war are contributing factors in youth behaviours within multicultural inner-city communities. The Youth Endowment Fund does important work on knife crime, and its toolkit is often cited as a key resource in providing the tools required to reach children.

Last week I spoke to Sharon Ward, the serious violence duty co-ordinator in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, covering my constituency of Huntingdon. The serious violence duty was introduced by the previous Government in January 2023, and requires local agencies to share data and information to help identify the root causes of serious violence occurring locally. When I spoke to Sharon about this in depth, she explained that they use a multi-agency public health approach, addressing the underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or perpetrator of violence in the first place.

The most vulnerable time for children and young people is from 3 pm to 6 pm, as well as later in the evening from 10 pm until 2 am. Diversionary activity is key to reducing those vulnerabilities. Sharon outlined how the path to becoming involved in violence is a slippery slope, where participation in antisocial behaviour is linked progression to more violent crime. I am sure that the subject of funding for youth services and cuts under the previous Government will be raised. I have focused on less discussed aspects of this wider issue in my speech; however, the part played by youth workers in reaching children and young people who are vulnerable and at risk of embarking on the wrong path is well-documented.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough currently have 41 interventions funded by the serious violence duty. They range from sport-based interventions to mentoring and relationship building, but all are designed to help those assessed as vulnerable. We must also be mindful that it is not simply about children from certain backgrounds—children from all backgrounds are vulnerable to exploitation by gangs. Those children do not realise that they are being exploited because of the way that they are being groomed—they are given new trainers, a PlayStation game or a bike by an older person they look up to or are fearful of, seemingly with no strings attached. Then they are on the hook and owe them at best a favour, or at worst a debt.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. He has made the point about children a number of times. Does he agree that educating our girls and our boys about the importance of respecting themselves and each other is an important part of tackling not just knife crime but all crime? Does he also agree that it is a matter for all Governments to do much more on prevention and early intervention?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wholeheartedly agree. Children seem to find themselves in a general atmosphere in which there is a constant need for validation and for

them to twist themselves into something that they are not. My honest belief is that social media has played a huge part in that. It comes across as a facile answer to give, but when we delve into it, it is far more complex and damaging than we are prepared to credit.

Any child can fall into criminality in this way. Sharon explained how parents need to be part of those discussions and alert to the warning signs. It is vital that schemes such as the serious violent duty continue to be funded, though I ask the Government to ensure that such funding is approved well ahead of time, rather than within a few weeks of its end, given the uncertainty that that often generates.

I welcome the Government's decision to ban zombie knives. Any steps taken towards reducing the chance of a fatal stabbing are a move in the right direction, but we must not smugly pat ourselves on the back and assume that that is all that is required. I was as critical of the previous Government's attempt to ban zombie knives as I am of this one's—not of the intent but of the way that it is announced as the solution rather than a tiny piece of the overall problem.

Zombie knives account for just 3.6% of fatal stabbings, the same as a lock knife. Screwdrivers are a more commonly used weapon. However, by far and away the most common is the kitchen knife: 52.6% of fatal stabbings involve the type of knife that we all have and probably used this morning or last night in our own kitchen. Yes, the zombie knife should be banned, but given its use in a small minority of fatal stabbings, that is not the panacea that it is presented as.

There have been proposals to change kitchen knives to have a rounded rather than a pointed tip, as outlined in research by Professor Graham Farrell and Toby Davies, and as championed by Idris Elba in his drive to tackle knife crime. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what consideration has been given to that idea, but we cannot pretend that kitchen knives are not and will not continue to be easily available to anyone with the intention of using one.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important and passionate speech. Historically, my area of Fife has not been synonymous with knife crime, and we want to keep it that way, but the possession of weapons in Fife has increased by 50% in the last year. Does he agree that figures like that, along with concerning recent footage on social media of a young man brandishing a knife shortly before he was attacked, are a warning sign that we need to act now to prevent worse developments?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wholeheartedly agree. Areas that traditionally have not been plagued by such violence are increasingly finding it rippling out into their communities. It is no longer just in large cities and areas that we would traditionally associate with it; we are finding it slowly moving into the suburbs. We need to nip this in the bud if we can to prevent any more tragedies.

A key question is: why are children now prepared to murder other children? It cannot be ignored that we see countless examples weekly—even daily—of a child being stabbed by another child. When did children develop a nihilistic worldview and a willingness to take the life of another child? In my previous career as an Army officer, I instructed new soldiers in phase one training, so

I know how long it takes to train a teenager to be prepared to kill. How and why are some children developing that mindset all on their own?

Fear is a huge driver of knife-carrying. The Ben Kinsella Trust's "Keeping Young People Safe" report illustrates that it drives the normalisation of carrying a knife. In the report, two thirds of respondents to a survey of some 10,000 young people said that they harboured anxiety about knife crime. Shockingly, the survey shows that children as young as 10 or 11 years old are considering carrying a knife. Though the numbers are very low, that shows that the idea of carrying a knife is within the scope of children who have only just stopped believing in Father Christmas.

Are children murdering other children solely out of fear? These children are not actually under threat—these are fights over little more than perceived slights—but somehow we have reached a stage of such frenzied paranoia among children of school age that they believe not only that they need to carry a knife, but that taking a life is somehow a reasonable, rational response to these situations. There is a sensible argument for access to therapy as a potential solution, but I appreciate that that is easy to suggest and unrealistic to facilitate and implement.

I have gone on long enough; I want to give others an opportunity to speak. I hope to hear many important and interesting contributions from hon. Members. I open the debate to others.

2.2 pm

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for bringing this important debate to the House. This is a national emergency and a huge threat to our society and our young people. I wish to associate myself with many of the things he said, and I totally agree that we have to stop this. I am not interested in who said what and when politically; I am interested in all of us working together to resolve this issue. We have to deal with it.

I will give a voice to victims and families, because it is important that we remember that behind every stabbing there is a victim, and behind every victim there is a family. I wish to mention two in particular. My constituent Beverley Davies has been to see me a few times. Beverley's son was stabbed over 120 times on Parbold Hill in Lancashire a few years ago. Alex was his name, and he was 18. The individual who murdered him was also 18. They met online on a platform that was used to lure Alex to his death. Beverley feels wholly let down by the justice system and the support and communications that she has received since this appalling event. The justice system around the country is piecemeal. It must be improved for our victims and families.

Child A survived the Southport attack—she was stabbed over 30 times. She and her family live in my constituency. I will not give her name or that of her parents, but I asked them if they wished to have their voices heard today in the Chamber. I commend them, because they asked me to read out the following statement.

"We welcome tougher laws around the purchase of knives and the wider work to reduce knife crime. We are extremely focused from our direct experience on male youth violence against women and girls but also recognise that knife crime crosses many other areas of our society and tackling this is complex. To reduce knife crime, and other acts of violence perpetrated by young men and

[Mr Paul Foster]

boys against women and girls, we must look at the motivations, the narratives and the environments they are immersed in. For us, this is the hard work; the work that requires sustained commitment.” That commitment must come from us. The statement goes on:

“The work to reduce knife crime must begin before young people go out to obtain a knife. It is sensible to make it harder to purchase knives and to tighten the law on carrying knives. These are tangible solutions that provide quick reassurance and ‘results.’ But, if a young person is looking for a knife, then we are too late, and they are already on a path to causing harm.

We must support parents, caregivers and schools better, not only in how they identify and support young people who may be at risk to themselves or others—we can all agree that these pathways need overhauls, and the Southport inquiry will serve this purpose—but, before that, working with all children, establishing the fundamentals of healthy relationships, friendships, and girls and boys being equal.

Our young people must be exposed to counter-messaging from what they may be consuming online, or at home. The work required is vast and complex but the long-term reduction in knife crime will only be seen if we go back to the start and raise our children better.

In the context of violence towards women and girls, current topics are important. Netflix’s show ‘Adolescence’ has opened a conversation about our children’s exposure to harmful messaging and themes about women and girls. We are grateful for the coverage happening this week, which is further highlighting the terrifying impact of Andrew Tate and others on vulnerable young boys.”

I commend that child’s parents for having the courage to write that. They are clearly concerned that this will happen again. I urge all hon. Members of the House to please work together for the victims and the families. Let us please deal with this once and for all.

2.7 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this important debate, and for his thoughtful speech. I join him in paying tribute to Ciaran Thapar, whose work took place in my constituency. It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), who made a moving statement on behalf of his constituents. I grew up near Parbold Hill and Southport, and it grieves me deeply to hear about the appalling violence in both those communities.

I rise to speak in this debate on knife crime with great sadness, because today, just after 5 am, a young man lost his life on Coldharbour Lane in my constituency after being stabbed. I visited the scene this morning and stood at the police line as the forensic officers undertook their work. I spoke with community members who were confronted with the shocking aftermath of this violence as they went about their day. I thought about the family, whose day would begin with a knock on the door from police officers, and the utterly devastating news that their loved one would not be coming home ever again. It is hard to feel anything but despair in these circumstances.

I know that hon. Members across the House will wish to join me in expressing our sincere condolences to the family and friends of the young man who lost his life. We do not yet know his identity, but we know that there will be people who loved him, and who are suffering the most visceral pain and loss today. I also pay tribute to the emergency services who attended the scene this morning.

When this young man’s name is released, it will join the names of others who have lost their life to serious violence and knife and gun crime in my constituency since I was first elected to this place in 2015. They are Jude Gayle, Kyall Parnell, John Ogunjobi, Donnell Rhule, Glendon Spence, Dennis Anderson, Beatrice Stoica, Filipe Oliveira, Chino Johnson, Ronaldo Scott and Keelen Wong. Each one was loved by their family and friends, and each one leaves a community traumatised by their loss and the circumstances of it.

When a knife or gun crime is reported in the media, we see the names in the headlines for a few short hours, and maybe again if the case comes to trial. We never hear about the ongoing trauma left behind in the local community, and the sense of loss felt not only by the immediate family but everyone who watched that person grow up and saw them out and about daily, those whose children went to school with them, and those who recognised and knew them. There is a sense of fear among parents that next time, their child might be the victim, and there are the mental health consequences of living with loss, fear and anxiety.

The causes of knife crime are complex. We need to take a public health approach to it, as though it were a disease. We should understand its pathology and take steps to prevent it taking hold, stop its spread, and treat the causes and the symptoms. I introduced a private Member’s Bill in the last Parliament to stop the availability of the most horrific weapons on our streets. I have met the lead consultants in the emergency department at King’s College hospital, who described the horrific injuries that are inflicted by machetes and zombie knives—weapons that can cut through bone, and serrated blades that inflict the most complex injuries on internal organs. They spoke about the survivability of many such injuries, compared with wounds inflicted with domestic knives, and described machetes and zombie knives as

“weapons of war on our streets”.

No one in our communities needs a machete or a zombie knife for any legitimate purpose, but they have been readily available for purchase online for as little as £10. I therefore welcome the Government’s action since July to further restrict their sale. I want further action on domestic knives. In particular, we should look at whether further restrictions can be introduced regarding age verification of those purchasing knives with pointed blades. I also want action further up the chain, to tackle those who exploit and groom our young people into serious violence—the county lines exploiters, the drug dealers and the serious organised criminals who are not spoken about enough in these debates.

In my constituency, in part because of the tragedies that we have experienced, we have seen inspiring responses from community organisations working with public services. The embedding of youth workers in hospital emergency departments was pioneered by Redthread at King’s College hospital. They provide options for young people who have been injured, or have seen their friends injured, allowing them to access support to keep themselves safe. I welcome the Government rolling out that intervention in other parts of the country.

I am also grateful to the Mayor of London’s violence reduction unit for funding Ecosystem Coldharbour through the My Ends programme. Ecosystem Coldharbour is a coalition of grassroots organisations working with young people and families in the Brixton part of my constituency.

It has been working for the last three years and has delivered some really impressive results. It has built up the trust and confidence of young people and families, so that they can access help and support. It provides mentoring and training opportunities, and leads the community response when tragedies occur. It delivers trauma support to families and communities. Our communities feel empowered by that work. It is particularly inspirational to see a group of mothers who have all lost a child to serious violence working together, under the banner “Circle of Life Ignite”, to support each other and prevent further deaths.

I am inspired by the way that young leaders have been equipped through that work. I pay tribute to the work of Abdoul Lelo, an extraordinarily impressive young man who has been working with McDonald’s in Brixton to embed a youth service in the restaurant. It takes support and positive opportunities to young people where they are. There are also benefits for the staff, who have often felt unsafe and overwhelmed in their workplace. I also pay tribute to the work of Sergeant Nigel Pearce from central south basic command unit, who has pioneered a different approach to community policing, based on trusting and listening to the community, and responding respectfully and supportively to their needs and experiences. If we had more officers working in this way across the Metropolitan Police, trust and confidence in policing would be much higher.

The partnership in my constituency is called Ecosystem because of the belief of the organisations in it that all the solutions to serious violence are in the community—but the community needs help and resources to find them. That is what we have had through the violence reduction unit. My plea to the Minister is that funding for such vital work be put on a long-term footing, so that we can keep on delivering and working to tackle the scourge of serious violence. In fact, as the Minister thinks about the design of the Government’s Young Futures project, I invite her to visit Ecosystem, because we have much good practice to offer for the development of that national programme.

The debate today is about young people and knife crime, but to tackle the scourge of knife crime, we must properly understand the nature of the problem and who is affected. Of the victims who have been murdered in my constituency since 2015, only two were under the age of 18. The majority were young men in their 20s, a cohort who grew up at a time when funding for youth services was being stripped away, who may find themselves unable to access employment often due to minor criminal convictions, who often have very poor mental health, who are accessing deeply damaging online content and for whom society can seem like it has very little to offer. There is currently no protocol or good practice for tackling serious violence in that cohort. The only part of the system obliged to try to help is the criminal justice system, if the person in question has committed a crime. Social services have no formal role or responsibility and mental health services are not designed with this cohort in mind, despite the fact that they are so often traumatised by the experiences, what they have witnessed in their communities and what they have seen their friends go through.

If we want to end the cycle of violence in our communities, we must turn our attention to that group. They are siblings, cousins and parents to the next generation.

The key to prevention must therefore lie in helping them to turn their lives around, making support services more visible in our communities, making it easier to ask for help through services that are designed with their needs in mind and properly resourcing effective rehabilitation.

I welcome the Government’s focus on halving knife crime. My communities have suffered far too much from its devastating effects and we continue to suffer today. I urge the Minister to work with us to devise services and interventions based on the experience in our communities, because we utterly reject this violence and we just want to see it stop.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I want to try and get everybody in, so please can people stick to around four minutes?

2.17 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on knife crime among children and young people, an issue that continues to devastate communities across the country. I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing the debate.

Very few people can say that they are not deeply concerned about the rising levels of knife crime, particularly among children and young people. As has been heard from my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), in the early hours of this morning a young man was stabbed and killed in Brixton, a town centre that we share along with my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi). Our thoughts go to the young man and his family at this time. It is a tragedy, but even more sadly, it is a tragedy that we hear far too often.

The latest figures show that there were more than 50,000 knife-related offences in England and Wales last year. Alarming, around one in five knife possessions involved young people under the age of 18. In 2023-24, there were 53 records of homicides using a sharp instrument where the victim was aged between 13 and 19 years. Though those statistics are alarming, we have to remember that they are not just numbers but young lives that are being lost, and with each one comes a family that will be left grieving and a community that is scarred.

I know that many hon. Members will point to the need for more policing, increased stop and search and harsher sentencing, and restrictions on who can buy a knife as solutions. Indeed, successive Governments, including this one, have introduced measures along those lines to tackle the surge in knife crime. I certainly will not stand here and argue that we do not need to review how we police the issue, although I believe that increased policing measures such as stop and search need to be thoroughly thought-through and must be intelligence-led. Increased policing and sentencing are not the only solution and cannot work on their own. Youth and knife crime are a wider societal issue that require a holistic approach. If tougher sentencing and more stop and search powers were all it took, we would have solved this crisis a long time ago. We cannot take reactive steps alone; we have to take preventive ones.

I know Conservative Members do not particularly enjoy our pointing out their record in government, but we cannot let this debate go by without mentioning the

[*Bell Ribeiro-Addy*]

impact of the past 14 years. This is not a political point but a factual one, because over that time we saw the systematic dismantling of the support systems that helped keep young people away from crime. Research from the YMCA showed that youth services have been cut by 73% since 2010, with over 750 youth centres closed and the number of youth workers falling by a third to 1,662 full-time equivalent roles. The result has been fewer spaces, mentors and positive role models for young people.

A recent Unison report revealed that in England 1,036 council-run youth centres were closed between 2010 and 2023, and only 480 remained open in April 2023. Funding for Sure Start children's centres, which provided early intervention and family support, has been decimated. Funding for police community support officers, who play a vital role in building trust between police and young people, has been drastically reduced. School budget cuts have squeezed pastoral support, mental health provision and behavioural interventions, increasing exclusions overall. The link between school exclusions and serious violence is well known. Excluded children often fall through the cracks. Many enter pupil referral units where gangs recruit vulnerable young people. Others disengage entirely, making them more susceptible to criminal activity. Those cuts have consequences, and when young people lack support, opportunity or hope, they become vulnerable to criminal exploitation. Gangs step in where the state has stepped back. It is no coincidence that as these services have disappeared, knife crime has risen.

Conservative Members cannot ignore the direct correlation between austerity and serious youth violence, but equally Labour Members cannot either. If we maintain the cuts or extend them even further, that is the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. As a starting point for tackling youth violence and knife crime, I strongly urge the Government to look at reversing the cuts and investing in youth services.

I also urge the Government to look at how local councils tackle the issue. I point to my council in the borough of Lambeth. Lambeth Made Safer was launched in 2021 by Councillor Jacqui Dyer. It takes a public health approach to violence reduction, focusing on prevention, early intervention and community-led solutions. It prioritises targeted outreach, family support and investment in community initiatives. It is obviously woefully under-resourced, but it is the sort of initiative and community-driven approach that should be rolled out nationwide. There is no single solution to this crisis, but we can begin to address it by ensuring that young people have the wraparound services that we know prevent them from being involved in, or the victim of, crime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We will now start with a formal four-minute time limit.

2.22 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this important debate. Knife crime continues to cast a dark shadow over our communities, claiming young lives, shattering families and leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. Last year, 10 people were stabbed

every week in Birmingham—a statistic that is both alarming and unacceptable. Within my constituency covering Erdington, Kingstanding, Castle Vale and south Oscott, the B23 postcode has been particularly affected. In 2023, it recorded the highest number of knife-related incidents in the entire city, but behind those statistics are real lives, real families and real pain. When knife crime tears through families, it destroys lives and devastates entire communities.

Just weeks ago, this crisis struck my family, turning our world upside down. My nephew—a kind-hearted, wonderful young man—was brutally attacked in an act of senseless knife violence. His crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. While his wounds are healing, it will take months for him to fully recover. The emotional trauma inflicted on him and our family, however, is immeasurable. This is a pain no family should ever have to endure, yet it is a pain that far too many are forced to bear.

Knife crime thrives in the shadows of neglect. Fourteen years of austerity under the last Government gutted our communities, stripping away 70% of the support systems that once guided and protected young people. In Erdington, the closure of the Malcolm Locker youth centre in 2014 marked the end of the last council-run youth service in my constituency. The cuts have left a void that is too often filled by despair and violence. I am glad that this Government have recognised the problem of knife crime and included provisions to address it in the Crime and Policing Bill, but we can and must do more.

I have always said that prevention is better than cure, and while the police play a vital role in tackling crime, a sustainable solution requires a preventive, community-led and partnership-driven approach. In Birmingham, we have inspiring examples in organisations like Bringing Hope, which I have worked with for many years, which works relentlessly to tackle knife crime among children and young people. Similarly, the YMCA in Erdington is unwavering in its dedication to our young people. On my recent visit, I celebrated with them the purchase of 83 flats, ensuring that young people have safe places to live and access to the support they need.

Initiatives like those show us the way forward. We must create greater aspirations and opportunities for young people, offering them a future beyond a life of crime. That requires long-term investment in our communities, our youth services and the organisations already making a difference, saying that we can always go even further upstream to support families and end deprivation in communities like mine.

My nephew did not deserve what happened to him—nobody does. Yet too many families are still left to feel this pain, and too many young people are still becoming victims. We can no longer afford to be complacent. Every moment of inaction puts another young life at risk. We must come together across the House and within our communities to break this cycle of violence.

2.26 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for bringing forward this important debate and for his moving speech. I also want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton)—I am sorry for what happened to her family.

Knife crime devastates communities across the country as organised criminal gangs lure children and young people into county line networks and organised criminality. Too many communities have seen children criminally exploited, and sadly we have seen the devastating consequences of knife crime in my constituency. In Huddersfield, Khayri Mclean, 15, and Harley Brown, 17, sadly lost their lives to knife crime in recent years. These were young lives cruelly taken too soon. Too many parents are dealing with consequences that no parent should have to face. Communities are left broken, and too many children and young people are left with mental scars.

The Home Secretary's announcement of Ronan's law, along with the launch of the coalition to tackle knife crime, the Young Futures prevention partnerships and the Young Futures hubs, are all welcome and important steps forward. By introducing stricter regulations on online knife sales and developing an extensive understanding of the root causes of knife crime, we are making it harder for young people to access those weapons in the first place and encouraging different, safer pathways. The measures are welcome, but alone they will not be enough.

Hon. Members have raised social media companies and the use of Spotify by gang members and so-called influencers, whereby algorithms are unfortunately driving this divisive behaviour, but that cannot be seen in isolation from what is happening on the ground. Kirklees council, covering my constituency of Huddersfield, has seen a 70% decrease in funding for its youth services since 2010. We know the loss of youth services has been linked to a 14% rise in youth crime within six years of the closures. We must invest in youth services, community outreach and early intervention.

Despite the difficult financial outlook, many incredible organisations support young people in my constituency, including Positive Stepz, Conscious Youth, Central Stars youth club, Team KickStart, Yorkshire Community Development, Empower, Boxpower and Temple Well-Being. The deputy mayor of West Yorkshire has also introduced an A&E navigator and community links programme, as other Members have mentioned. Those help to identify and signpost young people to the right support networks at the earliest opportunity.

Those organisations deliver outstanding community services to our young people, offering them experiences, opportunities and environments that allow them to thrive. However, despite their best efforts, the financial constraints that they face have resulted in many having to reduce their services. They continue to have to fight for small pots of funding, which is not sustainable in the long term. The evidence is clear: when youth services are cut, young people suffer.

Will the Minister provide details of when the Young Futures hubs will be introduced? I am keen for Huddersfield and towns like ours to be early adopters, alongside cities. We must also give communities the tools to tackle this problem from the ground up. It is usually local people and local communities who best understand the issues, but they often find themselves fighting against the system rather than being supported by it.

No parent should ever have to bury their child, and no community should have to live in fear. I look forward to continuing to work with Members from across the House, alongside the Government, to stamp out this epidemic of senseless violence.

2.30 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for bringing this debate to the House, and I commend colleagues for their powerful speeches.

It is clear that there is an undeniable consensus across the House on the need to get this right. However, consensus alone is not enough. A national crisis has devastated families and shattered futures, and it continues to cause damage. The Office for National Statistics reported 50,000 knife-related offences in 2022-23. In just one year, 50,000 lives were affected, and there were 50,000 incidents of fear, injury and, sadly for some, tragedy.

In my Gillingham and Rainham constituency, we had several incidents in recent years, including the stabbing of a 17-year-old boy in the town centre by two other young people. Members across the House will be familiar with visiting local schools in their constituencies, and many will agree that students are often the toughest crowd—never shy of asking direct and uncompromising questions, with a grilling that would put any Select Committee to the test. Time and again, however, one issue persists: safety. Students ask me why they should feel afraid to walk through their high street in the evening, why their communities do not feel safe, and why more is not being done to protect them.

It troubles me that most of that stands in stark contrast to my own experience growing up in the very same community and in the same area. I wish to tell those students that the fear and the sense of abandonment that they feel today is not inevitable. Some of it is the direct result of years of neglect. In reality, the Conservatives left behind a legacy of cuts and, at times, indifference to the futures of young people across this country. They dismantled the very support systems designed to keep young people safe: £1 billion was stripped from youth services, 760 youth centres were shut down, and 4,500 youth workers were lost. The evidence is clear: every £1 invested in youth work prevents greater costs down the line.

In viewing knife crime as the public health crisis that it truly is, we must recognise that the principles of upstream prevention have never been more pertinent. The truth is that by the time a young person picks up a knife, we have already failed them. That is why the Government's coalition on knife crime is a significant step in the right direction, allowing us to get to the root causes of knife crime, not just the symptoms. I also welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to bringing back neighbourhood policing, which will work towards restoring the trust and presence that have been dismantled. Communities such as mine are desperate for officers who will build relationships, prevent crime before it happens and reassure those who have lost faith. However, we cannot arrest our way out of this crisis. We must invest in young people, not only to steer them away from crime but to offer them a future beyond it.

Like many others, I have binge-watched the compelling drama "Adolescence", which highlights so well the toxic online culture that our young people are exposed to.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when we think about violence against women and girls, and role models for young men, we need a greater focus on protecting the future of our young

[*Natasha Irons*]

men, including by thinking about how we can help them to deal with the challenges they face, in order to make them safer and give them space within our communities?

Naushabah Khan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We must support our young men. The start of that journey is to tackle the toxic and concerning material found online. We must ensure that the social media companies, with their billions, are doing the right thing in managing that content, which I do not believe they are doing at the moment.

We must tackle head-on that culture that seeks to legitimise and glorify misogyny, gang violence and exploiting vulnerability. We must prevent our young people from being dragged into a cycle of harm before they even realise what is happening. This is our opportunity and our responsibility to work across parties to break the cycle, rebuild what has been lost, and assure our communities that never again will a generation grow up believing that carrying a knife is their only protection, option and future.

2.35 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this important debate and for his powerful speech.

The devastating impact of knife crime is felt at the heart of my Vauxhall and Camberwell Green constituency. The most heartbreaking thing I do as an MP is speak to a parent who has just heard that their precious son or daughter has been taken away far too young by knife crime. No parent should have to bury their child. When I sit there trying to comfort a family through something so horrific, I glance over their shoulders and see the pictures of that smiling face—of the innocent young life that has been robbed. I should never have to get used to that, but we all have to do it as Members of Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) highlighted some of the statistics, and as awful as they are in their own right, we must remember in talking about them that someone loved every single one of them—a friend, an aunt, an uncle, a brother, a grandparent, a mother, a sister, a family. They are now devastated about losing someone who had barely started their life.

Let me touch on the wider impact of knife crime on communities, which we do not focus on enough. When I was on the London Assembly, I authored the “Gang Associated Girls” report, in which we considered the impact that knife crime can have on girls and young women, who, if we are honest, may not often be viewed as the immediate victims of knife crime but who go through long-term trauma as a result of their experiences. In a number of incidents, it is young women and girls who are the first at the scene. It is the same young women and girls who help the community grieve. It is the same young women and girls who organise the funerals. And when the glare of the media has gone and the incident is out of the news cycle, it is the same young women and girls who go back to lay flowers at the cemetery, remembering the key anniversaries. Even if those young women and girls are not presenting at

hospital after knife crime, we must remember that this is also about their long-term trauma. It is important that we do not forget their voices in this debate.

That is why we need a holistic approach to address this issue. The whole community needs to come together if we are to break the vicious cycle of knife crime and the chain of trauma that impacts so many of our young people, robbing them of their future. It saddens me that just a few weeks ago there was a tragic shooting in my constituency, and in line of sight from a playground at a primary school was the blue line that says, “Police line do not cross”. Imagine the impact on those children.

It is vital that we continue to work across parties to address knife crime. It is not about politics; it is about young people dying on our streets up and down the country. I am pleased to see the Government committing to the Young Futures programme, which will champion the vital youth workers who are the lifeline that many of these young people need. If we are honest, those youth workers have not been paid properly, and many have lost their jobs and seen their youth centres close. We need to continue speaking about this, and I know that the Government will continue to work with us to make sure we address the vicious cycle that is robbing so many of our young people of their lives.

2.39 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) and all those who have worked to secure this important debate on knife crime, which has been a deeply vexing issue in our society for decades. Today, we are once again at a point where further action is needed to save lives, as we have heard in so many powerful contributions from Members across the Chamber.

I was pleased to see in the excellent briefing for the debate by the Safer Knives Group that Professor John Crichton of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland has brought his expertise to the work of that group. His study on knife crime reduction in Scotland showed that the Scottish violence reduction unit’s strategy of targeting young men carrying knives in public led to a 69% reduction in offensive weapon charges and a 50% drop in sharp instrument homicides between 2005 and 2016. These approaches show that restricting immediate access to knives reduces offences and saves lives, but crucially, as other Members have pointed out, they must be complemented by preventive approaches to knife crime focused on possession of knives among young people and on awareness.

At the time of that important work being initiated, there was huge concern in Scotland about the levels of knife crime. In 2010-11, the police in Scotland caught someone with a knife every 90 minutes. In 2009, the Scottish Parliament held a knife crime summit following a petition brought to the Parliament by John Muir of Greenock, whose son Damian was murdered with a knife in 2007. It was a privilege for me to work alongside John in his campaign, in my role as shadow Justice Secretary in Holyrood at the time. Although John’s campaign did call for tougher penalties for knife crime in sentencing, it also focused on the need to raise awareness of the trauma that so often follows someone’s decision to carry a knife, for which there are often many complex reasons, as we have heard today. John went into schools to take his powerful personal message to young people, which really had an impact at the time.

Today in Scotland, sadly, there is a worrying trend on knife crime in the wrong direction. The crime statistics for Scotland show that in 2023-24, there were nearly 11,000 offences of handling of an offensive weapon—an 11% increase from the previous year—and there has been an increase in homicides. In Methil in my constituency, the community has been particularly disturbed by social media posts of violent attacks in the community. In one post, a young person brandished a knife, and they were later attacked with a knife and slashed in the face. The fear is that if further action is not taken to address these incidents, more young people will be seriously injured and could lose their lives.

Scottish Ministers must ensure that local police have the resources they need to deal with these incidents, alongside the other interventions in the community that are required to support these young people. We must have the right legislation in place to restrict the sale of knives, so I welcome the measures brought forward by Ministers, particularly in the aftermath of the horrific attacks in Southport, which my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster) spoke powerfully about.

We are once more at a point where further measures are urgently needed to protect our young people from knife crime in communities across the UK. The impassioned calls for action from those whose lives have been devastated by these crimes have been given voice by Members across the Chamber, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) spoke powerfully about her personal experience. This must move us all. I am confident that these voices have been heard and that this Parliament will act and do more to protect our young people from knife crime.

2.43 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Norfolk, as a rule, is a safe county with a generally lower than average rate of crime. It is a wonderful place to live, and many people who grow up there, as I did, have a fantastic childhood, but that is sadly not the case for every young person. We face an increasing challenge with the intertwining of knife crime and county lines activity in our area, which is having a devastating effect, and I will focus my remarks on that element.

Since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have met Emma and Phil Dix, whose 18-year-old son Joe was tragically stabbed to death in my constituency in 2022. Three young men were found guilty of his murder. Joe's parents have spoken about how they feel Joe was exploited by county lines drug dealers and became trapped in a vicious cycle. I want to quote what Emma, his mum, has said:

“I don't think we've really tackled the root cause of why people are carrying and using knives, particularly in Norfolk. Unfortunately, we've buried it under the sand for quite a while. Some of it's going to be related to mental health, exploitation and grooming as well. We know that with a lot of incidents caused through county-lines, people won't go to the Police due to their fear of repercussions.”

As the Minister knows, the term “county lines” refers to the mobile phone lines used to take orders of drugs, and it has been strongly linked to violent offences, including knife crime. I recently met her to discuss this issue, and I welcome her engagement on it. It is also a focus for police in Norfolk. Since its creation five years ago, Norfolk's county lines team has reportedly investigated more than 200 phone lines, with 213 charges and more

than 570 years in prison sentences. I welcome that, because it is vital that those running these lines, who so often cruelly exploit young people, are brought to justice.

Emma and Phil have since set up the Joe Dix Foundation, and they have welcomed the Government's plan to recognise child criminal exploitation as a stand-alone offence in the Crime and Policing Bill. They have also called for a national register for all perpetrators who are convicted of child criminal exploitation, and I wonder whether the Minister could reply directly to that in her response. Their story, like that of so many families across our country, underlines why this Government's commitment to tackling knife crime is so important, and it is why I welcome this debate and thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing it.

To tackle county lines and knife crime among young people, we must focus on prevention, intervention, education and tackling the root causes. I welcome the recently launched coalition to tackle knife crime, which Emma and Phil are members of. It is a welcome collaboration, because it is only through listening to the voices of those on the ground that we will find solutions to these issues. I recently held a youth engagement forum with community groups and young people across Norwich North, and the overall message was the importance of multiple organisations collaborating on early intervention measures to prevent young people from going down dangerous paths and to give them opportunities.

I agree strongly with the call for a public health approach. As a councillor in London, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), I saw that at first hand, as well as the work of many community groups there. In my constituency, organisations such as the Joe Dix Foundation, MAP, Norfolk YMCA, Sprowston Youth Engagement Project, Future Projects and the district councils all do fantastic work, and I pay tribute to them.

Most importantly, we must listen to young people. Young people at that roundtable raised a range of issues we have covered today, including the need for more youth-friendly spaces, the lack of opportunities for work experience and employment, and the need to tackle online harms. I particularly welcome the Young Futures programme and the hubs that will be set up. Only by taking a holistic approach to combating knife crime will we begin to pull it out at its roots. I am clear that collaboration with young people and those on the frontline is key.

The Youth Endowment Fund has highlighted many of the most effective solutions when it comes to reducing violent crime. We have the evidence. With this Government, we have the political will. We have consensus on both sides of the House that we must work together to tackle knife crime, because none of us can sit back while precious lives are being lost and young people's lives are being destroyed.

2.47 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this vital debate. Knife crimes among children and young people are some of the most devastating incidents to occur in our constituencies. Last summer in Southend East and Rochford there were multiple machete attacks on our beaches and high streets. That was

[Mr Bayo Alaba]

incredibly troubling, and I set about meeting the families and businesses affected. I am also currently in the process of commissioning a youth summit to see what we can do, and to find the gaps in the community and the things we do not know, through the eyes and voices of our young people.

As hon. Members may or may not know, Essex is in the top 10 counties for reported knife crime. As parents, friends, and family members of young people, I am sure we all feel sheer horror when we hear about incidents involving knives, and every single offence is one too many. As a young man, as a boy, I was attacked a number of times with a knife, and I was very lucky to survive. It broke my mum's heart, knowing that she could not protect me every time I left the house, and that is one reason why—I have not shared this story publicly too widely—I have spent the last 20 years mentoring and supporting young people. I can see how hard it is traversing neighbourhoods, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) said, sometimes someone is just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Knife crime ruins lives, and this debate is particularly tough having known people, including childhood friends, who lost their lives from knife crime or drug crime. I have sat in the living room talking to families who have lost a young person, and that is a scenario and setting that no one ever wants to go through. The pain that you see and feel emanating from the parents and family because of the loss of that young person is something you just cannot describe.

I wholeheartedly welcome our Labour Government's commitment to halve violent knife crime in a decade, and we have not wasted any time to deliver on that commitment. Ronan's law introduces stricter online sale regulations to prevent weapons from falling into the hands of young people. That includes new offences such as possessing a knife or an offensive weapon with intent, and it increases the maximum penalty for manufacturing, selling, hiring or lending prohibited weapons. It creates new offences of child criminal exploitation and cuckooing, which are often associated with county lines.

It is essential not only that we ban the selling of machetes and sharp weapons, but that we make kitchen knives safer and have a strategy of prevention. Young people in Southend East and Rochford, much like in other coastal communities, face a unique set of challenges. The conversation today is not just about urban communities, or even immigration; it is about validation, self-esteem, boredom and role models, or the absence of them. Such things are huge contributing factors to what we see playing out, with the violence that our young people are enacting on each other. We have high unemployment and high levels of health inequality, and we often feel the brunt of the lack of transport and connectivity. The changes that the Government are proposing cannot come quickly enough.

2.52 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I rise to speak on behalf of my constituents across Luton South and South Bedfordshire who have sadly had to come together to stand against knife crime on too many occasions in recent years. There were consistent failures by the previous Conservative Government

to toughen up legislation on dangerous weapons, as well as a failure to ensure proper funding for our police forces. As we have heard from many Members across the House, and I agree, sustained cuts to youth services combined to allow a knife crime epidemic to take hold in our towns and cities. Knife crime destroys lives, devastates families and leaves lasting trauma on communities, and behind every one of the statistics is a person whose life remains ever changed or, sadly, was needlessly lost.

Sadly, in Luton we are all too familiar with the devastation that knife crime causes, but perhaps I may reflect on one case: the shocking murder of Azaan Kaleem, AJ, in 2018 when he was just 18. From darkness must come light, and AJ's mum, Roseann Taylor, is that light. I was honoured to present her with a Knife Angel community award, to recognise her dedication and selflessness in using her own story as a mother who lost her son to raise awareness of the impact of knife crime, and for her ongoing work with young people in knife crime prevention. That award was named after the Knife Angel sculpture—an amazing statue over eight metres tall that was created from 100,000 surrendered knives and based in Luton town centre last summer as part of its ongoing tour. It is a powerful symbol and catalyst for discussions about knife crime and violence, with the aim of educating and raising awareness, particularly among young people.

As the Knife Angel left our town, we marked the event with a vigil at St Mary's church, a candlelit walk of remembrance, and a closing ceremony in St George's Square. We remembered all those lost to knife crime, and committed to eliminating that violence by inspiring positive choices. Lots of brilliant organisations are working to make that happen, while also dealing with the sad reality of what continues to take place. Bedfordshire violence and exploitation reduction unit's "Just Drop It" campaign is working with local partners to encourage our young people to take a brighter path by going knife free. Wingman Mentors, who have worked with Bedfordshire VERU, are installing lifesaving bleed kits across our community as a step to try to avoid loss of life after a stabbing. Similarly, the Luton, Dunstable & Surrounding Kenyan Community Forum youth group created a safe card, with help from the group's youth co-ordinator, Mwangi Muturi, which shares vital information about what to do when helping the victim of a stabbing. Sadly, that was created following the death of a young friend.

Unlike the Conservatives, our Labour Government have been ambitious in our mission to get knives off our streets and ensure that people across our towns and communities are safe from violent crime, with our commitment to halve knife crime in a decade. Our Labour Government have already banned the ownership of zombie-style knives and machetes, and measures in our flagship Crime and Policing Bill will go further to crack down on knife crime. Like others, I welcome the emphasis on prevention through our Young Futures programme and other initiatives.

Tackling knife crime is also an important part of the police and crime plan of Bedfordshire's Labour police and crime commissioner, John Tizard, working jointly with Bedfordshire VERU. Will the Minister inform the House whether any additional funding will be announced for Bedfordshire VERU to ensure that it can continue its excellent work to keep our local community safe?

Taken together, these measures will directly improve support for children and young people who are sadly often most at risk of being perpetrators, but also victims, of knife crime.

2.55 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this important debate.

Knife crime among children and young people is a national emergency that should shame us all. With 3,000 knife crime offences involving children reported in the year ending March 2024, this crisis cannot be ignored. Each one of those offences represents a young person caught in violence—someone’s son, someone’s daughter, someone who deserved better.

In Croydon, where we have some of the highest rates of knife violence in London and where too many young people have lost their lives, we know the impact of knife crime only too well. In Croydon, Elianne Andam, a 15-year-old described by those who loved her as “vibrant, bright and loving” was taken from her family on her way to school, in an act of violence that is beyond comprehension. Too many young lives have been taken too soon, too many communities are living in fear of the next tragedy and too many families are being left in unimaginable grief.

I welcome this Government’s commitment to halving knife crime over the next 10 years and the urgency with which they are taking action, including going after the criminal gangs that are grooming our children into crime and trafficking them across the country, introducing Ronan’s law to crack down on the online sale of knives, and banning zombie knives. However, it is not enough to be tough on knife crime—we must be just as tough on its complex causes.

I welcome this Government’s plans to roll out the Young Futures programme. As is often said, it takes a village to raise a child, but with universal youth services seeing a 73% cut in funding since 2010 and young people often stuck for years on waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services, where is that village today? What can young people point to that demonstrates that this country is willing to invest in them, to back them and to support them? I urge the Government to move faster in prioritising the wellbeing of our children because, as is also said, if a child is not embraced by the village, it will burn it down to feel its warmth.

In Croydon, in partnership with the Mayor of London, organisations are working tirelessly to provide support to young people and to rebuild that village around them. They include Redthread, which is working in Croydon University hospital; the groundbreaking My Ends programme; Reaching Higher, which supports young people in schools, communities and at home; Croydon Drop-In, which offers free mental health support; and Croydon Youth Consortium, which is driving collaboration between local youth charities. Croydon is leading the way in giving young people a stake in their community.

However, due to impending budget cuts Croydon, which is London’s youngest borough, is on the verge of losing its youth engagement team. That team provides a critical link between the council, the voluntary sector and vulnerable young people across the borough. It provides outreach and runs youth hubs in hard-to-reach areas. Put simply, Croydon’s youth engagement team saves lives.

As the Government build their Young Futures programme and look to create a national youth strategy, I urge the Government to ensure that they work with and not against the grassroots organisations that know their communities best, provide long-term funding for youth-centred provision in local areas and look at increasing statutory protections for local youth services, so that they are given the priority they deserve.

Knife crime among children and young people is devastating, but not inevitable. Now is the time to invest in prevention as well as enforcement, to listen to those working on the frontlines of this crisis and to give our young people the support they need, because our communities, families and young people deserve better.

2.59 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): This is a timely debate, as Members considered the knife crime provisions of the Crime and Policing Bill only last week. I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on granting time for it, and thank the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for his compelling speech. We have heard some emotional speeches, which show the empathy that Members on both sides of the House have for victims of knife crime and their families.

Over the years, I have met constituents who have had their lives irrevocably changed by knife crime, whether it resulted in the murder or a loved one or a serious injury. I have spoken with mothers who have lost their children, and adult children who have lost their elderly parents after they were stabbed to death. Knife crime can affect anyone, and the pain that the surviving family members live with after such horrific events is palpable.

The Minister will know that I want to talk about harm reduction; I have spoken about this in this House, and with her, on several occasions. Two thirds of knives that have been identified as having been used to kill people are kitchen knives. That is in deaths where we know what the weapon is. That statistic should not be surprising; many murders are unplanned and committed on the spur of the moment with little thought, and kitchen knives are the weapons most readily to hand.

There has been much in the media this week about the new Netflix drama series “Adolescence”, which is a commentary on the many problems faced by young people growing up, not just knife crime, but it highlights how an easily accessible weapon can be used to cause devastation and change the course of many people’s lives forever. For years, bereaved families, support groups, youth groups and schools have called for the Government of the day to do something tangible to stop this, and to allow children to have a childhood. Their calls are now joined by prominent voices such as those of Idris Elba and Stephen Graham, the latter describing a “pandemic of knife crime” in our country.

I know that this Government are listening and want to make a change, but we need to do it quickly and thoroughly. The previous Government’s measures did not go far enough. The new measures in the Crime and Policing Bill go further, but more can still be done. There is a growing campaign to phase out kitchen knives with pointed tips as an everyday household item, and replace them with kitchen knives with rounded tips, as the hon. Member for Huntingdon mentioned. It is well documented that pointed knives are more likely to

[*Andy Slaughter*]

pierce vital organs and sever arteries—injuries that are far more likely to be fatal. Rounded knives are much less likely to cause lethal injuries, and most of us rarely use the pointed end of a kitchen knife when cooking.

The Crime and Policing Bill limits the purchase of new knives, but there are already millions of pointed kitchen knives in drawers around the country. The safer knives group, of which I am a member, has suggested a pilot scheme to convert pointed kitchen knives into safer, rounded-tip knives. We need to encourage manufacturers to replace pointed knives with rounded knives, and to discourage the sale of pointed knives by creating a price differential.

As I have said, making knives safer is only one step in reducing the number of deaths and serious injuries. Education, intervention and support, following the methods of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, would produce long-term solutions. It is also vital that we collect more data on the types of knives used in any knife-related crime. Information, policy changes, legislation and expert advice are all important, but it all has to lead to a change of behaviour, so that communities stop killing each other with knives, and that must be a national priority. I know the Minister agrees with me on that, but we must see action, and we all have to work on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.3 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The epidemic of knife crime is an issue that I have addressed many times in this place, although never in a debate specifically targeting its impact on children and young people. I commend the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on securing this debate on such a significant matter.

In Britain, we face a hard truth: young people are increasingly involved in violent crime, and the cycle is becoming ever more entrenched. Figures from the Ben Kinsella Trust show that across the country, some 614 young people under the age of 24 have been killed by knife crime in the last 10 years, 17 of them being 16 years old or younger. Children are being exposed to the tragic normalisation of stabbings. We have sleepwalked into a scenario in which many young people feel it is safer and easier to carry a knife to defend themselves. In this context, threats of punishment are unsurprisingly failing to deter violent behaviour. Knife crime should be treated as the societal disease it is, and we cannot afford to just treat the symptoms any more. If this Government are to truly tackle knife crime, they must address its roots—the deep-seated factors that drive young people to such violence in the first place.

To tackle knife crime, we must stop it before it starts. We must use a public health approach that addresses the root causes: fear, trauma, lack of opportunities, and social exclusion. This approach has many tenets—some of which I will outline today—and begins with education. When young people carry knives, it is often out of fear, not necessarily a desire to harm others. A study by the Ben Kinsella Trust revealed that over one in three young people do not feel safe in their own communities. Some 36% do not feel safe walking the streets, and two

thirds report anxiety over knife crime in their area. The teenage brain is wired differently from that of adults; we know that a tendency towards impulsive and risky behaviour is much more common during adolescence. Studies show that in many cases, knife crime occurs in the heat of the moment, when an altercation could have been resolved without serious injury if a weapon had not been present. That is exactly why we must address knife crime before it happens—before a knife is pulled from a pocket and the situation escalates beyond control.

Education can play a principal part in challenging the misconception that carrying a knife somehow makes a person safer. We can teach young people the real consequences of carrying such a weapon—how it destroys lives, impacts families, and perpetuates fear among their peers and in communities.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech that I think all of us across the House would agree with. I have spoken a number of times with Harlow police about knives and knife crime, not just in Harlow but across Essex. They do a lot of work with schools. Does he agree that it is important that schools fully engage with the police on these issues, and do not feel that there is stigma in doing so? All schools need to engage with that process.

Luke Taylor: I completely agree. I will come on to that later in my speech. I have spoken to the organisers and leaders of the Chris Donovan Trust in my constituency. They spoke about the challenge of getting into some schools to talk about knife crime, because of the perception that talking about it was a problem in itself. That was so frustrating to hear.

We need to have honest, open conversations with young people in schools. Teachers must be equipped with materials to educate the next generation, so that we break the cycle of violence. Even if a child is not at risk of committing a knife-related offence, educational programmes serve a critical role. They can teach children about the consequences of knife crime long before they consider carrying a weapon. That is vital. We need to reach young people and win the war for their hearts and minds before the prevailing climate of fear and the harbingers of toxic mindsets start their offensive. I urge the Government to consider introducing mandatory personal, social, health and economic lessons on the consequences of weapons possession, and to put the principles of restorative practice on the curriculum, in recognition of the great work of groups such as the Chris Donovan Trust in my constituency. We teach children from an early age about the dangers of diseases caused by smoking or alcohol; why, then, are we not having open discussions with them about the health risks associated with carrying a knife? Creating safe spaces for discussion, and building relationships with young people, can ensure intervention before thoughts of crimes arise, and deaths can be prevented.

To fully realise the nourishing, community-focused element of a public health approach, though, we must invest in youth services and community programmes that engage young people. Winning the war for hearts and minds means providing young people with opportunities to build skills, pursue education, and find alternatives to gang culture and criminal activity. However, as was mentioned in many speeches, we have seen a

dramatic decline in youth services funding over recent years, with cuts totalling £1.1 billion since 2010. This has left too many young people without the support they need.

Investing in youth services is not just about providing safe spaces; it is about providing young people with alternatives to violence, so that we break the cycle of crime, shift the culture of violence, and empower communities to work together to prevent crime before it escalates. The targeted early help and integrated support team at Sutton borough council in my constituency does exactly this kind of work, offering opportunities to young people who are not often afforded the luxury of such attention elsewhere in their lives. However, these programmes rely heavily on grants from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, the Ministry of Justice, and violence reduction services. Those grants are subject to constant uncertainty, often approved at the last minute and often only allocated for 18-month to two-year periods, preventing proper forward planning. We must do better than that. We need to consistently get serious funding to these initiatives in a timely manner. I echo the calls from the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about funding for these community schemes.

Lib Dem Members will continue to push the Government to make youth diversion a statutory duty, so that every part of the country has a pre-charge diversion scheme for young people up to the age of 25. That will ensure better outcomes for young people and less strain on police resources, but let us be honest with ourselves: police resources are already strained beyond breaking point in too many places, and education and early intervention alone are not enough to properly implement a public health approach. Visible community policing starts with actual police numbers in our London boroughs. To tackle knife crime, it is important for young people to see bobbies on the beat in London. Their active and engaged presence creates a sense of safety and security. We have to get back to meaningful community policing, returning the police to their proper duty as a positive, engaging arm of the state in people's lives.

Building trust between young people and the police is also crucial. This trust communicates that there is no need to carry knives for protection, as young people know that the police are there to keep them safe. As I have said before, when 17-year-old Ilyas Habibi was stabbed to death outside Sutton station in my constituency in December 2023, he was just minutes away from a police station. If we cannot expect visible policing in town centres and the areas closest to police stations, how little have we come to expect of community policing? To be clear, that is not a criticism of the police, but a criticism of successive Governments and mayors, who have consistently failed to get the police the resources they need to do their job. In London, far too many police are abstracted away from the communities they are supposed to serve to help plug gaps.

I was deeply concerned to learn of Sadiq Khan's budgeting decisions, which have led to dedicated police officers in schools in London being removed. Under the "A New Met for London" plan, officers will no longer be stationed in schools as part of the safer schools officers programme. While the plan claims that officers will still work closely with schools, the change reduces the consistent direct contact between officers and young people. That contact is crucial in building relationships

with young people to foster trust. There should be plenty of positive interactions and experiences with the police throughout young people's formative years. That can be achieved through school assemblies or classroom workshops. Young people need to understand that the police are there to keep them safe on the streets and are not the enemy, but when sparse police resources are focused on only the most extreme forms of deterrence, such as live facial recognition and stop and search, and when there is no community focus, it is unsurprising that they do not.

The hallmark of a meaningful public health approach that invests not just money, but serious political capital, is that it brings together all groups in our communities. It creates a coalition of care, breaks down the silos between projects, and builds a team across society committed to doing what it takes to rescue young people. On behalf of countless experts, professionals and parents, and on behalf of young people, I implore the Government to build that team, to create that coalition of care and to finally implement a meaningful public health approach to knife crime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

3.13 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): First and foremost, I pay my respects to all those mentioned today who have lost their life due to knife crime, and to their families. Too many families and communities have been and are being torn apart by knife crime. I welcome the constructive, compassionate and collaborative approach that Members from all parts of the House have taken to the debate. This matter is far too important, and the impacts are far too devastating, for anything but a shared focus on addressing and reducing this most violent of crimes. We cannot allow ourselves to be back here in a few years with more names and more stories, but no meaningful progress. No family, friend or school should lose a loved one to knife crime, yet far too often, that is the reality.

As others have done, I put on record my gratitude and admiration to our courageous police officers across the country who work tirelessly and fearlessly to help keep us and our communities safe. I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this vital debate, and for its emphasis on knife crime among young people. We all recognise the prevalence and impacts of knife crime as a whole, but the nuances that affect young people are integral, and developing an understanding of this problem—both as it stands today and as it will develop in the future—is important.

As my hon. Friend and other hon. Members have said, the world that young people occupy is multilayered. It is a hybrid of online and offline, where boundaries merge, coercion persists and the reality of the consequences of actions are too often overlooked until it is too late. Young people are being exposed to things at a much younger age than ever before, and the impacts of normalising, and desensitising them to, crime and violence are still not fully understood.

Although the number of hospital admissions for knife crime has declined from its peak, the figure remains far too high. We know the impact that knife crime has

[Harriet Cross]

on young people, so we must work to get knives out of perpetrators' hands. Thanks to research by the Youth Endowment Fund, we have a relatively clear picture of knife crime rates among young people. A small but by no means insignificant number of young people carry offensive weapons. In the last two years, 5% of the 13 to 17-year-olds surveyed admitted to carrying offensive weapons, 47% of which were knives. This illustrates that while only a minority of those involved in serious offences are knife carriers, their impact on communities is significant. Of course, that is a nationwide figure, and rates will be significantly higher in parts of the country where knife crime is especially prevalent.

Over the past decade, a number of steps have been taken to reduce knife crime. Although violence against the person has decreased significantly since 2010, knife crime remains stubbornly high. This suggests that specific, targeted action is required to reduce knife crime offences, particularly among young people. Much-needed measures to close loopholes and introduce restrictions on zombie knives were put forward and passed under the last Government, and implemented by the current one.

Additionally, I welcome the measures in the Crime and Policing Bill that replicate those in the last Government's criminal justice Bill by placing more stringent rules on knife possession and expanding police powers. Three key measures outlined in the Bill—the creation of an offence of possessing a bladed item with intent to harm, the increase in the maximum penalty for selling weapons to under-18s, and the power to seize, retain and destroy bladed articles—have all rightly been included. Increasing the penalty for those selling knives to under-18s is clearly a step forward in enforcing stricter laws and protecting young people. Ensuring that there are penalties for a range of weapons being used by young people is vital, as the police have highlighted that individuals use social networks specifically to advertise a range of weapons to under-18s.

Stephen Clayman's review provides a detailed assessment of the online sale of knives. I understand that the measures drawn from the assessment will be introduced as amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill, so it would be useful to hear from the Minister what impact she believes they will have on knife sales. Does she expect a significant reduction in accessibility for those who currently acquire weapons online? When considering online sales, we must not be naive. Data shows that a significant number of weapons held by young people are kitchen knives, which, as noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon, are widely accessible.

As Members of different parties have highlighted today, engagement, prevention and police interventions are crucial tools in not only preventing individuals from committing crimes but protecting young people, who are far too often the victims of offences committed by their peers. Stop and search saves lives and must play a role in addressing and preventing incidents of knife crime, by disrupting and removing weapons from the streets. The police must have the necessary powers to prevent crime, because far too many lives are being violently cut short. Research published in the *Oxford Journal of Policing* found that attempted murders could be reduced by 50% through stop and search. Knowing that the police can stop and search is a powerful deterrent.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the shadow Minister for her comments. Yes, the police have a vital role to play in dealing with knife crime. Does she agree that our youth workers, who work with some of the most vulnerable young people up and down the country, are also a key defence in stopping knife crime? In some instances, young people who are caught up in a vicious cycle of crime trust youth workers more than they trust the police.

Harriet Cross: I thank the hon. Member, who is so engaged and invested in this issue, for her comments. Youth workers, teachers and guardians—anyone whom a child trusts—are important in addressing this issue, and we must ensure that everybody has the powers and that society has the powers needed to address knife crime. Any action that helps reduce knife crime is an action that we should be looking at.

As well as stop and search, emerging technologies—for example, devices that allow the detection of knives at a distance and in crowded streets—could allow officers to more precisely identify and remove knives from would-be perpetrators. Alongside enforcement, prevention and early interventions require attention, and the Conservatives did make advances on that while in government. Between 2019 and 2024, violence reduction units were funded in areas of England and Wales where there was a prevalence of violent crime. According to Home Office evidence, these have led to a statistically significant reduction in hospital admissions for violent injuries. Since the funding began, an estimated 3,220 hospital admissions for violent injuries have been prevented in these funded areas.

We must also ensure that the police have the ability to be in the right place at the right time. As we have heard from Members across the House, too often it is being in the wrong place at the wrong time that leads to injury through knife crime. This is particularly crucial for young people, who congregate in hotspot areas, so ensuring that our police forces have the resources to increase patrols and increase their presence in such areas plays a key role in both prevention and response.

I acknowledge that the Government have placed significant emphasis on the delivery of Young Futures hubs to identify the young people most at risk of being drawn into crime. While we all recognise the benefits of providing support to young people, the effectiveness of the hubs will depend on implementation. Resources must be distributed effectively to ensure that young people receive the support they need, particularly given the range of activities that the Government intend the hubs to carry out alongside the reduction in knife crime. May I therefore ask the Minister how the hubs will be structured, and what work will take place outside their physical spaces to ensure effective engagement and early intervention?

We have seen police and crime commissioners using their independence to explore programmes that can provide earlier interventions. For instance, Thames Valley PCC Matthew Barber's Operation Deter Youth ensures that youth offending services make contact with under-18s arrested for weapon or violent offences within 90 minutes of notification of arrest, followed by a house visit within 48 hours. I am not asking the Minister to be prescriptive, but will she ensure that police forces have the Government's backing to trial innovative techniques such as knife scanning and new preventive techniques to help save young lives? Fundamentally,

what are her plans to change the mindset that has developed that enables children to stab and murder other children?

Reducing knife crime among young people is a critical task for this and any Government. When we hear the names that we have heard today of some of the many—too many—young lives that have been lost to knife crime, we are reminded that these are not just statistics, but devastating events that bring untold anguish to families. We must do everything possible to bring down the numbers.

3.23 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): Let me start by thanking the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) for securing this debate on an issue that matters enormously to us all. As ever, his opening speech was, as is his way, eloquent, thought-provoking and challenging. It ranged widely, including on the role of social media—he referred specifically to drill rappers’ music influencing children and young people. I refer him to the important work of Project Alpha based in the Met, and the role that the Online Safety Act 2023 will have as its provisions come into force, along with Ofcom.

There have been many insightful and heartfelt speeches, and I am grateful to every Member who has spoken. In particular, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), who spoke on behalf of the victims’ families. I am sure the whole House would like to thank the parents of child A in the horrific Southport attack for what they had to say.

My hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) all spoke with such knowledge, and they have done a huge amount in their local areas to tackle knife crime. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) spoke in a very personal way about the attack on her nephew, and how it had affected him and her family. Again, I hope the whole House will wish her nephew well in recovering from that attack.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) gave us the Scottish perspective. It is always useful to hear what is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) spoke very personally about being the victim of knife crime. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) has spoken to me at length about harm reduction and rounded kitchen knives, and I reassure him that nothing is off the table when it comes to tackling the scourge of knife crime and saving young lives. The Home Office is considering a proposal on rounded kitchen knives.

Before I deal with many of the issues raised this afternoon, I want to comment on the prevailing message of the debate. No matter what side of the House we sit on, whatever party we belong to and whatever constituency we represent, we can all agree that knife crime causes enormous harm in our communities. It is destructive and all too often deadly. Too often, those affected are teenagers and young people with the rest of their lives ahead of them. We all know that when someone carries a knife or a dangerous weapon, the potential for bloodshed

is always only ever seconds away and each fatal stabbing triggers a trail of devastation. First and foremost, there is the victim deprived of his or her future. Then there is the victim’s family, left to come to terms with the most unimaginable loss. There is also an impact on the wider community when these incidents occur. While we discuss policies, legislation and initiatives, we must always keep the individuals and the families affected at the forefront of our minds. On that note, I take the opportunity to say that my thoughts and prayers are with all those who have suffered as a result of knife crime. I also thank all our police and emergency service workers who have to deal with knife crime in our communities.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in recognising the great work done by PCSOs Nikki, Demi, Gavin and others in my constituency to prevent knife crime, and the Reel Rod Squad in Bedworth, which encourages young people to put down knives, take up fishing rods and enjoy the peace of the water instead?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for telling the House about the excellent work in her constituency, in particular the role of the PCSOs.

Time is short and a lot of questions were raised with me. If I do not have the chance to answer all of them, I will write to hon. Members specifically. The House will know that, under the safer streets mission led by the Home Secretary, we are driving a whole-of-Government approach to halving violence against women and girls, halving knife crime, and restoring confidence in the policing and justice system. As a part of that, the plan for change sets out our key reforms to strengthen neighbourhood policing, tackle antisocial behaviour and improve public confidence in law enforcement.

On offensive weapons, any effective response must include action to get dangerous knives and weapons out of circulation and off our streets. We have already demonstrated our commitment to putting in place stronger controls in the months since the general election. We implemented the ban on zombie-style knives and zombie-style machetes on 24 September. It is now illegal to sell or own those weapons. Furthermore, we committed in our manifesto to banning ninja swords. We have consulted on the legal description and are progressing our plans to bring forward an effective ban later this year.

A number of hon. Members referred to online sales. We are clear that we need stronger checks in place to prevent under-18s from being able to purchase knives online, which is why, last October, the Home Secretary commissioned Commander Stephen Clayman, as the National Police Chiefs’ Council lead for knife crime, to carry out a comprehensive review into the online sale and delivery of knives, which was published on 19 February. We are taking immediate action on a number of key recommendations from the report.

We have also announced Ronan’s law, named after Ronan Kanda, who was fatally stabbed in June 2023, following dedicated campaigning by his mum, Pooja Kanda. Ronan’s law will comprise a range of measures including requiring online retailers to report any bulk or suspicious-looking purchase of knives to the police, and the introduction of a new offence of possessing an offensive weapon with intent for violence.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

The Home Secretary has also announced that the Government intend to strengthen age verification controls and checks for all online sellers of knives at the point of purchase and on delivery. As raised by the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green, we will be bringing forward amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill to enact our manifesto commitment to introduce personal liability measures for executives of online companies that fail to take action against illegal knife and offensive weapons content.

The coalition to tackle knife crime, announced by the Prime Minister in September 2024, brings together campaign groups, families of those who have tragically lost their lives to knife crime, young people who have been impacted and community leaders, united in their mission to save lives. It is important that we have the lived experience of young people in that coalition, and we are working with our member organisations to ensure they have a platform to hear those young voices share their views, ideas and solutions for making Britain a safer place for the next generation.

Many of my hon. Friends have referred to Young Futures hubs and prevention partnerships, including my hon. Friends the Members for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) and for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal). We know that too many children and young people today are facing poorer life outcomes, including becoming involved in knife crime, because they are not effectively identified and supported early on. This can be caused by limited life opportunities or because they are particularly vulnerable. To address these issues, we have committed to the creation of the Young Futures programme, which will establish a network of Young Futures hubs and prevention partnerships to intervene early on, to ensure that this cohort is identified and offered support in a more systematic way.

The Young Futures hubs will bring together the support services that tackle the underlying needs of vulnerable children and young people, making them more accessible to those who need them. The hubs will promote children and young people's development, improve their mental health and wellbeing, and prevent them from being drawn into crime. The Young Futures prevention partnerships will identify children and young people who are vulnerable to being drawn into crime and violence, including knife crime, antisocial behaviour and violence against women and girls, and divert them by offering them effective and evidence-based support in a more systematic way.

I will refer briefly to county lines and child criminal exploitation, which was referred to by a number of hon. Members. County lines is the most violent model of drug supply and is a harmful form of child criminal exploitation. Through the county lines programme, we are and will continue to target exploitative drug dealing gangs and break the organised criminal groups behind the trade. We know that knives play a huge part in that. [*Interruption.*] I can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you want me to conclude.

There is so much more to say on this, but, in conclusion, I again want to congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon on securing this debate. We have to get a grip of what is, as we said in our manifesto, a national crisis. The public want change and we are determined to deliver it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Ben Obese-Jecty to wind up quickly.

3.34 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty: Knife crime among children and young people has, for too long, been a stain on this country and our communities, and a blight on our collective social conscience. The increasing involvement of children, both as perpetrators and victims, cannot and should not be ignored. It is this, at its heart, that collectively we must change, and I look to the Government to grasp the nettle on that. Although the public health approach that they are likely to adopt has merit, there is need for a sustained, impassioned intervention to prevent our children from becoming murderers, and to remove this fictional threat that they are buying into to make them feel safe even when they actually already are.

I thank all Members who have spoken for taking the time to contribute to this important debate, and for paying tribute to those who have lost their lives. I am pleased that we have been able to put heat and light on some of the often overlooked aspects of the cause of this issue and on the potential solutions too.

There is much to do in addressing the root cause of this issue, and we have tried to cover myriad factors as broadly as we can, but I am conscious that this topic is too broad to solve in just one debate. I hope that, collectively, we have raised issues that give the Government pause to consider when developing their own strategy to achieve their aim. I would dearly love it if none of us ever had to raise the issue of knife crime in this House again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of knife crime amongst children and young people.

Coastal Communities

3.35 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered coastal communities.

I am delighted to be leading my first ever debate in this Chamber, on the vital topic of coastal communities. I am very grateful to Members from across the House who supported my application for the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

This is the first debate on coastal communities of this new Parliament, and it could not come soon enough. There are a number of traditional divides into which people break our country: rural versus urban; affluent versus deprived; industrial versus agrarian. However, the divide between coastal and inland communities is often overlooked, yet this divide has wide-ranging impacts and leads to a unique situation for these areas.

In fact, many of my constituents in North Norfolk may share far more similar experiences with our coastal siblings in Cornwall, almost eight hours away, than with those just half-an-hour down the road in Norwich. What coastal communities across the country often feel is that, despite the incredible contribution they make to our country economically, culturally and environmentally, the system is not working for them. Our health and economic outcomes are poorer than those of our inland neighbours. Our environment is battling the challenges of climate change, coastal erosion and the sewage dumping scandal. But, despite that, the Government do not seem to think that we are worthy of proper representation in the form of a dedicated coastal communities Minister.

I turn now to the health challenges faced by our coastal communities. In 2021, Professor Sir Chris Whitty published a landmark report into the health outcomes in seaside towns and coastal communities. What he uncovered was shocking. We have higher rates of poor health and disease. The rates of cardiovascular diseases and cancer are higher, and those diagnosed with these diseases have poorer outcomes. They also suffer with them for longer.

Data shows that, on average, residents in Hull live more than 25% of their lives in poor health—around a quarter more than the national average. That results in a lower quality of life and wellbeing, a greater reliance on the health service, and shorter lives overall. The work of Hull's public health department, under the leadership of Mike Ross and the Liberal Democrat-led council there, to tackle these challenging statistics is commendable, but coastal health inequalities need to receive more direct Government attention.

The disparities in life expectancy that were found are particularly shocking. I want to take Members on a brief tour of my Norfolk neighbours to outline this point for them. To the east of my constituency is Great Yarmouth, and to the south is Broadland. These areas are very nearby, they share similar amenities in many situations, and they have shared frustrations with the A47. However, a baby born in Great Yarmouth has a life expectancy four years shorter than that of one born just over the border in Broadland. Both these babies would be proud Norfolk residents, both live within touching distance of our Broads national park, both may even grow up sitting in adjacent seats at Carrow Road football ground, but the challenges that we face in

coastal towns and communities means that there would be a disparity in their health, in their wellbeing and even in how long they live. For communities so nearby, so similar, this cannot be seen as an acceptable status quo. Our coastal communities deserve to live longer, better, healthier lives than they do now.

North Norfolk faces its own coastal health challenges. We have lost the Blakeney surgery, which served many coastal villages with otherwise poor transport links. Benjamin Court reablement centre has been closed down—for now—removing a vital asset that allowed local people to recover outside of hospital and nearer their families. Cromer hospital also needs the support and funding to provide more services closer to our coastal communities, preventing them from having to travel to Norwich for vital healthcare.

Professor Whitty points out that coastal communities share many more of these challenges with each other than with their inland neighbours. It was clear to him that action needed to be taken. We all listened to him when he was on our TV screens during the pandemic, and I hope that the Government will take his advice just as seriously now.

Our coastal communities are major economic drivers. We have a thriving tourism industry, which contributed £17 billion a year to our economy before the pandemic struck. It supports hundreds of thousands of jobs across the country. Our hospitality industry plays host to talented hoteliers, chefs, publicans, chip shop owners and many more. A visit to the Blakeney hotel, enjoying lobster and crab at Rocky Bottoms in West Runton, a pint at the Hill House in Happisburgh, or some dessert at Crumble Crib in Sheringham, are all excellent ideas for anyone taking a trip to our part of the world. Tourists have been doing this for centuries. Jane Austen sang the praises of Cromer in my constituency in “Emma”, describing it as

“the best of all the sea-bathing places”,

although I must say that the whole of North Norfolk qualifies for that level of praise.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): My constituency could not be further from the sea. However, I have spent many happy holidays in Cromer and Sheringham, and I am delighted that he has been returned to the House as the representative of those wonderful communities. Will he tell me how wonderful Cromer, Sheringham and the North Norfolk coast are? I prefer to swim in the sea in Sheringham rather than Cromer—does he agree?

Steff Aquarone: I make absolutely no comment on the latter question, but I welcome the hon. Member's contribution—no advance sight was given of my speech. Her presence here serves to remind us all that it is not just MPs representing coastal communities who have a stake in their prosperity. I thank her for her almost perfectly timed words.

In more recent times we had the 2024 pier of the year in Cromer. The excellent North Cottage in Cromer, run by Andrea and Jerry, was recently awarded self-catering accommodation of the year at the Suffolk and Norfolk tourism awards. Cromer also plays host to a Banksy artwork from his 2021 tour of the east coast. The artwork, of a queue of hermit crabs looking on at

[Steff Aquarone]

empty shells, highlights one of our greatest challenges in coastal communities: second homes and the wider housing crisis.

In North Norfolk we have been plagued by huge numbers of second homes and empty homes. Outside the City of London, we have the highest number of empty or infrequently used homes in all of England. These properties are carving the core out of many small and historical communities, and in too many cases contribute very little back. Our poorest are sitting on ever growing waiting lists, while the rich treat our coastal villages as a setting for a Jane Austen-era summer jaunt, leaving them to suffer for the rest of the year.

In Wells-next-the-Sea, 40% of the town is second homes and holiday lets. In some parts, only one in 10 homes is someone's main residence. I am delighted that, after years of lobbying, we are able to levy a 100% council tax increase on those second homes. That will bring in £1.7 million for the district council, allowing it to support more affordable housing and provide homelessness services.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Jane Austen mentions not only Cromer but Ramsgate—in “Pride and Prejudice”—although certainly in a less salubrious way than she may have referred to Cromer. Ramsgate and Wells-next-the-Sea share the concerns that the hon. Member mentioned about short-term holiday lets. Does he support the calls that many colleagues and I have made for not just a registration scheme but a licensing scheme for short-term holiday lets, in order for local authorities to be able to control and shape their own local economies?

Steff Aquarone: It is not ideological; we must be pragmatic in these things. The right sort of holiday lets can bring in welcome tourism to North Norfolk, but there is a safety issue regarding regulation, which I am very sympathetic to. I would be very interested in talking in more detail about our shared interest in this matter at another time.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate that affects so many constituencies around the country. In Sea View Street in Cleethorpes there has been a noticeable uptick in the number of Airbnbs. That street has a unique identity, and the Airbnbs are taking away from the impact of local businesses and the local tourist trade, because they are using those shop façades. Does he think that more should be done to reduce the Airbnbs and protect the unique identity of some of these shopping streets?

Steff Aquarone: I do think that more should be done. It is a classic example both of unintended consequences from the explosion of a successful tech platform that was originally designed for people to let out spare rooms and is now a mainstream booking platform, and of the inevitable fact that legislation moves more slowly than life. Again, I would be interested in a further discussion on that topic, which affects us both.

In Cornwall—we are not alone in the struggle—about 14,000 second homes are sitting empty, while it is also in the midst of a critical housing crisis.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Is the hon. Member surprised to hear that Reform is campaigning locally in Cornwall against second homes, yet nationally it voted against taxes on second homes?

Steff Aquarone: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. I am a little surprised. I am not too familiar with Reform's tax policies, but I am not sure whether that is just me or most of us. Nevertheless, I hope that I have done my neighbour, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), a favour by raising some of the challenges in his constituency. I am sure that he will be most supportive of whatever is in its best interests.

Cornish Liberal Democrats, including my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Andrew George) and for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), are fighting hard on this issue, to their great credit, as are many in the House. Our coastal economies do, however, face struggles. From 2009 to 2018, half of coastal towns saw a decline in employment compared with only 37% of inland communities. We have much higher rates of self-employment and part-time employment and, by the nature of our tourist-driven economy, we have significant seasonal variation as well. Many small local businesses are deeply concerned that, after years of feeling left behind, increases to national insurance could squeeze them even further; for some, it might be the final straw.

Our economy is also changing to meet the opportunities of the future. Coastal communities have been at the forefront of the renewable energy revolution and are key parts of the manufacturing process for wind turbines or hosting the sites where the cables for their energy make landfall. In Bacton in my constituency, there are amazing opportunities for carbon capture and storage and for hydrogen generation as we undergo a green transition. Our coastal communities have so much economic potential and opportunity just waiting to be unlocked. I hope that the Government can support and enable them to flourish in the years to come.

One of the most special things about our coastal communities is the environments that they possess. Visitors to Salthouse marshes in my constituency might be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the migratory snow bunting. Moving north, in Holkham and over the border in Holme dunes live some of the ever-decreasing number of natterjack toads. Those are precious, unique and environmentally important landscapes and areas, but they face significant challenges, too.

Anyone who lives in a coastal community will have been furious at the shameful sewage scandal, which has been unfolding for years. The tainting of precious beaches through the dumping of raw sewage by water companies is a national disgrace and shows no regard for the importance of the coast to its wildlife and residents. I am delighted by the work that we have done locally to secure blue flag beaches for much of North Norfolk, but there is still so much to do.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The hon. Member talks about the environmental challenges of our coastal communities, one of which is that many of them face thousands of pylons along hundreds of miles moving electricity from one place to another. Does he agree that we need to find a way to put those cables underground to protect our beautiful coastal communities?

Steff Aquarone: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I am pleased to associate myself with the sentiment behind his remarks. I think it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), when he was Energy Minister in the coalition, who scoped out the possibility of an offshore ring main for East Anglia, which is an even better solution than trying to bury cables under the ground.

Our coastal communities are also on the frontline in facing down the effects of climate change. I have spoken many times in Parliament about the coastal erosion that we face in North Norfolk—I make no apology to hon. Members for sounding like a broken record—but, as a result of man-made climate change, North Norfolk's coastline villages such as Happisburgh, Trimmingham and Overstrand are rapidly being claimed by the North sea.

We are not alone in this fight, as communities along the North sea coast are facing similar worries, and new modelling shows that the concern is more widespread than previously thought, with areas of the south-west now under threat of erosion too. My constituents look at projects such as the Thames barrier, where we have rightly taken bold steps and built infrastructure to protect communities from the effects of rising sea levels and extreme weather events, and wonder whether the Government would deliver the same level of attention to them. I will not allow our communities to be left behind or written off. We must fight climate change and mitigate its impacts, which we are already facing.

A fantastic book by Madeleine Bunting, “The Seaside: England's Love Affair”, charts the story of our seaside towns over the past several decades. It is a story of decline that must be reversed, but it is also a story of hope and resilience. I can absolutely see the balance she describes: the fragility of life clinging to the cliffs, but also the social strength, the raw beauty and the economic opportunity. Supporting our local coastal economies does not have to mean billions in investment; it needs advocacy and action at the top table and the right support from Government to help people help themselves. Madeleine Bunting gave the Reynolds lecture in 2023 and made this salient point:

“Seaside towns don't fit into the public debate about the North South divide. Nor has their decline ever dominated the national narrative in the way that inner cities did in the 80s as a focus of public policy or like the former mining and industrial towns. Seaside towns have been left to struggle with their own decline.”

I have covered just some of the key pillars of the challenges that our coastal communities face, as well as their resilience and our opportunity as a whole country to support them. What frustrates me greatly is that despite the wide-ranging and various challenges, responsibility for supporting them is fragmented and siloed across Government. I am delighted to see the Minister in his place; however, his remit contains only the communities aspect of our coastal communities. We have unique health challenges, economic challenges and opportunities of major environmental importance. Our coastal communities are too important to be bit parts of different portfolios, and we urgently need to take a holistic approach to supporting them, understanding how the different factors interact with one another. We need to be able to see and understand the impact of economic outcomes on health and wellbeing and how environmental challenges and renewable energy opportunities can go hand in hand.

That is why I have been calling for the creation of a Minister for coastal communities to give us a specific representative, speaking up for our areas in Government. That call has cross-party support, with MPs from across the House supporting it in the previous Parliament. I hope that the wide range of Members present today shows the Government that a similar consensus still exists for getting us a seat at the table and making the needs and opportunities of coastal communities heard and acted upon.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, as I am keen and excited to hear the contributions from all those present about what makes their communities so special. I hope that everyone will think about how coastal communities have impacted their lives: whether as a summer holiday destination, a weekend getaway, a university town or the place they have called home for generations. Let us think about why they matter to us and what they have given to us all, not just in economic contribution but in memories and in experiences. There are the memories from holidays with family and loved ones; the laughter and smiles at building sandcastles on our beaches as a child or with children of our own; the timeless enjoyment of windswept fish and chips warming us as we watch the waves crash against the shoreline; the way that Turner or Constable captured coastal beauty in their art works; and coastal walks, arcades, swimming, surfing and even seal spotting. Let us remember what coastal communities have given to us. Today, we can come together and make sure that we give back to them, protect them and let them create many more memories for generations to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members will have noticed that there are a lot of people on their feet wanting to speak, so I will try and get as many people in as I can. I am imposing an immediate three-minute time limit.

3.53 pm

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): For nearly four decades, our seaside towns have shaped the outcome of elections. Yet, despite that significance, we have been overlooked, struggling with deprivation, economic decline and crumbling infrastructure.

The crisis is particularly evident in my constituency of Blackpool North and Fleetwood, which bears the scars of deindustrialisation and the decline of the fishing industry. Income deprivation is rampant, job opportunities are limited, health inequalities are stark and our infrastructure is in disrepair. Coastal residents, on average, earn £2,800 less than those inland, and crime and antisocial behaviour is 12% higher. Our health crisis is also dire, with residents 15% more likely to suffer an early, preventable death. Cancer mortality rates are 9% higher on the coast, and our rates of respiratory disease are three times the national average.

Our coastal properties are also a third cheaper, leading to more houses in multiple occupation and poorer living conditions. These challenges are not abstract numbers; they are the lived reality of families struggling to make ends meet, young people seeking opportunities that do not exist, and communities suffering from the daily impacts of “dirty business” and historical contamination. Labour is working to reverse that with its ambitious plans to grow the economy and its commitment to fix the NHS.

[*Lorraine Beavers*]

Blackpool North and Fleetwood was founded on ambition. Our forefathers envisioned thriving model seaside towns, combining prosperity, tourism and industry. Yet, sadly, today they are a shadow of that vision. It is time to restore that ambition with real investment and leadership. The Government's move towards regulatory reform is essential, but our communities are impatient. They have been let down for too long and need to see tangible delivery now.

To truly deliver, we need a Minister for coastal communities. Coastal communities face unique challenges that require a dedicated voice in government—a Minister who understands our specific needs and ensures they are addressed through a co-ordinated, strategic approach to investment and regeneration. While top-down reforms provide essential structural change, they must be matched by bottom-up solutions shaped by local knowledge and intelligence. A Minister for coastal communities could help us seize private sector investment in the clean energy transition to enable growth now, revitalising our docks, improving transport links and creating long-term sustainable employment. Coastal communities have been part of this country's success for generations. It is time we gave them the investment and leadership they deserve, or we risk losing them forever.

3.56 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): As a native of a coastal community in Devon, I am well versed in the challenges that living there presents. However, we must also highlight the opportunities its presents. It is all too easy to depict coastal towns, cities and communities as run down and tired—places where people retire or only have work six months of the year when the tourists roll in. While there is undoubtedly a lot of truth in that, there is also a huge amount to value and celebrate about our coastal communities, because if there was not, why would people flock from right across the country and, indeed, the world to visit?

My constituency of South West Devon has the significant suburbs of Plymouth, Plympton and Plymstock, and swathes of the coastal South Hams and Dartmoor. The challenges the coastal community in my constituency face are much like those elsewhere, including housing for local people and transport connectivity.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): My hon. Friend has begun what I am sure will be an exquisite speech, and she hits the nail on the head when she talks about transport connectivity. One of the great problems that unites all our coastal communities is that it is difficult to get anywhere. For a community like mine in Dumfries and Galloway, it is 80 miles to the nearest hospital. Perhaps rather than a new Minister looking at coastal communities, we need existing Transport Ministers to put their foot down.

Rebecca Smith: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point, and although my constituency is a long way from his, we too have significant problems with transport. We are on a peninsula, and if the trains stop, we cannot get in or out, so I completely understand the need for a focus on transport. We also have the health and education inequalities that have been mentioned, and the new Government's attack on businesses with increased employer

national insurance contributions. That affects not just businesses but our local St Luke's hospice and vital community pharmacies such as Tubbs in Newton Ferrers. The changes to business and agricultural property relief are also threatening the future of long-standing family businesses.

Arguably, one of the biggest opportunities for South West Devon is the continuing growth of the marine autonomy hub at Turnchapel Wharf in Plymstock. With over 300 years of history as a shipyard and naval base, it was sold 20 years ago by the Ministry of Defence and bought by Yacht Havens group. Over the last 12 years, it has invested in the hub and attracted more and more marine-based businesses, with a specific focus on marine autonomy, developing autonomous vessels for the future of scientific surveying, defence and humanitarian work at sea.

The development highlights some of the unique opportunities we can have in the coastal community of South West Devon and Plymouth. With the easiest and quickest access from land to deep water in the country, my constituency is perfectly placed for businesses looking to do sea trials underwater—a niche but essential opportunity for our local coastal community. Last Friday, Thales delivered the first end-to-end autonomous maritime mine-hunting system to the Royal Navy from my constituency. The project is part of the Organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation, and it has served the French navy as well as the Royal Navy.

It is vital, however, that we do not fall into the trap of looking at coastal communities solely through the lens of built-up areas, towns and cities. The coastal communities in my constituency have a wide range of identifying factors. As the Government's local government reorganisation work progresses and councils across the country consider how they can best serve their own interests, it is important that they look at the interests of the places that they seek to absorb. Edging Plymouth, a unitary authority with its own proud identity, with part of Devon county council and two district councils will mean a very different future for much of my constituency, but taking in the rural character of communities such as mine is essential.

Although the population of towns and cities such as Plymouth may significantly outnumber the population in the rural parts, it is essential to place value on both population size and land mass. Identity matters, and people often choose to live where they do to be close to the sea, but that does not always mean that they are in built-up towns and cities. Local government reorganisation must be in the best interests of everyone, not just people in urban areas, be they on the coast or not.

To conclude, the previous Government recognised the challenge faced and invested significant sums of money in communities such as mine to help them close the gap with non-coastal communities. Going forward, we must be proud of coastal communities, which are such a key part of our national identity as an island nation. I am committed to finding the balance between pursuing opportunities and tackling the challenges that we all face.

4.1 pm

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): It is a privilege to represent East Worthing and Shoreham, a fabulous stretch of the stunning Sussex coast where

the sea meets the shore at our beautiful collection of towns and villages, which then give way to the breathtaking south downs.

Too often, coastal towns have been treated as afterthoughts. Once vibrant hubs of industry, culture and trade, too many now struggle to cope with rising inequalities, economic stagnation, climate change and a housing crisis that is forcing families out of their neighbourhoods. However, there is hope on the horizon and the tide is coming back in. The new Labour Government are committed to steadying the ship, pulling our coastal communities out of the sewage-blighted murky waters, and setting sail towards a brighter future.

The housing crisis in our coastal areas cannot wait. The skyrocketing cost of housing has made it nearly impossible for many of our young people and working families to find affordable homes. House prices in my constituency have risen by 20% in the past five years, but wages have not kept pace. The median house price is £380,000—almost £100,000 higher than the national average—but our median weekly wage is lower than others across the country. The new homes that the Government will build cannot come soon enough to ensure that local families are not priced out of their communities, and people's children and grandchildren do not have to move away to get on in life. Indeed, that was a huge factor in last year's election campaign. I met a couple in their 80s who were voting Labour for the first time ever because their working adult children were still unable to afford a home of their own. They were not just first-time Labour voters; this lovely couple met 60 years ago at the local Conservative dance party. The Labour Government are not only making it easier for people to own a home of their own; we are also, through our Renters (Reform) Bill, supporting the 17% of households in my constituency in the private rented sector by ending no-fault evictions, banning rent bidding wars and driving up standards. I am glad to be part of the work of Labour Members to bring an end to the exploitation of residents in coastal communities like mine by poor managing agents, who take them for a ride with excessive charges and poor service.

We are addressing the issue of climate change. We are committed to building a climate-resilient future by investing £2.65 billion in flood defences. I will make the case for East Worthing and Shoreham getting its fair share of that funding, given our experience of flooding, including in Shoreham, last April. We are also acting on the causes of climate change through our aim to achieve 95% clean power by 2030. I am proud to support an extension of the Rampion wind farm in the sea just beyond our shoreline, which will produce enough electricity to power the whole of Sussex if completed.

We need investment in our coastal communities, not just for the residents living in them but to revive our tourist economy and give us the opportunity to show off the delights of our splendid seaside towns. Time is short and I cannot talk about too many of them, but they include Worthing pier, which suffered a closure last year, and Worthing lido, which I hope we can restore.

The time for change is now. Our coastal communities have given so much to the country over the years, and it is time that we gave back. I hope that will come in the form of a coastal communities strategy, so that the Government can deliver real change for our neighbours.

4.4 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing the debate, and for his excellent speech. My constituency of Aberdeenshire North and Moray East is a coastal community. It boasts beautiful views of nature, bustling ports and delicious local produce. Peterhead is the largest fishing port in Europe, with a huge daily fish market. Fraserburgh is a fantastic port town and my home. Fraserburgh harbour has developed a £300 million master plan, which, if brought to reality, could deliver more than 1,000 new jobs. Portsoy has a remarkable harbour with unique local products. Each July, Portsoy hosts the Scottish traditional boat festival, which celebrates the craft behind boats with tremendous events and music. There are many more coastal communities, such as Buckie, which has a large marine industry.

Golfing is a popular leisure pursuit in the constituency, with many world-class golf courses found right across it; Cruden Bay and Fraserburgh are only two among many. Across Scotland, there are more than 2,000 active Scottish fishing vessels, and three quarters of them fish primarily in inshore waters. The inshore fleet is diverse and includes trawlers, creelers, netters, dredgers and divers. In 2019, there were an estimated 14,092 people directly employed in the seafood sector, many in remote coastal and island communities.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Fishing is far more than an industry; it is part of our identity in coastal communities. Does the hon. Member agree that a sustainable inshore fishing industry is vital to our economic growth?

Seamus Logan: I completely agree.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): For the industry to be sustainable, it must have access to labour. The inshore fleet in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, like the one in mine, will doubtless be crying out for labour to come in from foreign countries. It is not able to because of the way the visa rules are structured.

Seamus Logan: I believe the Prime Minister himself agreed with me on the issue of labour shortages very recently.

Some 95% of commercial fishing jobs are located in areas of Scotland that, together, are home to less than a third of the total population.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that we desperately need a proper, fully thought out fishing strategy to support this vital industry in our local communities?

Seamus Logan: That is a reasonable point, but some of these matters are devolved, so it might be difficult to have a UK-wide strategy.

In 2021, Scottish exports of fish and seafood were valued at £1 billion, accounting for 60% of total Scottish food exports and 63% of total UK fish and seafood exports. Scotland's seas around our shores make up over 60% of the UK's total waters. However, fisheries need confidence to operate. Aberdeenshire council's

[Seamus Logan]

recent decision to cut the night-watch service at Macduff harbour is ill thought out and economically illiterate. This is despite an economic development plan for the harbour that was accepted by the council's harbours sub-committee only last December, in which it highlighted that the harbour supports around 280 jobs and injects £11.2 million into the local economy.

There are many things I could complain about—depopulation, unemployment, poor access to healthcare or transport infrastructure, which the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) mentioned—but let us look hopefully to the future. The continued growth of Scotland's renewable energy sector will be an essential feature of our future clean energy system and a potential key driver of economic growth for many of these communities, not least in my constituency. I want to reassure the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) about pylons. None of the cables that are coming ashore in my constituency will see any pylon development within at least 10 to 15 miles of the shoreline, which is very reassuring.

An abundance of renewable energy resources creates opportunities to meet domestic needs, to exploit new technologies in carbon capture, wave power and hydrogen production and to export low-carbon energy to others in these islands and to Europe. These developments bring great hope to many struggling coastal communities in Scotland, not least my own.

4.9 pm

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing this debate, which is timely and overdue. I am glad to hear from Members who live in coastal communities all round this great country about the places they represent, many of which—this is where I am grateful to my parents—I visited on caravan trips around the country when I was younger. The tourism industry in this country will be pleased about this debate, but I am also grateful to hear about the challenges and inequalities that many of our communities face.

The report by Professor Chris Whitty was important for me when I was working at the NHS; it fleshed out some of the unique challenges that many coastal communities share, including inequalities in access to healthcare, and in health and employment outcomes, as well as transport difficulties—the list goes on. The coasts of this country are not only the interface between land and sea, but the interface between many of the greatest challenges that we face as a country. I am pretty certain that every Member in this debate will be able to give examples from their constituency of high levels of inequality, of social deprivation, or of challenge, often against a backdrop of beautiful, stunning landscapes, access to nature, and places where people want to live, and where many—not just those on holiday in a caravan—want to visit on a daytrip, or retire to.

It seems a terrible shame that somehow we have got ourselves locked into a system in which places that should be among the most desirable in the country face some of the biggest and most entrenched challenges. Some of those challenges are intrinsic to being by the water. For example, damage to buildings and the maintenance cost of housing and infrastructure is higher

at the coast, yet that is not accommodated for in a lot of our public spending decisions, when we think about our infrastructure and how we support people in maintaining their houses. If anyone goes to Sheerness in my constituency and looks around, they will see that much of the social housing in that coastal town is damaged and degraded, largely because of the impact of the sea. It also faces the financial challenges that the rest of the country faces.

Sittingbourne and Sheppey has some unique features. It is a rural community, but there are two industrial towns in my constituency. There is a coastal community with nature reserves and wildlife, but there is also big industry, big power stations, and massive paper mills. There are real opportunities that I think we can capture and build on. The reason I have twin towns in my constituency is because of the sea and access to water, yet we are not taking advantage of that in transport terms. I very much endorse the call for a Minister for coastal communities, but the one thing I would really like the Government to commit to is developing a cross-cutting coastal strategy that addresses all those needs.

4.12 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna). I do not need to repeat everything he said, because it all applies in spades to my constituency, which is very much a coastal constituency, which includes not just Harwich, but Manningtree, Mistley, Brightlingsea, and West Mersea. Those are all places of varying economic prosperity, but I wish particularly to talk about Harwich because it is so typical of what has happened to very prosperous Victorian port towns, where glorious terraces of grand houses would be worth millions if they were near London, but instead they are bedsit territory for some of the most unfortunate in our society who find themselves getting off the train and looking for somewhere to stay.

Having said that, as the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) said in his opening remarks—I thank him for securing this important debate, although obviously we have much too short a time—these places are full of potential. Harwich is a unique historic town. It is where the Mayflower sailed from in 1620. The captain of the Mayflower lived in Harwich, and his house is now a museum. When we say to the Americans, “Do you realise that you originally came from Harwich?” their eyes are opened. They think it is all about Plymouth, but they are not right. When we tell them what they could come and see, and that instead of some fake Victorian steps, they could come and see the real house of the captain of the Mayflower, they are amazed. It was an important Napoleonic port, it grew from a wonderful medieval naval base to being a very important naval base during the first and second world wars, and the entire German submarine fleet was gathered in the estuary.

Harwich is full of potential. We have the freeport, the offshore wind industry and wonderful manufacturing businesses, providing stable employment to their workforces. The place is full of potential, but I worry that without being championed by our own Tendring district council, which has done a marvellous job but is being lined up for abolition, we will not get the same support. When he winds

up, will the Minister assure us that coastal communities will get the same support, under the new local government set-up, that they have always enjoyed from their district councils? I have my doubts, I am afraid, so I would be most grateful if he can address that.

4.15 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): In many ways, my constituency of Southport is a typical coastal community and, like many coastal towns, it has seen better days. It is coping with challenges that do not necessarily impact inland areas to the same extent. Part of that negative change is due to the nature of the town's economy, but a big part of it is due to its geography: it is a seaside town.

What made many of our seaside towns successful originally—the sense that they were a trip away from the big city and that people could travel for miles through the countryside to get to them—now militate against us. While it once might have been appealing for families from Manchester to take a packed lunch to the seaside and enjoy the scenic train route through Lancashire, it is no good for our commuters to still be stuck on that scenic route, trundling across the north-west to get to work and back every day. What was once our strength has now become our weakness.

Austerity has hit us hard too. The former Government removed in excess of £200 million a year from the local area. The multiplier effect of that has had an impact on private businesses in the town because when so many customers see that their wages are not keeping up with prices, then small businesses fail. We have seen a lot of that in Southport in the past decade.

Austerity manifests itself in different ways in different areas, and in my town austerity has manifested itself most prominently in the closure of the town's seaside pier. A botched repair job 25 years ago means that there are now structural problems estimated to cost over £10 million to fix. The pier is in local authority ownership, and thanks to the previous Government, the local authority has not got the money to bring about the necessary repairs. I have been campaigning on innovative ways to ensure that piers across the country are safeguarded for the next generation.

This Labour Government have more coastal MPs than at any point in our country's history, as is evidenced by the overwhelmingly empty Conservative Benches. The common issues faced by coastal towns are felt keenly by my colleagues on the Labour Benches. With that in mind, I am pleased that the Government are willing to commit to support our coastal communities and I too put on record my wish to see the creation of a specific Minister for coastal communities. The issues our areas share are so specific to the coast, common to each other and important to our residents that Government will gain greatly from a dedicated Minister ensuring that the views of our towns and areas are heard in this place.

I am sure that if government steps up and meets some of the challenges that our towns face, the decade of national renewal that we know the country needs could be implemented.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. With an immediate two-minute time limit, I call Siân Berry.

4.18 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I am pleased to speak in the debate and I thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing it.

In 2019, a House of Lords report on the future of coastal communities called Brighton

“probably the UK's most successful seaside community,”

and we are. I am very pleased that the city council has recently set up a new seafront development board, and I have already had a positive meeting with its chair to discuss how we continue to make our seafront better, to support and grow our city's wonderful reputation for heritage, music, the arts, shopping, amusement, community action, diversity, nature and wellbeing.

As others have said, there are currently no Government funding schemes specifically for coastal areas, and there is no ministerial focus; I echo the comments of everybody in this House on that. We need focus on the specific challenges that our coastal communities face, because austerity and Brexit have bitten Brighton's communities too. Our people have big problems with housing costs, holiday lets, employment, health, transport and health inequality, which all need dealing with.

Seamus Logan: Does the hon. Member agree that Brexit has done immense harm to places such as Brighton and other coastal communities?

Siân Berry: I could not agree more. The amount of different sectors of the economy in Brighton and Hove that have remarked to me on the impact of Brexit is huge, not least the cultural industries.

I will echo others and talk a little about the regularly appalling state of our sea water, which is a genuine threat to our success. Southern Water has been taken to court and found guilty of criminal behaviour and lying, yet we still have sewage overflows off the south coast on a regular basis. I have met sea-swimming groups and individual constituents who have been very sick after swimming in the waters around Brighton, and the only way to get that properly under control is public ownership. My Green colleagues and I will continue to push for that in this Parliament.

I will very quickly shout out Lucy Davies, the brilliant and enthusiastic new director of Brighton Dome. When I met her recently, she told me about the excellent collaboration happening between cultural institutions along the Sussex coast. The coastal catalyst programme will support creativity and culture for young people from Bognor Regis to Bexhill, and it is exactly the kind of co-operative work that needs to happen.

There is no single solution to the challenges that impact on our coastal communities, but we need ambition, vision, a dedicated Minister and a proper package of strategic initiatives and funding. As MPs we can help by working together and with local leaders to build on the ideas, build up new initiatives that we all agree our communities need because of their very special natures, and put on the pressure for that to happen.

4.21 pm

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): For too long, coastal communities such as Blackpool have been left behind. Despite our stunning coastline, proud heritage and incredibly resilient people, Westminster has neglected us for far too long. Now, with a new Labour Government

[Chris Webb]

in place, we have the opportunity to turn the tide to ensure that Blackpool and other coastal communities finally get the support they deserve.

Nearly one in two children in Blackpool live in poverty. I recently submitted a report to the child poverty taskforce based on the experiences of parents and those working with children in Blackpool. Almost 90% of those surveyed said that financial strain was damaging children's enjoyment of childhood. That is unacceptable, and we must change it.

Blackpool's economy has long relied on tourism and associated job roles that historically have been seasonal, insecure and low-paid. Local efforts have done much to create a year-round economy, and the Government must support them. That means targeted investment in the sectors that can provide long-term careers, helping businesses to grow and expanding skills training to prepare our workforce for the future. With the right support, we can unlock Blackpool's full potential.

Patrick Hurley: Does my hon. Friend agree that with the new Government, north-west towns have the best opportunity for a generation to turn the tide on years of Tory decline and ensure that their best days lie ahead?

Chris Webb: I completely agree. I have many happy memories of my hon. Friend's constituency of Southport. My family would go from Blackpool to the Pontins in Southport, but my dad would always go the long way round on the motorway so it felt like we were going further away than we were.

As I was saying, this does not mean turning our backs on tourism and hospitality: it means investing in them. However, the rise in employer national insurance contributions presents a significant challenge to them, and jobs are at risk. If we are serious about growing our economy and supporting working people, we must give this sector the support it desperately needs. A 12.5% VAT reduction for hospitality and tourism would boost turnover, creating nearly 300,000 jobs over the next decade and delivering billions in tax revenue. That is the kind of bold, ambitious action that places such as Blackpool need to thrive.

For too long, places such as Blackpool have been left behind, but with the right plan and with the determination to see it through, we can change that. My constituents demand a voice, so I am also calling for the appointment of a dedicated Minister for coastal communities. The last Labour Government rebuilt our cities; this new Labour Government have the opportunity to rebuild our forgotten coastal towns. We must deliver a cross-Government strategy dedicated to improving the health, wellbeing and prosperity of coastal communities. The chief medical officer has rightly said that

“strong, targeted, long-term action”

can lift our coastal towns and create a fairer, healthier and more prosperous future for all. My constituents deserve nothing less.

4.24 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing this important debate. We desperately need a Minister for coastal communities, as has been highlighted in some outstanding speeches this afternoon. The fact

that my constituency of Torbay is the premier resort for the United Kingdom is of great pleasure to me—we have six blue flag beaches across the bay. However, once upon a time at the turn of the 20th century, Torquay was the wealthiest town in the country. Sadly, Torbay is now one of its most deprived communities, and is the most deprived community in the west of England.

One wicked issue that faces us is pollution in our seas. While we have those lovely blue flag beaches, from time to time—particularly with climate change and the propensity towards heavier water use in the summer—our sewage system gets overwhelmed. It is a great sadness that locals have to look on the Surfers Against Sewage app to determine when it is safe to swim in our seas. We also face wicked issues and challenges in our NHS, including our crumbling hospital.

Steff Aquarone: Does my hon. Friend agree that hospitals face challenges not just with their state or accessibility but with the affordability of housing for NHS workers?

Steve Darling: My hon. Friend is spot on. Whether we are in North Norfolk, North Devon or Torbay, we face challenges with our NHS, and we also face a lack of affordable housing. We have seen that challenge put on steroids by the pandemic, during which we saw house prices and rents rise, with people fleeing from metropolitan areas to live in coastal communities. Let us ensure, with the appointment of a dedicated coastal communities Minister, that coastal communities are not left on the edge, geographically or economically.

4.27 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the coastal parliamentary Labour party and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for coastal communities, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume). We are in danger of violently agreeing with each other, so I will not repeat much of what has been said—needless to say, much of it also applies to East Thanet.

What I will cover, however, is the potential that coastal communities have to drive economic growth across the country through our people, our heritage and our environment. Take the Government's mission to build 1.5 million homes; East Kent Colleges Group is working with house builders and construction companies such as WW Martin, offering apprenticeships to develop the next generation of workers. There is a demand for non-graduate jobs in our community, and if we tap into that potential, there is no reason why it could not be workers from coastal communities who build those 1.5 million homes across the country and refurbish our shoddy, draughty and damp housing stock.

It is important that we build on people's identity and heritage to develop resilient coastal communities. In East Thanet, we have tapped into our artistic heritage of Charles Dickens and J.M.W. Turner—the Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate is a monument to what can happen when energy and resources are focused on regenerating coastal towns. Of course, our natural environment is not just a nice-to-have; it is an integral economic asset. However, we cannot talk about increasing opportunity without first providing people with security. How can people look to the horizon when they are having to watch where they step? This is a mission-driven Government with five missions to transform the country.

Patrick Hurley: Does my hon. Friend agree that a strong enabling state, bringing forward those five missions and investing in a progressive industrial strategy, can help our coastal towns thrive in the next decade?

Ms Billington: Indeed, we need a place-based approach with that active state. If we want economic growth that reaches all parts of the country, invest in coastal communities. If we want public services that really improve the experience of people who are most alienated because of state failures, invest in coastal communities. If we want to create an environment that works for nature and people, invest in coastal communities. I am speaking not just about financial investment, but about investment of Government time, energy and focus.

When colleagues and I were trying to work out which Department would be answering this debate, we literally did not know. While I am obviously delighted to see the Minister in his place, the issues raised in this House today span all Departments, whether that is Health, Transport, Environment, Education, the Home Office, the Treasury or many others. I simply note that if there is not one Minister who fits the portfolio, there should be one—a Minister for coastal communities who can focus on regenerating our towns and growing our coastal economies.

I will end with a point about the previous Labour Government. In the 1990s, cities were not the places they are today. That Labour Government had a relentless focus on improving them, and the regeneration we have seen is testament to what can be delivered. Coastal towns are in the same position now, and the Labour Government have not only—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Members will be aware that I will call the first Front Bencher at 4.38 pm. That means that not all Members will now get in. They might consider that when making interventions.

4.31 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing this debate. It is an honour to be here today among MPs representing coastal communities. I represent Southend East and Rochford. I was born on Green Street in east London, and growing up I spent a lot of time going to Southend for days out, as a lot of east-enders did at the time—they still do, in fact. However, tourism has changed, consumer habits have altered and industries and coastal communities are typically centred around agriculture, social care, retail and hospitality, which are all usually low-paying sectors.

According to the independent commission on neighbourhoods, Southend East and Rochford contains 17 neighbourhoods identified with the highest need. High deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure has had a knock-on effect on life expectancy, education outcomes and job opportunities. Where someone lives should not negatively impact their future.

My constituency is a centre for creative arts and heritage buildings, such as the Freight House, the Kursaal, the Cliffs Pavilion, Southchurch Hall and more. Residents have a passion and a determination to create a sustainable future for Southend East and Rochford, as do I, but we need a coastal communities strategy that differentiates coastal communities from our inland and rural partners and seeks to address the unique challenges we face. For

long-term change, we must diversify industry in coastal communities, so that hospitality, heritage and tourism can thrive alongside finance, tech and industry.

4.33 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Our coastal communities are likely to have higher deprivation living alongside great wealth. They are often creative hubs. Cornwall attracts many artists and musicians, and Falmouth has the world-class Falmouth University, which grew out of a 100-year-old art school. People come from all across the country and the world to visit our beaches and coastline. However, I am worried about the shore management plan, and managed alignment poses a risk to our beach cafés, car parks and economy in Cornwall.

The port of Falmouth is still very significant: we maintain and repair ships, including military ships, we host cruise ships with new green energy onshore plug-ins, and we have plans to regenerate the port to service floating offshore wind and to reinstate the freight railway. However, wages are lower than the national average, many jobs are seasonal and insecure, and hospitality businesses struggle with low margins. The permanently lower business rates that will be introduced in April next year after the business rates discount expires will help a great deal, as long as the rate is permanently lower than the current rate, rather than the full rate from pre-covid. Skills shortages are significant, particularly in hospitality, but also in other skilled professions, and house prices are 13 times wages.

There are 24,500 properties for short-term let in Cornwall, up 30% on 2019, while 27,000 households are on the social housing waiting list. Second homes account for nearly 5% of our housing stock. I welcome the Renters' Rights Bill, but we also need a toolbox of measures to tackle second homes and short-term lets, including a registration or licensing scheme. Good holiday companies are actually calling for safety inspection measures, and for the closure of the business rates council tax loophole.

In addition, Cornwall has faced underfunding in health, social care and education for years. I, too, support the call for a broader Government strategy on coastal communities, because every policy affects us in potentially different ways from in urban areas.

4.35 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Today I want to talk about the wonderful, world-renowned cockling industry in Southend West and Leigh. Forgive me if this sounds a bit niche, but I am sure the House will agree that industries such as cockling are important to all of us in coastal communities—to preserve our heritage and cultural identity, boost tourism, and increase prosperity and employment.

Leigh-on-Sea has been synonymous with cockling for—wait for it—1,000 years. The industry is a vital part of Leigh-on-Sea's heritage, with the old town's cockle sheds serving as a reminder of its maritime past and a huge boost to our tourism sector. The North Thames cockle fishery, which is one of the oldest in Europe, has implemented measures such as seasonal operations and total allowable catch levels to ensure the sustainability of cockle stocks, and it was given a Maritime Stewardship Council's sustainability award in 2019. It is a perfect example of sustainable fishing.

[David Burton-Sampson]

However, there are issues that need to be addressed, as I heard from our fifth-generation firm of cocklers, Osborne's fishmongers. I was told that people in this country do not eat much shellfish, especially the younger generation. This is not a trade that we want to die out, and I support initiatives such as Seafood in Schools and Fish Heroes. The cockling industry in Leigh-on-Sea brings significant economic benefits to the local community, but it faces several challenges. Its representatives have told me that increased pressure to operate more efficiently and sustainably requires long-term investment. After the new cockling licences were finally passed by Parliament following delays in the previous Parliament, Osborne's and others would like to see their individual licences granted.

Preserving local industries, such as cockling in Leigh-on-Sea, is vital for coastal communities. We must continue to support them.

4.37 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): My constituency of Scarborough and Whitby includes some of the most beautiful towns and villages in the country, but it also has some of the worst health outcomes. We have talked a lot about older people in this debate, and I will use my time to talk about younger people.

I am excited by the opportunities that the advent of renewable energy offers young people in my constituency. Scarborough university technical college is already training the engineers of the future, who will work on the wind farms off our coast. The Construction Skills Village in Eastfield is training apprentices in bricklaying, plastering and other trades to help build Labour's 1.5 million new homes. However, we must deliver year-round, non-graduate careers for our coastal kids and ensure that funding is funnelled not into cities and universities, but into coastal communities. Only by doing this will we deliver on our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Lady for being so brief. That brings us to the Front Benchers.

4.38 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing the debate—although, on a beautiful day like this, I am sure I am not the only one pining for the beach.

Great Britain is an island nation with a proud maritime history. Coastal communities are central to our cultural identity, our national heritage and, of course, our economy, yet time and again they have been overlooked by Governments in London. From under-investment in infrastructure and transport to the devastating impact of water pollution and the broken business rates system, coastal communities face unique challenges that require targeted solutions. It is time for proper investment, fairer funding and a real plan for the future.

My constituency of West Dorset is home to the famous Jurassic coast—a UNESCO world heritage site—and as in many coastal communities, tourism is an essential industry for the area, but it also places increased strains on local infrastructure, public services and emergency

response teams. Although Dorset experiences a 42% increase in population during peak seasons, such rural and coastal areas remain chronically underfunded. The current funding formula fails to account for rurality, and for the seasonal population fluctuations that we experience. Rural local authorities face higher service delivery costs, yet the Government's decision to repurpose the £100 million rural services delivery grant on a new need and demand basis has removed a crucial lifeline for councils trying to provide transport, emergency services and social care in remote areas. That is simply unacceptable.

One of the greatest threats to coastal economies and to public health is the ongoing sewage crisis, and the figures are staggering. In 2022 alone, over 320,000 sewage spills were recorded across England. As a result, England is ranked among the lowest for water quality in Europe. Meanwhile, water companies paid out £1.4 billion in dividends in 2022 alone, and £51 million in executive remuneration between 2020 and 2021, all while failing to invest in critical infrastructure to prevent these spills. It is nothing short of a national scandal. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the creation of a clean water authority to replace Ofwat, as well as stronger regulation, increased funding for water regulators to hold polluters accountable, and a dedicated Minister for coastal communities to oversee regulations on sewage spills and coastal protections.

I must raise the issue of business rates. Small businesses are vital to coastal economies, yet the broken business rates system is holding them back. The Government's plans to slash relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from 75% to just 40% will be a devastating blow for many small coastal businesses that are still struggling to recover from the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. That is important, because tourism numbers are still down a third on pre-2019 levels. The UK tourism sector directly employs over 3 million people, but it has experienced heightened job insecurity and reduced hiring rates since that time. Our tourism sector needs targeted support, not short-sighted tax hikes.

As Members have outlined, coastal communities are also facing a housing crisis. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for a 500% council tax surcharge on second homes in housing-shortage areas, new planning restrictions on second homes and short-term holiday lets to prioritise local housing needs, and a requirement for all holiday let owners to pay council tax, ending the loopholes that let them avoid paying anything at all. These measures will help protect the character of our coastal towns and ensure they remain thriving communities, not just seasonal destinations.

Post-Brexit fishing and farming policies have left many coastal communities struggling. The last Government's botched Brexit deal threw the UK fishing industry into turmoil, and as we approach the end of the transition period in 2026, uncertainty is growing. Too many fish are exported abroad for processing before being reimported, leading to higher costs, increased emissions and lost job opportunities. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a renegotiation of trade agreements to protect British farmers and fishermen, greater investment in local fish processing facilities to create job opportunities and boost local economies, and a £1 billion boost for the environmental land management scheme to support sustainable and nature-friendly farming.

Healthcare remains a postcode lottery in rural and coastal communities. In West Dorset, only 14 NHS dental practices serve a population of 101,000, leaving many without access to care. People living in coastal communities across the country face stark health inequalities compared with those in other areas. Reports, such as the one by Sir Chris Whitty, consistently show that rural communities experience poorer health outcomes driven by deprivation, limited access to healthcare and persistent workforce shortages. These challenges are not inevitable; they are the result of neglect. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a strategic small surgeries fund to sustain struggling rural GP services, and a dental rescue package to fix the broken NHS dental contract and guarantee urgent dental care for all.

Ms Billington: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Morello: I am afraid I will not, because I am very keen for my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk to have time to wind up.

Digital exclusion remains a pressing issue. Many coastal businesses and residents lack reliable broadband and mobile connectivity, impacting everything from emergency response times to economic opportunities. The Government must commit to full-fibre broadband and reliable mobile coverage for all coastal and rural communities.

Coastal communities have long been overlooked. As the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) and others have eloquently outlined, it is time for a dedicated Minister for coastal communities to ensure that our voices are heard in every Government decision. We deserve clean waters, thriving businesses, secure jobs and infrastructure that meets our needs. It is time for bold action, not just warm words, if we are to secure the future of our coastal communities for generations to come.

4.44 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to wind up, on behalf of the official Opposition, this debate on the importance of our coastal communities, of which my own constituency is a proud one. Those communities are rich in history, industry and natural beauty, but they face significant challenges. They are home to thriving tourism, fisheries and local businesses, but they continue to struggle with economic inequality, housing pressures and environmental concerns. It is our duty to ensure that coastal communities receive the attention they deserve. In that spirit, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing the debate. His opening speech showed clearly that he is committed to his constituency and cares deeply for the people he represents.

Many hon. Members touched on the unique and impressive heritage of their respective coastal communities, from their evolution as trade hubs, shipbuilding harbours, bases for fishing fleets and tourist destinations, to the modern and diverse settlements of today. I hope hon. Members and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will permit me a minor indulgence as I add my homage to my coastal constituency.

Straddling the Hamble river, from which my constituency gets its name, the communities that line this strip of the Hampshire coastline are as venerable as they are beautiful, snaking down from charming Curbridge, past beautiful

Bursledon and stunning Swanwick, all the way down to Hill Head into the Solent past scenic marinas and yacht clubs and many wonderful pubs, which, as the weather warms up and the sun comes out, I will be pleased—as I am sure all Members across the House will be—to visit more and more often. It is a hard life being the MP for Hamble Valley, but someone has to live it.

However, it is not all blue skies and calm waters all the time. As Members have said, there are challenges facing coastal communities, and we cannot ignore their impacts. As in my constituency, coastal towns and villages struggle with restricted accessibility from poor transport links and increasing environmental risks, higher than average unemployment compounded by seasonal job instability, disparities in housing income, lower educational attainment and the upward mobility of skilled workers causing a brain drain that further exacerbates all those issues.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that there is currently no national strategy for coastal areas. Coastal towns are usually low-population areas and are often conflated with rural areas, which obscures their unique challenges. As we have touched on, coastal communities are already grappling with economic inequality, yet this Government continue to burden them further. Average annual pay in coastal towns is £4,700 lower than in the rest of Great Britain, and their national growth rates are much lower despite the historical industrial and commercial strengths they exhibited in the past. Now they face tax increases, declining support for high streets and rising employment costs, which threaten to undo years of progress in just a matter of months.

Instead of fostering economic growth, we are seeing policies that stifle local businesses and weaken our high streets. For example, with the Government's hike in employer national insurance contributions to 15%, we can see the fallout that poor economic choices deliver. Businesses I have spoken to, including pubs and restaurants in my constituency which rely on seasonal tourism and are already struggling with high costs, are now having to make difficult decisions about laying off staff, not taking on more staff, and, in extreme circumstances, closing venues. That is the exact opposite of what our local businesses need. The Government say that their first priority is delivering growth, yet the policies they have chosen to implement will bring about yet more economic uncertainty, financial worry and labour market instability in coastal communities.

With the Government's recent housing algorithm changes, we are also seeing dramatic increases in housing targets in coastal communities. In coastal communities near Hamble Valley, such as New Forest, Fareham and Gosport, we are seeing targets rise by up to 105%. Cornwall, Dorset, Somerset and North Yorkshire are all being tasked with delivering thousands of new homes, yet infrastructure and public services are not keeping pace.

Many of our coastal communities depend on a strong and sustainable fishing industry. The previous Government worked hard to strip EU-imposed quotas that constrained our fishing fleets. However, this Government's continued pursuit of closer alignment with the EU raises serious concerns about access to UK waters post-2026.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Holmes: I do not have time, I am afraid.

The previous Government made significant investment in our coastal communities. Through the coastal communities fund, £229 million was invested across 369 projects, creating over 7,000 jobs and bringing more than 3 million visitors to our coastal area. Furthermore, the future high streets fund, town deals, the levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund provided much-needed support to local economies. These initiatives renewed town centres, safeguarded businesses and created thousands of training opportunities, but we see no commitment to continuing them today. The Government have already announced that there will be no new funding for the towns fund, which I think is a betrayal of the commitments made to our coastal communities.

Coastal communities are an integral part of our national identity, and yet they continue to be overlooked by this Government. Instead of supporting local businesses, they raise taxes; instead of investing in our high streets, they cut funding; instead of protecting our fishing industry, they seek closer ties with the EU that threaten our independence. It is time for this Government to change course. We must ensure fair housing policies, sustained economic investment, a strong and independent fishing industry and robust flood defences. Our coastal communities deserve better, and I urge this House to take action to protect their future.

4.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing this debate and for the way he led it. He said that it was his first opening speech—it was an excellent one. I admire both the poise and the clarity with which he spoke in his first Backbench Business debate. There are clearly more excellent debates to come, but he will struggle, I think, to top today's topic. The official record of this debate will read like a love letter to our nation's coastal communities—one in which we can all see ourselves and our treasured memories, whether we represent a coastal community or, for Members like myself who do not, spent our childhoods at Southport, Blackpool, Skegness or elsewhere around the country.

The hon. Gentleman set out very clearly the opportunities for our coastal communities—be they tourism, energy or natural beauty—but also the profound challenges, which were echoed in the contributions of a number of colleagues, such as slower economic growth, higher levels of deprivation and real challenges in healthcare. He said that he felt the system does not work. I share a lot of that, and I have some suggestions for how the system might change. The hon. Gentleman was also very clear that he would rather that a dedicated Minister respond to the debate, rather than me—I will try not to take it personally, and will address that directly in a moment.

First, I want to cover a number of contributions from colleagues. My hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland) and for East Thanet (Ms Billington) and the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) spoke about the integral challenge with housing in coastal communities, with too little building for too long. This Government are going to change that, with a million and a half homes in this Parliament. I say to colleagues, and to anybody listening who is passionate about their coastal community, that the way

to ensure that is done in the right way—a way that respects local heritage, local demand and areas of natural beauty—is to be involved in the local planning process. That is how to set the blueprint for excellent development in our communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) said, that will bring jobs as well, with opportunity for all-year-round jobs, great careers and skills.

Of course, that conversation on housing includes an important point that was raised by a number of my colleagues, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), which is the matter of second homes and short-term lets. She and I have spoken about that a lot over the years, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon). This Government are introducing a short-term let registration scheme to protect the spirit of our communities, notwithstanding the importance of short-term lets to the economy. We are abolishing the furnished holiday lettings tax regime to remove the tax incentive that short-term let owners have over long-term landlords. From this April, councils can opt to charge a council tax premium of up to 100% on second homes. However, we recognise that more will need to be done, and we are very keen to have that conversation with colleagues. We are considering what additional powers we could give local authorities to enable them to respond to the pressures created by short-term lets and holiday homes.

A number of colleagues, including—perhaps unsurprisingly—my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna), made important points about healthcare. I would trumpet the Government's 10-year health plan to reform the NHS, which coastal communities in particular will benefit from. The Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), is sitting on the Bench next to me. With the three big shifts—the move from hospital to community, from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention—there is a lot in that plan for coastal communities. Again, I encourage colleagues to lean into that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) draws me on cockles. Osborne's sounds like it is the real backbone of his community, but, clearly, it is facing some real hurdles. If it is of any value to him, I would be very keen to meet the firm's representatives and have the chance to have that conversation in full.

My hon. Friends the Members for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) and for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) touched on partnerships with central Government, local government and local communities. I can point to significant money coming from this Government: £90 million for housing redevelopment in Blackpool, and £40 million for the further education college and the new civil service hub. We believe that Blackpool's best days are ahead of it, and I am very keen to work with my hon. Friends in that regard.

The hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) talked about the strong opportunities for development in the private sector. I would add to that the £4.4 billion for the naval base at Devonport. We also have the excellent tool of the freeport that we can work on together to draw in investment, which I and my colleagues are very keen to do.

The subject of freeports takes me to the Essex coast and to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). He wanted to hear from this Dispatch Box a commitment to his community, and I can give him that commitment. Our renewed commitment to freeports, which we inherited from the previous Government, shows that we believe in the potential of his community. There are changes to local government coming, and the possibilities of devolution are outstanding, but I know—I will speak to this point later when I address the matter of a dedicated Minister—that his community has the skills, the knowledge and the experience to shape the area for the better and build it for the days ahead. Our commitment is to give it the power and the tools to do so, and I am very happy to recommit to that today.

Ms Billington: Will my hon. Friend confirm that this Government understand that there is a clear distinction between the challenges in rural communities and those in coastal ones? I noticed that the Liberal Democrat spokesman used the words “coastal” and “rural” almost completely interchangeably, and we know that the levels of deprivation and the challenges in coastal communities are significantly different from those in rural communities. Can he give me that confirmation from the Government?

Alex Norris: That is an important point. Rural communities can be coastal communities and vice versa, but not always, and their challenges manifest very differently. The challenges that come from being a community at the end of the line can be significant and profound, and we absolutely accept that.

I turn to the point that the hon. Member for North Norfolk made about having a dedicated Minister. As other colleagues have said, I think he is selling himself short. The reality is that this is not about having a Minister in government pulling the lever for North Norfolk, Hamble Valley or anywhere else to transform its community. This is an inside job. The promise from this Government is to shift power and resource from this place to those communities, so that they can change things for themselves. We have made a down payment with our plan for neighbourhoods, which covers Peterhead, for example. I hear some of the frustrations, but giving communities power and resources is a way to rebalance things, and it will enable them to change things for themselves. Of the 75 areas in the plan for neighbourhoods, 25 are coastal, which will mean a £500 million commitment. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) talked about the independent commission on neighbourhoods, and much of its work is reflected in what we have done.

I say gently to the Opposition spokesperson that we want to move away from the broken begging bowl culture of levelling-up funds, where communities were pitted against each other, to more long-term sustained funding based on the needs of a community. The money is one thing, but, for me, the power is the real thing, and it underpins our plan for change. I am talking about the shift of power from this place to our local communities that we are seeing through devolution. We already have five elected mayors representing coastal areas, with two more still to come in May—Hull and East Yorkshire and Greater Lincolnshire. That gives those communities powers over housing, planning, transport, energy, skills, employment support and more, so that they can shape their areas.

Six more areas are coming down the line, including five coastal communities in the devolution priority programme. That is a shift of money and power from this place to coastal communities to take on the challenges that they have had in the past and, in partnership with central Government, to build very exciting futures—be they in tourism, in climate or in housing. That is what this Government offer. That is what the future offers, and that is something to be really excited about.

4.58 pm

Steff Aquarone: I am immensely grateful to Members from across the House for their contributions and for echoing my call. I want to mention a couple of points that I thought were exceptionally noteworthy. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) and the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) spoke about the pride and opportunities in their areas, not just the challenges. The hon. Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) spoke about the challenge of being asset custodians of piers and other such things. I was delighted to hear the hon. Members for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and for East Thanet (Ms Billington) talk about the opportunities for skills development and young people.

Time does strange things in coastal communities. I leave hon. Members with a final image that I thought of as I listened to colleagues: the volunteer lifeboat crews off the North Norfolk and how much they do to support and protect all of us in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered coastal communities.

Face-to-face GP Appointments

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

5 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is a pleasure to hold this Adjournment debate on face-to-face appointments with GPs. I ask hon. Members listening and watching to go back to October 2023 and imagine that they have abdominal pain and some blood loss. They seek a GP appointment and they are given a telephone appointment. They are given a diagnosis of endometriosis and prescribed some painkillers. This diagnosis, sadly, turns out to be incorrect.

They then move forward, still in pain, to mid-December 2023. They receive a letter with a gynaecological appointment for the end of January 2024. But they are still in deep pain. The pain intensifies. Their husband rushes them to the urgent treatment centre at Pilgrim hospital, where a doctor sees them and reaffirms the diagnosis of endometriosis. The doctor says, “As you are being looked after by a GP, there’s nothing more I should do.”

Over the next two weeks, the pain intensifies, to the point where at the end of December 2023, they are rushed to A&E. It is just before new year. They are told to come back for tests on 2 January 2024. Those tests reveal some problems and some lesions around the liver. They are put on a two-week cancer pathway with more tests, CT scans, MRI scans and an endoscopy. On 2 February, they are given the results of those tests. Sadly, the cancer has spread to such a degree that nothing more can be done. Just three days later, they pass away.

It is impossible to imagine or to understand this, but it is the tragic story of Laura Barlow, aged just 33, the mother of three young daughters: Summer Skye, Bonnie Rae and Bella-Mia. Her husband Michael Barlow is here in the Gallery with friends. His campaign, after the tragic loss of his wife Laura, is for more face-to-face appointments, and for patients to have the right to one if they feel they need it.

It is worth looking at the context of face-to-face appointments in our healthcare system. Going back some six years to 2019, around 80% of all GP appointments were face to face. According to NHS England, for the last two months, the figure is just over 64%. How do we compare to other nations? In European nations with different healthcare systems, the average is 84% or 85%. We have some 20% fewer face-to-face appointments than some of our international peers.

I am just a layman, not a doctor, but it must be common sense that an experienced, highly skilled, professional GP looking a patient in the eye to physically assess them face to face must give patients the greatest chance of a correct diagnosis. Sometimes, a GP will spot something that the patient was not even aware of.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. GP face-to-face appointments are a massive issue in my constituency, and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are probably inundated with constituents asking about the same thing. People—more often than not, elderly people—phone the emergency number at half-past 8 in the morning and hold on till 5 past 9. After they have held the phone for 35 minutes, a voice says, “By the way, you’re too late.” The system is not working. To be fair to the Minister, I

understand that changes are coming. We need to know what they are, and whether they will improve the system. If they do not do so to the satisfaction of the hon. Gentleman, my constituents and me, something is drastically wrong, and that needs to be addressed immediately.

Richard Tice: The hon. Member makes some excellent points. There is clearly a place for telephone appointments. When researching the topic in more detail, I was astonished to find that of the gap between the 64% or 65% of face-to-face appointments and 100%, telephone appointments represent some 25% and Zoom or Teams appointments are just 5% to 7%. I would have thought it would have been the opposite. Surely it is better if GPs can see the pain that might be etched on a patient’s face.

We can look at the broader context—at what is happening to our population, and to the number of GPs, and at the pressures on GPs—and ask: is that why the percentage of face-to-face appointments has collapsed so significantly? In England, there are 6.5 million more people than in 2015—an increase of some 17%. Interestingly, the number of GP appointments increased in that period by a similar percentage, give or take; it went from just over 300 million appointments to over 360 million appointments. In fairness, and with due credit, there has been a recent increase, month on month, in GP appointments, which is to be commended, but it seems strange that the number of full-time, fully qualified GPs has barely moved in those 10 years. It is true that there are more trainee doctors and trainee GPs in the system, but the number of fully qualified, full-time-equivalent GPs has basically stayed static. That means, of course, that the number of patients that a GP has on their books has increased significantly, from over 1,900 per GP to over 2,300 per GP. We can therefore understand the increase in pressure on them. Given those health needs, they will feel the need to see as many people as possible, so we can see the temptation to hold telephone or Zoom appointments.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does he agree that there is a place for telephone appointments if a GP is giving guidance and support, or making a referral, but that any diagnosis should be made face to face?

Richard Tice: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. This comes back to the basic concept of common sense. It must be easier for a GP to make the correct diagnosis when seeing someone face to face. We all make mistakes, but when our medical professionals on the frontline, whom we all admire, are under pressure and tired, and they make mistakes, that can have devastating, life-changing consequences.

We will never know the difference it may have made if Laura had the correct diagnosis in October 2023, but it must be right to give all patients the best opportunity. I know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who I have interacted with in the Chamber, is absolutely determined to make reforms across the healthcare system. He has started actively, abolishing NHS England, making changes to the Department, and doing much more. That brings me to what else can be done.

We can look at the pressures on GPs. I was astonished to read that almost 50% of all GPs are thinking of retiring in the next five years. Almost 50% of them cite

the increased pressure of bureaucracy, paperwork and administration. Surely we want our trained GPs in front of patients; we do not want their time being absorbed by unnecessary burdens and paperwork. If that is driving our GPs away from the noble profession of curing and helping people, we have to look again. I hope the Health Secretary, the Minister and colleagues will drive a change in processes.

When I was with people in my constituency of Boston and Skegness recently, doing more research, I was astonished by what I found when I spoke to a GP and liaised with her. She gave me some examples of bureaucracy clogging up the system. For example, if a GP refers a patient to a consultant in hospital, and the consultant says, “Yes, the patient needs this, but I also need to refer them to another speciality just down the corridor in the same hospital,” that cannot be done directly. The consultant has to write back to the GP. That letter goes through the post, with a hundred other letters a day. Then the GP has to refer the patient back to a different consultant, with that different speciality, down the corridor in the hospital. That lacks common sense.

It appears that if the consultant wants to prescribe medication to the patient who has been referred, they are unable to do that directly; they have to refer back to the GP, who has to spend more time providing the prescription. That appears to lack common sense. If the consultant wants to request blood tests, on many occasions that will have to be referred back to the GP, by letter or maybe by email, so that the GP can request those tests. All that leads not only to delay for the patient, and to time being consumed, but to more work for the GP, who we all surely want to see more patients face to face.

There are other situations that seem to be clogging up the system. Take our old friend GDPR. It is well-intentioned, but when I went to a pharmacy in Boston a few weeks back, the pharmacist said, “We have the same software system as the GP surgery, right next door to us in the same building, but because we have different modules, and because GDPR does not let the modules talk to each other, it leads to increased delays and a lack of productivity and, for patients, a lower-quality service.” They went on: “We could do so much more. We could relieve the GPs of some of the work they are doing, so that they could see the patient face to face.”

Then, a week later, I was in a care home in Boston, with carers and experts in the room. We were talking through the issues. They said, “There are processes and procedures that we can do that we are not allowed to do, so a GP has to do it; or we have to request an ambulance from the hospital, clogging up ambulance waiting lists or clogging up A&E corridors, when we could do those procedures.” Again, the great concept of common sense cannot be applied. I think we all know that we can do so much better than that.

Then there is the issue of referrals. When a GP makes a referral to a consultant, that referral often gets assessed by a non-clinician as to whether it is correct. I would have thought that we should be able to trust highly trained, highly skilled professional GPs and back their judgment on the frontline. If they think someone needs to be referred to a consultant, surely that does not need double or triple-checking. Again, that delays good patient care and causes more blockages for the GP, more admin and more paperwork.

Then there are our friends at the Care Quality Commission: an important supervisory process and concept. I hear about the processes, the box-ticking, the patient panels—all that is just more admin, more time and more resources consumed outside the core function of face-to-face treatment and care for patients. It therefore seems that this is not a party political issue, but one of driving continuous improvement in our healthcare system, and of the Department, as it moves forward with the reforms we all want to see, saying, “Actually, let’s look at all the processes. How do we reduce the blockages? How do we remove any unnecessary paperwork and burdens? How do we improve the technology?”

Indeed, artificial intelligence, which is so recent, is a huge opportunity for healthcare and technology in healthcare, and for GPs to, for example, double-check or triple-check their own diagnoses. These are great opportunities facing us, but most fundamental of all, we must give our GPs every support, every ease of progress and the right technological assistance behind the scenes in the back office, so they can face all of us when we are unwell and need treatment, because that is when they can use their experience, wisdom and knowledge to get to the right diagnosis.

It would be a tribute to Laura—it would be her legacy—for patients to have the right to see a GP face to face. Easing the processes would make life easier for GPs and would make them want to stay in the profession, because they know that face to face they will achieve a great and noble cause and good.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) for raising GP access, which is a vital matter to many of our constituents. I want to start by paying tribute to Laura Barlow’s family, friends and loved ones and to her husband Michael, who is in the Gallery. It is a terrible tragedy that Laura’s cancer was not caught earlier, and I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the significant number of people who signed the petition shows real strength of feeling on this heartbreaking case.

When people are asked what their top priority for the NHS is, the chances are they will say, “Fix general practice” because GPs are the front door to our national health service. They are the first port of call for millions of people, and they perform a vital service by delivering care in communities across our country. Let me be crystal clear from this Dispatch Box: GPs must provide face-to-face appointments, alongside remote consultations. Online services must always be provided in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, in-person consultations. Patients have a right to request a face-to-face appointment, and practices must make every effort to meet their preference unless there are good clinical reasons to the contrary, such as in cases where the patient tests positive for an infectious disease.

There are clear benefits to attending an appointment in person. GPs pick up cues from body language and foster a more personal relationship with their patients, and that is important if we are to bring back the family doctor. Last year, GPs delivered 380 million appointments throughout England. Two thirds of those were in person, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the figures for his integrated care board in Lincolnshire are in line with the

[Stephen Kinnock]

national average at 65%. It is possible that, in some practices, defaulting to remote appointments was a temporary and necessary measure during the pandemic, but in some cases, that may have become a habit that has become difficult to shake. Let us be clear that this is not the fault of GPs per se; it is the fault of the last Government, which left them underfunded, understaffed and in crisis. That is why we are doing everything we can to remedy the downward spiral that GP services have found themselves in after 14 years of Tory neglect and failure.

I was absolutely delighted that the general practitioners committee England voted in favour of this year's GP contract last month. It is the first time that the contract has been accepted in four long years. The reformed contract agreed between the Government and the GPC will improve services for patients, make progress towards our health mission and, crucially, require practices to make it possible for patients to go online to request an appointment throughout the duration of core opening hours. That will free up time for patients who prefer to call or visit in person.

Those changes are backed by an extra £889 million, representing a cash growth of more than 7% in overall contract investment, bringing total spend on the GP contract to £13.2 billion this financial year. That is the largest uplift to GP funding in a generation, and it means we are beginning to reverse a decade of a dwindling share of NHS resources going to general practice.

It is not just about resource and funding, however. We are bulldozing bureaucracy for GPs, so that they spend less time pushing paper and more time seeing patients like Laura. We are training thousands more GPs, modernising the booking system, ending the 8 am scramble and bringing back the family doctor. Those measures should make it possible for GPs to guarantee a face-to-face appointment for all who want one.

The Government are committed to shifting the focus of our NHS from hospital to community. We will move towards a neighbourhood health service, improve continuity

of care for those who would benefit from seeing the same clinician regularly, which is associated with better health outcomes and fewer A&E attendances, and we will drive the shift from analogue to digital by ensuring that all practices are employing the full functionality of GP Connect.

Let me turn to cancer. The Government are determined to tackle the biggest killers. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has announced that a national cancer plan for England will be published later this year. The plan will put patients at its heart and will cover the entirety of the cancer pathway, from referral and diagnosis to treatment and ongoing care. It will seek to improve every aspect of cancer care and the experience and outcomes for people with cancer. Our goal is to reduce the number of lives lost to cancer over the next 10 years. The plan will spell out how we will improve outcomes for cancer patients, speed up diagnosis and treatment and ensure patients have access to the latest treatments and technology. We will bring this country's survival rates back up to the best in the world.

Our NHS belongs to the people. Those are not just my words; they are in the NHS constitution. Fourteen years of Tory failure left our NHS broken but not beaten. Everything this Government have done since the election has been geared towards saving the NHS and giving it back to the people. We are putting power back in patient hands, because it is their health service and it must work for them. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced reforms that will shift power away from the centre. Patient choice is at the heart of this Government's commitment to build an NHS fit for the future, and all patients should be offered face-to-face appointments when it is in their best interests.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 March 2025

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

British Sign Language Week

1.30 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Before we begin, I point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv. There are also British Sign Language interpreters in the room for the benefit of those watching from the Gallery. I appreciate that some Members will wish to use sign language during their contributions; I ask them to keep that limited and brief, so as not to create confusion with the other interpretations available.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered British Sign Language Week.

[In British Sign Language: I beg to move, That this House has considered British Sign Language Week.]

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank those who have supported today's debate: the hon. Members who sponsored my application to the Backbench Business Committee; the members of the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on British Sign Language, who had ideas for how to celebrate Sign Language Week; and the British Deaf Association, which campaigns tirelessly to promote the interests of the deaf community. I am delighted that we have live British Sign Language interpretation today, and I am grateful to the House authorities for supporting it. It means that we are able to have members of the deaf-signing community join us in the Public Gallery. *[In British Sign Language: Welcome to Parliament, and I hope you enjoy the debate.]*

As the theme of this year's Sign Language Week captures well, BSL is more than a language. For the 87,000 first-language signers in the UK, it represents culture, community and belonging. It is symbolic of a unique way of life—one that empowers deaf people to overcome the barriers they face from birth. It provides connection, not only in the deaf-signing community, but to their loved ones. Sign language creates special moments that other families might take for granted. The first time a parent tells their deaf child, "I love you," might be using sign.

My daughter has Down's syndrome and experiences hearing loss, so my husband and I use sign-supported English, which is a form of BSL, as part of our toolkit to communicate at home. To any BSL first-language speakers who are watching, I am going to attempt some BSL throughout this speech, so my apologies. *[In British Sign Language: I am trying.]*

It is with a real sense of personal pride that I open this debate. It is an opportunity to celebrate Sign Language Week and the rich culture it commemorates, while discussing how we as MPs can go further to improve access and the inclusion of the BSL community. The progress

that has been made to date is testament to the determination of deaf campaigners, but British Sign Language is not a new phenomenon; it has existed for hundreds of years. There are printed accounts of a national language of the hand dating back as far as the 17th century, but it was only in 2003 that BSL was officially recognised as a language, and it was not until the British Sign Language Act 2022 that this nominal recognition was translated on to the statute book, with legal recognition of BSL. I pay tribute to the former Member for West Lancashire, Rosie Cooper, for leading that private Member's Bill through Parliament.

The Act was a watershed moment in galvanising public support, and Rosie Cooper's exceptional campaigning has left an enduring legacy. The Act legislated for the promotion and inclusion of BSL in Government, and led to the creation of the BSL advisory board, which has done excellent work to put the experiences and voices of deaf signers at the heart of Government. It placed a duty on Departments to prepare and publish reports on the use of BSL in their communications. From May 2023 to April 2024, BSL activity in Government communications doubled, and the overall number of Government Departments that said they had not produced any BSL communications halved, from 11 to five. However, there is still much further to go. Five Government Departments is still five too many.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): *[In British Sign Language: Will my hon. Friend give way?]*

Jen Craft: I will.

Chris Vince: My hon. Friend is giving a passionate and knowledgeable speech. Does she agree that, in terms of Parliament, this is a question of accessibility? We want people with BSL as their first language to be able to not only access politics but be a part of it as well.

Jen Craft: *[In British Sign Language: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.]* As people will see, we have tried to learn some parliamentary signs ahead of this debate. My hon. Friend is absolutely right—it is a question of accessibility. If someone is a British Sign Language first-language speaker, there are barriers to taking part in this House. There absolutely should not be. This is the House of Commons of the United Kingdom. There are 87,000 BSL first-language speakers and they absolutely deserve their place here as much as hearing people do. Too frequently, Government consultations, including on the national health service 10-year plan and the welfare reform Green Paper, have BSL interpretation as an afterthought, if it exists at all.

In wider society, we need to see a renewed focus on the needs and interests of the deaf community. Some 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, but support to learn BSL is based on a postcode lottery. Across the country, there is a patchwork of sign language services, with a mix of local authority and third-sector provision. According to research by the National Deaf Children's Society, almost half of local authorities neither provide, fund nor commission any courses in sign language for families.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this debate.

[Alison Hume]

In 2023-24, 26 children in north Yorkshire were registered with special educational needs due to a hearing impairment, yet support remains inadequate. To show my support for them and for the other children here today, I will now sign my name in BSL. [In British Sign Language: Alison.] Does my hon. Friend agree that deaf children need access to fluent signers as teachers?

Jen Craft: I completely agree: deaf children need qualified teachers of the deaf. I thank Mrs Smith, who is in the Public Gallery today—an exceptional teacher of the deaf in my constituency. I come back to the point about the patchwork of sign language provision for parents. There is an estimate that the availability of courses has fallen by 34% in certain areas since before the pandemic.

Parents are often told to access support through adult community colleges. While they provide an excellent grounding in BSL, it is usually irrelevant for the kind of conversations that parents need and want to have with their child. For example, my one-year-old daughter did not really have too much interest in how many brothers and sisters I have, what job I want to do or what my favourite colour is, but the signs for “milk”, “mummy”, “daddy”, “play”, “book” and, most importantly, “biscuit” very much caught her attention.

It is also hard for adults who are not naturally adept in learning languages to learn a completely new language in a way that meets their learning needs. I ask the Minister to work with me, the British Deaf Association and the National Deaf Children’s Society to build a pathway to ensure that parents of deaf children have access to relevant BSL lessons no matter where they grow up.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I was pleased to see plans for a GCSE in British Sign Language following the passage of the BSL Act, but I am concerned that it has still not been rolled out, even though it is an essential step in promoting BSL, increasing the awareness of those who use it, and helping those who are not themselves deaf in understanding how to use it.

One of the most enjoyable things I was able to attend at the end of last year was an event where lots of primary schools in my borough did a Christmas concert. They all sang in English and signed at the same time. It was one of the most encouraging and inclusive events I have been to in a long time. Does my hon. Friend agree that rolling out the British Sign Language GCSE would create lots more opportunities for deaf people, including in employment, which is a matter very much on our minds at the moment, and that the GCSE should be rolled out without any further delay?

Jen Craft: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is a real shame that the BSL GCSE is not yet part of the curriculum. I understand there are some delays around what a qualification would look like. However, BSL already has a qualification that is agreed by the deaf community and the BSL first-language community. I ask that the Minister goes back to his colleagues in the Department for Education and requests they provide an update on progress, as it is crucial that we have new BSL signers who are confident.

My hon. Friend made a good point about the number of deaf people in employment. Research shows that only 37% of BSL first-language speakers are in work. That is compared to 77% of people who are hearing and without a separate disability. In my constituency, there is no support for BSL first-language speakers to access employment, which is a real shame. That speaks to the experience that BSL first-language speakers and deaf people in general have when they try to access services. They face ongoing challenges in daily life accessing healthcare, employment and a society that often overlooks their needs.

SignHealth, a fantastic organisation that advocates for the needs of deaf people in the healthcare system, says that 67% of deaf people report no accessible method of contacting their GP. The long-term impacts on health and wellbeing are very clear, with deaf people twice as likely to suffer mental health problems as their hearing peers. The deaf community is being held back by a shocking lack of societal understanding of British sign language. Part of that is a lack of awareness that BSL is completely different from spoken English, and that even in written communications there is need for an interpretation.

As parliamentarians, we can be leaders in driving greater understanding of British sign language. Through Parliament and in our constituencies, we can promote the interests of the signing community. Today’s debate is an important signal of our recognition of the needs of BSL first-language speakers. It is the first time ever that live translation is being provided both in the Chamber and broadcast from the studio on parliamentlive.tv. I am now the first MP to have used sign language in a debate in this Parliament, and the first to do so since 2022, I believe.

Next year, I hope to host this debate in the main Chamber, where having live interpreters on the Floor of the House would be unprecedented. I encourage all colleagues from across the House to take advantage of the House’s BSL scheme to learn some BSL, so that they are able to better communicate with the 87,000 BSL first-language speakers. I am sure there are a number in each constituency, so it can only be beneficial. It would be a really big milestone in demonstrating Parliament’s accessibility for deaf signers.

I also hope that in British Sign Language Week next year we can reflect on the progress that will have been made in the intervening months. Nineteen years separated the recognition of BSL as a language and the landmark British Sign Language Act 2022. We cannot wait another 19 years for the next significant step forward. Alongside the British Deaf Association and members of the all-party parliamentary group, I am calling on the Government to go further in promoting BSL.

Ministers need to support the expansion of access to sign language classes. Through national funding, the Government can deliver a universal service of BSL support to the families of deaf children—a national programme of early years intervention that could give every child the opportunity to benefit from BSL. This is about choice. For some parents, the choice to learn BSL may not be the right one, but it is about ensuring that parents have that choice to make. It is about giving deaf children the opportunity to choose their method of communication and the way that works best for them.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate. I am sorry that my British Sign Language is incredibly rusty, having learned it 30 years ago and not having practised diligently. I want to pick up on what she said about access to learning British Sign Language. Having worked in a council as a lead member for children, families and education, it was evident that growing numbers of young people have speech, language and communications difficulties.

If we can capture British Sign Language as a valid language for everybody, and teach our nursery nurses, early learning teachers and teachers right the way through our schools, that will be so much better. As I understand it, British Sign Language can be taken up to a level 6 national vocational qualification, so there is no reason why every child in this country cannot have a second language, even if it is not one of the traditional languages that we would normally recognise in the academic system.

Jen Craft: The hon. Lady is quite right that there is a real case for children across the board learning some BSL. We never know—for one child, it might spark a lifelong love of the language. Indeed, I believe there is a young girl in the Public Gallery who has her BSL level 1 qualification and she is still at primary school, which shows what is possible and what can be achieved.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): [*In British Sign Language: I learned BSL because I created barriers for deaf people, and I wanted to take those down. Is it right that all children learn level 1 at school?*]

Jen Craft: My hon. Friend is quite right. All children should be offered the opportunity to learn BSL level 1 at school. As she says, it can only help to break down those barriers to the deaf community and open up our society for those who are BSL first-language speakers.

I will conclude because I know that other Members want to speak, and I want to offer everyone the opportunity to practise their BSL if they have learned some—I very much hope they have. Broadly, the Government must embody the maxim “Nothing about us without us” as they continue to improve accessibility for the deaf community. Deaf signers should lead the design, delivery and evaluation of BSL in Government and across public services. We need to see a commitment to truly embed deaf voices in public service delivery and policymaking.

Sign Language Week does not represent a small minority issue. BSL is the fourth most widely used language in the UK. It is relied on by thousands of families, including my own, and learning BSL opens up access to an enriching community for deaf people to be part of. It provides a special bond and a shared sense of identity, in a society that has historically refused to recognise deaf culture and need.

We owe it to members of the deaf community and the campaigners who have come before us to continue to put BSL on the Government’s agenda. We have the legal framework in place to effect real change, and we now need to turn that into a positive reality.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I suggest five minutes for every speech to start with.

1.48 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I have not learned any BSL to any competent level, but I promise I will endeavour to do so before next year’s debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this very important debate. I want to celebrate the incredible contributions of the deaf community and BSL users across the United Kingdom. BSL is not just a language; it is a vital means of communication that connects people to their families, their communities and essential services.

I was recently invited to visit MeSign by Steven Francis, who is a deaf person, a teacher of BSL and an incredible advocate for his community. I also got to meet Michelle Teasdale, who was born to deaf parents and founded MeSign, which brings together the deaf community. The pair, and their amazing team at MeSign, hold events that allow deaf people from across Thornaby and further afield to come together. Their amazing organisation tackles isolation and allows deaf people to share the challenges and difficulties they might be facing. They helped me to understand that for deaf people, written English is in no way a direct equivalent to BSL. The barriers and challenges created by deafness mean that reading written English, particularly when jargon-riddled or technical, can be difficult for many. BSL is their first language.

It is vital that public services make themselves accessible to all. All too often, we see that there is investment in translators for those speaking foreign languages, but having access to translation for BSL is a postcode lottery. That is not acceptable, and more must be done. Steve and Michelle told me that my local authority contact centres, many GPs and many local employment services fail to offer BSL interpretation and are not as accessible as in other places. The reality is that technology means that it would be as simple as having an iPad and access to a translation service.

People who want to sort out everyday issues such as council tax bills, or to understand changes to bin collections, are left isolated and frustrated. They lose their independence and have to rely on family and friends to help them. The worst and most heartbreaking example that Steve and Michelle shared with me is about deaf people who use health services having to rely on family members to interpret what they are being told—imagine someone having to interpret a diagnosis for something like cancer to their deaf parents. That is completely unacceptable, and it cannot go on.

Huge progress has been made, but we need to go a lot further. We need to ensure that all public services are accessible and offer BSL interpretation. I will continue to push my local service providers to raise their standards. I welcome today’s debate, as it seeks to push this issue up the agenda.

1.50 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. I will attempt to say [*In British Sign Language: Good afternoon*] to the members of the public and members of the deaf community who have joined us today.

For more than 150,000 people in the UK, BSL is their first or preferred language. That is 150,000 people who cannot routinely follow debates in this Chamber;

[Ms Julie Minns]

150,000 people who may be unable to read information about how to travel to Westminster or, indeed, anywhere across the UK; and 150,000 people—approximately one in 450 people—whose language has been and continues to be misunderstood and whose communication preferences often go unmet. Their language is misunderstood because BSL, as we have already heard this afternoon, is not a translation of English. Many people do not realise that, but it means that too often service providers believe that they have met the needs of BSL users because they provide webchat or email access to customer services, not understanding that many BSL users may not read English.

The lack of understanding was brought home to me all too clearly a few years ago when I was working for an electricity distribution network. Following engagement with our deaf customers, I recommended that the network introduce video relay access to its customer services. That recommendation was initially met with bewilderment, as customer services had only recently introduced webchat and the view was that the needs of deaf customers were therefore met. After several discussions explaining and re-explaining that BSL is not a translation of English, video relay was introduced to those customer services.

Although a growing number of organisations now provide video relay access to their customer services, many do not. I did a quick check ahead of today's debate and confirmed that although my constituents in Carlisle and north Cumbria can access their water company by video relay, they cannot access their gas and electricity networks. Considering how vital those utilities are, we need to do more; I will certainly be writing to my local electricity and gas distribution networks after today to urge them to introduce video relay.

British Sign Language is a beautiful language, but its users can face less than beautiful consequences from using it. BSL users can face social exclusion as a direct result of linguistic exclusion. That can negatively affect their employment, education, access to healthcare, and navigation of the justice system and victim support. The concerns that we all have about our public services become doubly concerning when people cannot routinely access information about those services.

That is why the 2022 Act introduced by the former Member for West Lancashire—we have already spoken about it this afternoon—was a major step forward. The requirement to produce a report every three years on the use of BSL by Departments is key to ensuring that Government communications are as inclusive and accessible as possible. I welcome the Labour Government's commitment to continuing to improve the accessibility of Government communications to the deaf community and BSL users.

In conclusion, I want to share with hon. Members that earlier this week, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and I took part in an introductory BSL training session specifically for MPs. I urge all colleagues to look out for it if it is offered again.

Alison Hume: My big takeaway from the training session that was provided here was that the language is a visual language. Does my hon. Friend agree that we are therefore excluding many of our constituents without realising?

Ms Minns: I absolutely agree; all of us in this House have some way to go to improve access for BSL users. It is just over a year since the House introduced British Sign Language coverage for questions and statements. That was clearly welcome, but it means that on any given day, over 50% of business in the main Chamber remains unsigned. I therefore hope that today's debate prompts a further improvement on the signing of the business of this place.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I call Perran Moon.

1.56 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): [*In British Sign Language: Thank you.*] That is about as far as my signing goes, Sir Desmond, apart from one or two rude words that are not appropriate for the Chamber—it is an honour to serve under your chairship once again. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this debate and for her continued advocacy as part of the APPG on British Sign Language. I declare an interest as an officer of that APPG.

As a hearing person, I cannot claim to have direct experience, but I will describe the experience of Katie and her son Alvie from Illogan in my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle. Katie first learnt that Alvie had been born with hearing loss when he was just seven weeks old. By the time he was 10 weeks old, he had been fitted with hearing aids. The diagnosis came with a flood of appointments, hospital visits and advice from professionals, all of whom were hearing and, through no fault of their own, were perhaps not best placed to understand the needs of a deaf child.

Katie's initial question was whether she and her family would need to learn BSL to communicate with Alvie. She was reassured that they would not need to, and she accepted that advice with relief. Looking back, however, it seems bizarre that Katie was not provided with the opportunity to learn BSL as soon as possible to begin to communicate with her son.

Alvie struggled to keep his hearing aids on. He was always having fun; at the beach, he would roll them in the sand and throw them into the sea. Alvie's parents were told to persevere, but they could not help but feel the weight of their son's isolation during those early years—unable to hear the world around, to engage in conversation or to be part of the joyful moments that many of us take for granted.

Katie's story is one of frustration and determination. She began to campaign for better access to BSL training for parents of deaf children, and soon discovered that the current support system was failing families. Free or affordable BSL courses were not readily available, and many parents were unable to find the resources they needed to learn how to communicate with their own deaf children.

As Katie worked with the British Deaf Association and the National Deaf Children's Society, she uncovered the immense barriers that exist, such as the cost of courses, the lack of funding, and the exclusion of parents from programmes designed to help them. Her goal is simple: she wants all parents of deaf children to have access to BSL. She believes that no parent should have to fight for the right to communicate with their child, especially when a solution already exists.

Through her campaign, Katie has gathered tens of thousands of signatures in support of free BSL courses for parents and guardians. She is determined to ensure that future generations of deaf children will not experience the isolation and frustration that so many adults in the deaf community have faced. Alvie's journey has been life changing for his family, and while they are making progress in learning BSL, Katie knows that it should not have been that difficult. Deaf children have the right to full communication, and families should not have to battle the system to ensure that their children are included and supported.

Katie's story is the story of countless families across the UK. I pay tribute to her as a campaigner and a brilliant mum. We must ensure that people can choose to learn BSL freely and access training. I have been so impressed with her work as a campaigner that I was delighted to have the opportunity to employ her as a caseworker in my constituency office. Katie joins us here in the Public Gallery today.

That brings me to two key points: first, it is a tragedy that parents of deaf children in the UK are often advised to choose between BSL and spoken language. I am pleased that the Government are committed to offering a BSL GCSE with the capacity to teach not only signing itself, but the history of the language. This is a fascinating opportunity to make teaching and learning BSL more mainstream. However, I worry that early access to sign language is still not readily available, which means that the richness of the language itself is lost to many people who do not have the chance to access BSL early on.

My second concern is over funding. The Government have inherited a situation where funding for BSL courses is taken from the adult education budget, now the adult skills fund. The fund is aimed at people who want to learn vocational courses who are usually unemployed. This makes it inherently difficult for parents of deaf children who want to learn but who are working. What is more, a postcode lottery exists where many parents, including Katie, simply do not live near an institution with the provision for BSL courses. It is also very difficult for working parents to qualify for funding for BSL courses as a means of communicating with their child.

In conclusion, it is essential that we recognise BSL not just as a language, but as a fundamental tool for communication, inclusion and connectivity for the deaf community. We must ensure that all families, particularly those with deaf children, have equal access to BSL courses, regardless of their location or financial situation. The Government must act swiftly to eliminate the barriers that prevent parents from learning BSL and communicating fully with their children. Let us ensure that future generations of deaf children are supported in their journey towards full inclusion and engagement, and that no family is left to fight a system that should be supporting them.

2.2 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), my best friend, for securing this hugely important debate—sorry to everybody else! I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham North (Vicky Foxcroft), who in April 2021 was the first Member of Parliament to use British Sign Language during Prime Minister's Question

Time, bringing to the attention of the then Prime Minister the fact that there were no BSL interpreters at the then Prime Minister's press briefings.

I came to this debate not speaking any BSL other than to say "thank you" and "Will my hon. Friend give way?", which I learned yesterday. To be honest, having tried learning French in the past, I know that I am not very good at languages, so I appreciate the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock about those who have difficulty learning languages—some would say my English is not great, either.

The contributions that I have heard so far from hon. Members from across the House have really moved me and made me think a lot about my own practice. When I go back to Harlow and my constituency team tomorrow, I will have conversations with them about how we ensure that any engagement that I have with members of the public in Harlow—including my MP surgeries—is compatible with BSL, because what I do not want, and I am sure no Member wants, is our constituents feeling that they cannot have access to their MP in their first language.

I want to talk about accessibility. I declare an interest because I am a member of the Modernisation Committee. It is really important that everyone, no matter their situation, has the opportunity to achieve. I have been impressed in many ways by how accessible the House is. Last week, members of Razed Roof—an inclusive theatre company that I am a trustee of—visited Parliament. Simon, who I have mentioned before, who often relies on physical communication and is wheelchair-bound, was able to get a tour of Parliament, which he enjoyed a great deal. The only slight problem came when we went to St Stephen's Hall. But clearly there is more we can do. We do not just want to make Parliament accessible; we want to make politics accessible, and not just so that people who have BSL as a first language can access politics, but so they can participate in politics and perhaps even be an MP.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, there are 87,000 people who use BSL as a first language, so I ask the Minister how we can better ensure that they can participate in politics and play an active part in it. It would not be a Westminster Hall debate in which I was taking part if I did not mention young carers: I pay tribute to the number of young people who have to learn BSL to communicate with a parent or loved one. The points made about ensuring that BSL is part of the curriculum and that it is not a postcode lottery are really important, particularly to young carers. We have spoken about the difficulties parents have in being able to access BSL to communicate with their children, but it works both ways.

Of course, I recognise that life exists outside this place and I want to briefly touch on education—another of my favourite topics. The Department for Education has not yet made BSL part of the curriculum, but will give schools the option to offer a BSL GCSE. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) mentioned, a GCSE for BSL was expected in September 2025. Can the Minister tell us how this is progressing? That would be really useful to know. There is also currently no national programme for early years BSL, as other Members have covered.

Let us as politicians work with organisations like the BDA and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People to make not only this place, but society, an inclusive

[Chris Vince]

place for everyone, including those people for whom British Sign Language is their first language. We should not have a postcode lottery.

2.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I commend the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on setting the scene so well. She spoke excellently yesterday in the Down's syndrome debate and her speech today was a tour de force.

Perran Moon: I wonder if the hon. Gentleman could try to talk a little slower, because the interpreters might be struggling a little bit.

Jim Shannon: Kate Hoey, formerly the hon. Member for Vauxhall, said, "Whenever Jim Shannon speaks, he gets more words to the minute than any other MP", so the hon. Member is absolutely right to tell me to slow it down. I will do my best to slow down a wee bit, if that is possible.

The speech made by the hon. Member for Thurrock was a tour de force. It is clear to all of us here that her heart shines brightly, and we thank her for telling her story. I congratulate all the other hon. Members who have had the ability to learn sign language.

The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) referred to one of his staff members; I say to her, keep a tight rein on him! I say that in jest, of course, because we all recognise how hard the hon. Member works.

In Northern Ireland, we have two sign languages. It is part of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We have British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language, because we have two different traditions, and the people of those traditions have the same difficulties when it comes to sign language. Those who want to have British Sign Language can have that and those who want Irish Sign Language can have that as well. In March 2004, the Secretary of State announced the formal recognition of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language as languages in their own right, following similar recognition of BSL in Great Britain.

Some of my staff are very assiduous. I am only as good as my staff—I say that honestly because it is true. When some constituents came into the office who were challenged and had deaf issues, my staff decided that—even though those constituents came into the office with their parents—they would learn some sign language in order to communicate with them. My staff wanted not only to understand what my constituents wanted but to engage socially with them. I think it was the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth who said that when people cannot hear anything, they do not know what is happening around them. My staff felt that it was important to do that small thing. It shows that sometimes we have to do things outside of our own systems.

British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language in Northern Ireland have their own grammar and syntax systems, rather than being visual reflections of other languages. I believe we have a good system in Northern Ireland.

I should have said that I am pleased to see the Minister for Social Security and Disability, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), in his place. I do not think I have yet been in a debate where he has been responding. I look forward to hearing what he has to say, and to the speeches of the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) and the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones).

British Sign Language is the first, or preferred, language of communication for approximately 3,500 members of the deaf population of Northern Ireland, and approximately 1,500 use Irish Sign Language. Schools have incorporated some basic sign language, and I am glad they have—it is another way of doing it.

We have many churches who engage in this. It is no secret that I am a Christian, and I like to understand that we are moving with society. There can be language issues for children at church whenever we are preaching the gospel, preaching the word of God, reading the Bible or praying, so we should have sign language in the church.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland has launched a brilliant new sign language video relay service for deaf people. There is access to the facility—24 hours a day, seven days a week—on the SignVideo app or via a call button on the PSNI website. I say to the Minister: if the PSNI has done that in Northern Ireland, perhaps we need to do that here.

I have one last point. Fury from "Gladiators" is deaf, but look at what that lady has done. There is not one man in this Chamber who would take her on, never mind any other lady—I know I wouldn't, anyway. I will finish by saying this: if Fury can do it, you can do it as well.

2.12 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this important debate. I declare an interest as an officer of the APPG.

I thank Watford Deaf Club, which was kind enough to host a hustings event for the general election in June 2024, and Helen Austin from the club, who has helped to identify some of the many challenges the deaf community face in day-to-day life. At the hustings event I was struck by two things: first, by how disappointing it is that society at large does not adequately consider integrating deaf people into our culture, systems and public life, resulting in a discernibly disadvantaged experience of some aspects of what hearing-able people take for granted; secondly, by how frustrated and upset some members of the community are about that first point. As politicians, we need to be very careful to be inclusive, accessible and available to all our residents. Currently, we are not. I say that with my hand up first, among many.

My local deaf club says:

"We are so glad that BSL was recognised by the DWP in 2003, and that the BSL Act was passed in 2022, but there are still so many issues that BSL users meet every day."

I know from the comments of people at the club that the issues include BSL interpreter availability. It is great when interpreters are in the room at televised events, such as political conferences and briefings, but they are often hidden in a corner, meaning the angles of vision

can be difficult for BSL users viewing events on TV. The deaf community would like interpreters to be front and centre, as they are in America and New Zealand. Their being tucked away makes the community feel like people are embarrassed of BSL and, by extension, them.

Signed TV programmes are put into ghettos, often at unhelpful times, and appear and disappear with no notice. That also makes the community feel second class. Not all programmes are subtitled, and smaller channels are not expected to provide them. Sometimes, automated subtitles do not keep up with the speech, a phenomenon known as—excuse my language—craptions. Certainly, not all programmes are signed. Members of the deaf community point out to me that they pay 100% of the TV license but do not have access to 100% of the programming content they contribute to.

Additionally—and here I confess guilt of my own—not all politicians subtitle their videos, making democracy inaccessible. My local deaf club says:

“We’d love BSL interpreted videos but subtitles would be a good start.”

It is best practice to make social media posts accessible. I try, but there is clearly room for improvement on my own feeds, and no doubt on others’ too.

The community has raised particular difficulties accessing public services. This was raised at the aforementioned hustings event, and it obviously continues to be an issue. NHS access is still unreliable and inaccessible. Let me read a quote:

“Deaf people have to chase staff in their second language to find out if anyone has bothered to book an interpreter for each and EVERY appointment (hospital and GP, or any other NHS service) and fight for one when they haven’t, despite this being their right under the Accessible Information Standard (AIS) so should be automatic.

Health services being outsourced is another massive issue. They often find buildings are inaccessible—you have to speak into a box, no way to sign, and no-one seems to know if they are covered by the AIS and, if so, whose responsibility it is to find/book/pay for the Interpreter?”

MP and councillor surgeries have also been raised. How can the community access them and have BSL interpreters present? That is a great idea and I will take it on board for my own surgeries.

Communication with emergency services is a problem as well. My local deaf club has highlighted the case of a member who was sexually assaulted and, despite repeated requests, never had access to a BSL interpreter when talking to the police. That is shocking. It is disappointing that there is no longer a police liaison for the deaf community in my county of Hertfordshire. Many, if not all, of these problems can be solved through basic training and understanding.

It is vital that we take steps here in this place, and when dealing with the big charities as parliamentarians, to make sure that national efforts are made and connected with local communities; otherwise, we risk ignoring people as individuals, and we might create or reform services in ways that do not work for them.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the great deal of concern among the community regarding the forthcoming benefits reforms. Although we await the final details, it is vital to acknowledge that we need to support the community to cover the additional costs of living with deafness. For example, having to pay for BSL interpreters in person or online is a requirement

that impacts people whether they are employed or not. This has been an inspiring debate, and I look forward to taking action to address the issues raised today.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I have to impose a three-minute formal time limit.

2.18 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this incredibly important debate. I reiterate her point that we are talking about fundamental communication and giving every person the opportunity to learn and to access all the services they so desperately need.

Communication between children and their parents, families, friends, teachers and the wider community will stop deaf children and adults feeling isolated in society. Currently, there is no national programme for early years British Sign Language provision for deaf children in the UK. Instead, parents are being told that their deaf children do not necessarily need to learn BSL. But when children are taught to sign, it opens up communication and removes barriers for them.

One of the most beautiful things I have seen was my niece, who was only seven at the time, sing “Little Donkey” while signing along. That was to ensure that the deaf child in her class was not isolated during the song. Ensuring that all children can communicate with each other is just as important for socialising—there is a barrier for deaf children, but non-deaf children want to engage with them, so it is important that they can communicate together.

As the British Deaf Association warns us, there are serious life consequences for deaf children’s language, emotional and cognitive development, as well as for their general wellbeing. Deaf children are taught that merely coping is the highest they will ever achieve, but there should be no reason to think that a deaf child is any less able to achieve top grades, their dreams or their career goals than any other child. We just need to open up the opportunity for them.

Families have to pay to learn how to communicate with their child through sign language, and often the lessons are framed around receiving a qualification. For most parents, it is not about the qualification—it is about getting to read a bedtime story or ask their child about their day—but the lessons are often not tailored around communicating with their children. Although it is fantastic that level 1 courses are being offered in local libraries and leisure centres across Leicestershire, we need so much more. Most classes in North West Leicestershire, a rural community, are only offered online, but face-to-face learning is much more effective.

In Sign Language Week, it is more important than ever that we recognise the barriers that deaf children and adults face if they are unable to communicate with their peers. There are very simple solutions. Like the British Deaf Association, I believe that deaf children in the UK and their families have a right to learn British Sign Language and receive the linguistic and cultural enrichment that comes with it. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to this incredibly important debate.

2.21 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this important debate during Sign Language Week. Her dedication in advocating for British Sign Language is commendable, and her tireless campaigning is a sign that the 2024 intake of parliamentarians is one of the best.

I am really sorry that I do not have any sign language. My mother lost much of her hearing as a teenager and lived to the age of 93, using aids for as long as I can remember. If she had been able to learn BSL, I am sure her life would have been much easier.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I share the belief of the hon. Member for Thurrock that all deaf and hearing-impaired individuals have the right to participate in society fully and independently. That is not a theoretical right: it is a basic human right that too often remains unrealised.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this debate. When I worked at the Royal National Institute for Deaf People 25 years ago, I learned how important BSL is as a means of communication for deaf people.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be short.

Rachel Taylor: BSL is a rich and important part of the cultural identity of the deaf community. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is essential that deaf people and their parents have access to BSL based not on whether they can pay for the courses but on need? That would enrich the language and cultural identity of the deaf community.

Clive Jones: I agree 100% with everything the hon. Lady said.

The Liberal Democrats have a long history of pushing for British Sign Language to be given legal status. We have worked for change since one of our councillors, David Buxton, became the first deaf sign language politician in the UK to be elected as a borough councillor. He co-founded the Liberal Democrat Disability Association, and has extensive experience of campaigning and doing incredible work across the UK in advocating for the deaf community.

In 2022, David fought hard for the British Sign Language Act, which officially recognised BSL as a language in England, Wales and Scotland. That was a significant victory, but we must acknowledge that it was only one step on a much longer journey. Recognition is essential, but it is not enough: we need respect for BSL alongside tangible pathways to a world where deaf people can achieve their full potential.

We are concerned about the previous Conservative Government's legacy of cuts to British Sign Language interpretation services for deaf people accessing health services. Funding for the BSL health access app was withdrawn, and it is deeply unjust that BSL users currently have to ask for reasonable adjustments through the Equality Act 2010 if they want to access information

and services. Furthermore, the adjustments provided are usually written notes, rather than the provision of a BSL interpreter.

We are committed to seeing more deaf BSL users elected to public and political office, and a good step towards that aim is wider access to services in BSL. Extensive research suggests the best time to learn a second language is from the age of six to puberty. The opportunity for access to language experience is crucial, especially for deaf children's language, emotional and cognitive development. That is why the Department for Education should commission a feasibility study into the introduction of BSL lessons in primary schools, which would embed the teaching of basic BSL from an early age, and offer expert findings to devolved Education Departments to share best practice across the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, we support the rapid introduction of GCSE-equivalent qualifications in BSL in England, which would provide a clear formal pathway for students to gain fluency in British Sign Language. It is deeply concerning that, despite the Government's commitment to rolling out the qualification by the start of the 2025 academic year, the implementation of BSL in the national curriculum continues to be delayed.

There is a real risk that further delays in implementing BSL qualifications will deprive the next generation of BSL users of the access and opportunities they rightly deserve. Without this opportunity, deaf children may grow up without the proper foundation to navigate the world fully and confidently. That would be simply unacceptable. Will the Minister commit today that the BSL GCSE will not go the way of the Welsh equivalent by eventually being scrapped? Will he also give more specific details as to when Ofqual's proposed consultation on assessment arrangements and its technical consultation will be launched?

2.28 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond, on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition. I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this important and timely debate during Sign Language Week. It was great to hear that the all-party group has been re-formed and to hear of her pride in that. It is wonderful to see signing in the Chamber today. We have had some important, thoughtful and very hard-practised contributions from hon. Members. These general debates often bring a new perspective in the very best traditions of this House. We have seen that once again this afternoon.

Claire, from my team, is a signer. I really value her contribution and commitment across my constituency in East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages. She works to make sure that I connect with local young people and users of BSL. She has taught me a little bit, but I must say that I have failed miserably to keep up with it. Robin also taught me some—I am very proudly wearing my badge from my time working with Robin when I was in the DWP. I am not sure whether the Minister will have much time to learn BSL—I wish that I had had time to learn more of it—but I wish him well on that. My time with Robin was very much worth it.

As a former Minister in the DWP, I was pleased to work on the efforts to improve BSL across Government. We made some excellent progress. The Conservatives'

legacy is of working on legislative change and implementing Rosie Cooper's amazing work on the British Sign Language Act 2022, which was ably supported by my colleague Chloe Smith, who has not left the field when it comes to working on this. Recognising BSL as an official language and rightly improving the reporting duties was leadership from the top of Government on improving BSL in official communications.

Of course, as with everything, there is always more to do. The first report required under the Act was published in July 2023. Although the Act requires a report to be published triennially, we wanted to go further to embed the sea change that we have talked about this afternoon into Government communications, and committed to report annually in the first five years. I am sure that the Minister will reassure the House that his Government will match our commitment and, hopefully, follow suit. In my time at the DWP, BSL and accessibility for all was at the heart of our engagements. I am sure that no campaigner would leave the Minister's or my office without rightly reminding us not to forget that. We are also rightly proud of the BSL Advisory Board.

Ms Minns: In a rare moment of cross-party agreement, I think the work done on the implementation of the '22 Act was very welcome. It is also worth noting the Media Act 2024, which extended the quota requirement on BSL programming to on-demand services. That quota is only 5%. Does the hon. Lady wish to comment on whether that quota is sufficiently ambitious?

Mims Davies: As we have heard today, BSL availability for users, through both captions on TV and signing in person, is too low. As the hon. Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) spelled out, it would be hard for any of us to say that 5% is enough. We should challenge ourselves on that.

BSL was first recognised as a separate language in March 2003 and has about 150,000 regular users. However, one can find it in early documentation from 1576 in the registry offices of St Martin's church in Leicester, where a marriage ceremony apparently took place between Thomas and Ursula that showed that love is blind, and can also be deaf. It is wonderful to hear how that passage of love played out. I enjoyed finding that out from one of my colleagues.

It was 50 years ago that British Sign Language was officially introduced with formal recognition. As we have found out this afternoon, there is still a lot to do to embed it into our school system. It is wonderful to have younger BSL users in the Public Gallery today. As many hon. Members have said today, we should note the need for loved ones and carers to get the right advice, as adults caring for little ones, about when deafness touches the lives of a family, and then look at how we can embed it as a route around accessibility.

I was struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) said about means of communication, and how the MeSign team helps to tackle isolation. He said that provision of BSL in Government services was woeful and that more was needed. There is a loss of independence, particularly in NHS and health services, if BSL is not there.

I also want to touch on the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); I think it was the first time he has spoken quite so slowly. As usual, he

got all his points in and raised the things in his community that make such a difference. When it comes to BSL services in healthcare, the NHS 111 BSL service, across the board, is just not enough. He highlighted some progress, yet also some areas where we are left wanting. That applies to mental health support as well. I talked about isolation earlier on, and I think we can very much improve on that issue.

I turn to some of the questions this afternoon. The most recent report, in December 2024, found important progress in Government communications at the Home Office, the Cabinet Office and the DWP. As I said, there is a legacy there, but there is still more work to do. We have heard this afternoon about the changes in Wales; unfortunately, the work across the Senedd has not been enough when it comes to BSL access in Wales. We also heard about the scrapping of the BSL GCSE in Wales in October 2024. The British Deaf Association's Cymru manager called that

“a slap in the face”.

We have heard today about the real, tangible opportunity for young people if the BSL GCSE were ready for 2025 in England. It is hugely disappointing that a plan of how to deliver that has not been set out. I hope that, on behalf of his Government, the Minister can commit to straining every sinew to see whether that GCSE can be taught in classrooms for pupils and adult learners alike. In fact, in my previous roles, I met many young people who wanted to learn it as a language—something that the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) also pointed out today.

I think I need to conclude, Sir Desmond. *[Interruption.]* Oh, I do not need to. Well, in that case, I have a couple more points to make. Gosh—how exciting! I turn to BSL accessibility in Government communications and the disability action plan. As the Minister will know, in February 2024, when a Minister in his Department, I took forward a commitment to 32 actions to make the UK more accessible for disabled people to work, live, and—importantly—thrive in. What has happened to the update on that, and what can we expect? As we have heard today, the actions, outcomes and needs of our young people, disabled people and users of BSL have not changed. What is his commitment to the issue in the Department, following the legislative changes that came through in the British Sign Language Act 2022?

We have had absolutely the right conversation this afternoon, and I look forward to the issue being discussed in the main Chamber of the House of Commons next year. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock on bringing forward this debate. As has been highlighted, the interest in BSL, and the need for BSL interpreters, has never been higher. I urge the Minister to outline the steps that the Government will take across all Departments, using his leverage through the equalities role, to increase the communications across the board, particularly in times of national need and national urgency. I was very close to making further announcements about that when I was at the Department.

I hope we have come a long way since 1576 and the act of love that I talked about earlier. Clearly, there is much more to be done in this arena to help people to thrive, move into employment and, above all, feel part of the whole of wider society, with full accessibility for all. I thank everyone for joining us here this afternoon.

2.40 pm

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. We have had a wide-ranging and thoughtful debate. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing it during British Sign Language Week and on the initiative of establishing the all-party parliamentary group.

It is not very well known that the Deputy Prime Minister is BSL qualified to level 2. She has this morning posted on social media a signing message in support of British Sign Language Week. She sets out in the message the Government's commitment and her own commitment to championing BSL and to tackling the barriers that face people in Britain with hearing impairments.

Rachel Taylor: Does the Minister agree that there is still a long way to go to make BSL accessible for everyone who needs it and that it is important that deaf people not only are included in the conversations, but lead them? Does he share my delight in seeing BSL interpreters here today in Westminster Hall, which sends a message to deaf people that they are welcome here?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am very glad to do so; I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

This week gives us a chance to celebrate British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language. As we have heard, 151,000 people use BSL; 87,000 have it as their first language, and it is the UK's fourth most widely used indigenous language. That is a very large group of people, with a great deal to contribute to our economy and our society.

It is right to take this week as an opportunity to highlight, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, the rich culture around BSL, of which many people are unaware. I was intrigued that American Sign Language is completely different from BSL; I think that arises from its origins not long after American independence when—I suppose understandably—Americans wanted more to do with the French than the British. That has shaped American Sign Language today.

We have heard about the 2022 Act, and I echo the tributes to our former colleague Rosie Cooper and to Chloe Smith, the then Minister. The Act is driving improved accessibility of Government communications and in this Government we are going to implement it in full. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock very reasonably asked why the BSL version of Tuesday's Green Paper has not yet appeared. I can only apologise for that. The 12-week consultation clock will not start until all the accessible versions are published in early April, with a BSL version among them, so that BSL users will have a full 12 weeks to respond.

The BSL Act requires the Government to publish a British Sign Language report setting out each Department's steps to promote and facilitate the use of BSL in public communications. The first, as the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) reminded us, was published in July 2023. The second was a bit delayed by the general election and appeared in December. I echo the commitment that she set out to annual publication in those first five years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, BSL activity has more than doubled across Government since that first report, but there is still a long way to go, and I have noticed impatience in some quarters about the speed of progress.

The new Lead Ministers for Disability will have an important role here. We discussed the BSL Act and its reporting framework at our first meeting in December, and we did so again in our second meeting last week. We will keep progress under review, and of course I will have the opportunity to discuss there a number of the issues raised in this debate. We will also publish a BSL plan for each Government Department with the third BSL report, which we will be publishing in the summer.

In line with the commitment in our election manifesto, I work closely with disabled people and representative organisations to put their views and voices at the heart of all we do. Since July, I have met a wide range of deaf people's organisations, along with other disability organisations. We have heard about the independent BSL Advisory Board, set up in the wake of the Act; it is co-chaired by Craig Crowley, chief executive of Action Deafness, who has done a fantastic job. The board has 15 members, mainly BSL users and all with lived and/or professional experience of the barriers facing deaf people.

I have been very impressed with the board's work, drawing on the experience of its members and their knowledge of those barriers to develop priorities and a focus for its work, including setting up sub-groups on specific issues. For example, the health and social care sub-group is compiling recommendations based on deaf people's experiences in the health service—we have heard about a number of those in this debate. I have also spoke to SignHealth, which has made the point to me that BSL users often struggle even to make a GP appointment and to communicate basic health information with the NHS. The report of that sub-group, with its recommendations, will appear later on this year.

Over the last year, the board has also discussed deaf access to sport with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It presented at the British Deaf Association conference in Manchester, the theme of which was BSL in the early years, and I am grateful to the board co-chairs and other members for their commitment to improving the lives of deaf people and collaborating in order to do so.

I attended the education summit that the BSL Advisory Board organised at the Frank Barnes School for Deaf Children at King's Cross last year. There were powerful contributions from senior leaders on the barriers that deaf children and their families face in education. That school is really interesting; it has a bilingual model of education and shares a playground with a hearing school, encouraging interaction between deaf and hearing children, contributing to the inclusion of everybody.

We want to enhance the status of BSL, and I agree with the points made in this debate that the GCSE will benefit BSL users generally, as well as those individual students who take it.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): My constituent Sarah has been unable to afford a British Sign Language course for her son, which costs up to £400. I welcome the prospect of a GCSE in BSL, but that support is often unavailable where skills funding is not devolved. Can the Minister outline what steps he is taking to ensure that families in areas not yet devolved, such as Cornwall, can also affordably access BSL courses?

Sir Stephen Timms: The situation in Cornwall has also been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon). My understanding

is that the adult skills fund will be devolved in Cornwall under the recent devolution agreement that has been reached. The fund will be devolved from the coming academic year 2025-26, so there is an opportunity for local decision making in the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth rightly made points about the way in which that funding has typically been used in the past, and the fact that the decision has certainly not always been made to provide courses along those lines. Following that devolution deal, there is at least the opportunity to do that.

I assure the House of our continuing commitment to the GCSE. Ofqual is now finalising the assessment arrangements for it, working closely with exam boards and BSL organisations to ensure that there is a fair and reliable assessment process. Ofqual met the BSL Advisory Board on 5 February to discuss that, and I think the board was generally reassured about the progress being made and the commitment to deliver. I am advised that the technical consultation that the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) asked about will be launched in the next few weeks.

Mims Davies: I am grateful to the Minister for the reassurances. The message from the Chamber this afternoon has been about a postcode lottery, and different experiences for families in different parts of the country. I am grateful that the Minister is seeking to reassure and to work with Craig and others. Could the Minister undertake to work with our devolved nations—I mentioned the challenges in Wales and there is further progress in Holyrood—so that the postcode lottery does not extend despite the good efforts of his office?

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, I would be very glad to meet representatives of the devolved Governments, and to co-operate with them on this, as we do in many other areas.

Jim Shannon: The Police Service of Northern Ireland has a 24/7 video system, so that those who have hearing problems can contact them and somebody can come out immediately. Is that something that the Minister could push forward with police forces on the mainland?

Sir Stephen Timms: I welcome that innovative arrangement; if the hon. Member drops me a line about it, I would be interested to look at it further. That is a similar example to what we heard about some energy companies operating for their customers, and I welcome it.

Another main focus for the advisory board this year is the use of artificial intelligence to reduce barriers. How long will it be before we have a handheld device that will be able to interpret BSL both ways? What might be the pitfalls of that happening? Yesterday I chaired an interesting roundtable at Tata in Bishopsgate, attended by the co-chairs and members of the BSL Advisory Board, representatives of the British Deaf Association, the RNID, Professor Richard Bowden from the University of Surrey, and Professor Kearsy Cormier, professor of sign linguistics at University College London.

At the roundtable Dr Charudatta Jadhav, the principal scientist and head of the accessibility centre of excellence at Tata in India, told us that, while Tata is focusing initially on Indian and American Sign Language, it

expects to have a BSL interpretation product within five years. We discussed the ethical and cultural issues around that: how can software interpret the nuances in facial expressions, which I believe are much more important in BSL than in Indian Sign Language? How do developers decide which version of BSL to implement? How will regional accents, which can provide a BSL user with valuable information about the signer, be handled? Those are interesting topics, and as Members have said, deaf people need to be in driving seat in resolving them.

Tech can certainly help deaf people to overcome barriers that too often and needlessly block opportunities that others take for granted. We want more of that potential to be realised. The Government have taken important steps around equal pay and flexible working. On Tuesday, we launched our 12-week consultation on mandatory disability pay gap reporting—including, I am pleased to say, a BSL version of the consultation document. We want deaf people to get the support they need to thrive in the workplace, and we recognise that too many do not at the moment.

Implementing the BSL Act is only just beginning. Let us all keep working together to deliver the access and inclusion for deaf people that all of us want to see. Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock and to everyone who has contributed to this important and welcome debate. I am grateful to those in the Public Gallery for their interest. I express particular thanks to the interpreters who have supported us today, and I thank Mr Speaker for enabling them to be with us.

2.55 pm

Jen Craft: I thank all Members who have taken part, particularly those who took the time to learn some BSL. I also thank the interpreters, who have made it possible for the deaf community to join us.

I have a few reflections on things that were raised. There is certainly a learning point for all Members across the House to consider how we can best communicate with our constituents with hearing loss and those who are deaf, and how we can ensure that we are fully accessible. I will certainly be asking utility companies in my constituency—thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns)—whether they have taken measures to ensure that there is BSL interpretation for those who need it.

I thank the Minister; I am reassured by the Government's continuing commitment to the BSL GCSE, but I reiterate my plea for a meeting to discuss early years support for parents and universal BSL language support for parents who have a deaf child, because that is sorely lacking right now. I look forward to next year, when hopefully we will be able to have this debate in the Chamber and have interpreters with us. I encourage all Members to show their support, to join us on the APPG and to take away from this debate that we must make sure that not just Parliament, but politics, is accessible for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered British Sign Language Week.

2.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Tourism Industry

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the tourism industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to introduce this debate during English Tourism Week, when people across the country will be celebrating all the fantastic tourism attractions that form part of the fabric of so many of our communities. They range from Land's End to John O'Groats, from the Needles on the Isle of Wight to the neolithic site of Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands, and from the Titanic museum in Belfast to the Roman ruins of Colchester. Across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, we are fortunate to have unique and interesting tourism attractions. We have them in, I feel reasonably confident in saying, every constituency and every corner of the country.

Tourism is a vast industry. It is worth £145.8 billion to the UK economy, which is equivalent to 6.5% of UK GDP. Tourism supports 3.8 million jobs, and 1.6 million people are directly employed in tourism. Some 328,000 businesses, representing 6.6% of all businesses in the UK, are tourism businesses; 76% of those are microbusinesses. Tourism is the UK's sixth largest export earner and it feeds into a wide tourism ecosystem, supporting local high streets, hospitality and a wide range of other industries.

This Government have an ambition for our country to reach 50 million tourism visitors a year. It is an ambition that I support, and I hope that in this debate we can examine the role that Government and we in this place can play in supporting tourism nationally and backing our tourism economies locally. I am aware that, as the Member of Parliament for Mid Bedfordshire, I might not be the most obvious voice for tourism in this place. Bedfordshire has been rather left behind by the tourism economy. We are one of the last counties in England without an official local visitor economy partnership. That is despite fantastic attractions such as English Heritage's Wrest Park, Whipsnade Zoo and Woburn Safari Park—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests following the safari park's kind hosting of a roundtable and tour of the park for me earlier this year. We also have Center Parc Woburn Forest, the Wyboston Lakes Resort, Luton Hoo and so much more.

Anyone who watched my debate last year on tourism in Bedfordshire—I am glad to be debating with the Minister on tourism again—will have heard me extol the virtues of Bedfordshire as a place to visit. However, despite those fantastic attractions, our county has a domestic tourism economy of just £250 million and an international tourism economy of just £100 million. We are not a remote county; we have a major international airport, a motorway and a direct rail connection. Bedfordshire's tourism economy has so much potential to be a key part of growing the economy.

Where Bedfordshire has lagged, it now can lead. The Government have already thrown their weight behind East West Rail, which has the potential to make a real

difference to local tourism, setting our county up as a central piece of an Oxford-to-Cambridge growth corridor that is full of growing businesses and, more importantly for this debate, attractions that embody what it is to be an English county. Like many other colleagues, we have fantastic opportunities in Bedfordshire to deliver new attractions that will boost our tourism economy. The Bedford to Milton Keynes waterway park is one such opportunity, and would be capable of attracting 750,000 visitors, creating 1,000 jobs and bringing in an extra £26 million for our local economy. I will continue to bang the drum to get that delivered as quickly as possible.

The other major tourism project in my constituency is the game changer. Looming like a monstrous shark off Amity Island, a prehistoric predator off the coast of Costa Rica or an Italian-American plumber in the Mushroom Kingdom, the Universal Studios theme park at Kempston Hardwick would transform the tourism landscape in Bedfordshire. Universal is a game changer for Bedfordshire, but also for the whole UK tourism economy. Getting it right represents a £50 billion economic boost, 20,000 new jobs and 12 million more visitors every year. This Government talk a good game on growth and on growing tourism, but the proof is in the pudding, and for this Government the pudding would have the words "Universal Studios Bedfordshire" written on it. I sincerely hope that they will get this over the line.

With or without Universal, it has become clear that the support available from Government to promote our county is insufficient. Getting Bedfordshire an LVEP would help—indeed, getting an LVEP in all counties that are lagging behind would help enormously—but we must also ensure that tourism is a central consideration of English devolution. We must ensure that there is proper prioritisation in the minds of new mayors and proper funding from local government to allow our regions to shout about all the fantastic reasons to come and stay awhile.

If the Government want to get tourism right, they must provide that funding centrally, and resist the urge to consider local tourism taxes as a silver bullet. For Government, local taxes have the allure of a problem handed down to devolved areas to handle, but they will make the UK even more uncompetitive, introducing additional costs and confusion for holidaymakers at home and abroad.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I welcome the hon. Member's bold efforts to bring Bedfordshire's tourism economy to the fore. In Cornwall, our tourism economy is already very much at the fore. Does he agree that it has been a mistake to see the industry as a sort of be-all and end-all in places such as Cornwall? Given the seasonality of the employment, the lack of infrastructure and the many opportunities beyond, it must be recognised that it can sometimes be a mistake to bed tourism so centrally into our growth plans.

Blake Stephenson: It is important that local economies are balanced, and I recognise that in some parts of the country it feels like the economy is imbalanced. Perhaps there are communities suffering from too many tourists, and I am sure that hon. Members may talk about that in the context of Cornwall. I thank the hon. Member for his intervention; it is important that we have balanced economies throughout the United Kingdom. However,

tourism in the United Kingdom has the potential to grow without the negative consequences that Government Members may wish to talk about.

The cost of tourism is already far too high. Evidence from the World Economic Forum puts the UK 113th out of 119 countries on price competitiveness. Our visitor visas are uncompetitive internationally: a 10-year visitor visa costs £962, but the United States charges Chinese visitors just £135 for a visa of the same length. Repeat visa applicants face a bureaucratic process that requires them to resubmit their biometrics, which is often a complex process for visitors from rural areas, who may need to travel significant distances to provide their biometrics. Lower-cost, longer-lasting and simpler visas will help to make the UK much more competitive as a tourism destination.

Our international price competitiveness was already low before the Government hiked the price of electronic travel authorisations by 60%—a policy that they admit will cost the UK just over 100,000 visitors every year. That is 100,000 fewer people staying in the accommodation sector, eating and drinking in our pubs and restaurants, and enjoying everything great that Britain has to offer and recommending a visit to their friends back home. The Home Office estimates that that means a cost to the UK economy in the region of up to £734 million over five years—in the same breath as the Government talk about being a Government for growth and growing the tourism economy to 50 million visitors per year.

If we are to achieve the Government's goal of 50 million visitors per year, we need to make the UK more attractive to visitors at home and abroad, and less attractive as a source of revenue for the Treasury or local authorities. The evidence shows that for every 1% decrease in the cost of visiting the UK, the earnings of the UK's inbound tourism economy increase by 1.3%. For every £74,300 increase in tourism revenue, a new full-time-equivalent job is created in tourism. Tourism is a growth-generating machine that the Government hold the keys to, but it is a machine that needs more careful maintenance than it is currently getting from this Government. Since the general election, businesses in tourism and its supporting industries have faced significant Government-imposed barriers to growth. Most notably, the Government's decision to tax job creation and business expansion has left many tourism businesses putting their future plans on ice. Tourism businesses were already struggling, with 19% reporting that they are either in survival mode or performing quite badly.

Profitability for tourism businesses is down. The decision to increase their employer's national insurance, taxing them for creating jobs and helping to grow the economy, all while reducing business rates relief, will have a devastating impact on the industry. If our tourism businesses fall, the attractiveness of visiting the UK falls with them, and tourism businesses are already falling. Just this month we have seen a theme park in Wales closed, citing national insurance as a contributing factor. As I mentioned earlier, in Bedfordshire we hope to be in the business of opening theme parks, not seeing them slip away. We know that where tourism thrives, it benefits the whole of the local economy, from accommodation providers and high street shops to pubs, cafés, museums and restaurants.

When tourism succeeds and grows, it brings the whole of the local economy with it. When tourism fails, it puts at risk not just the future of UK tourism and the

Minister's growth plan, but the whole ecosystem that it supports. The great British pub is a staple of British culture and a key attraction for visitors to the UK. Pubs like The Bell in Woburn, The Oddfellows Arms in Toddington and the Star and Garter in Silsoe are a key part of what makes Mid Bedfordshire a great place to spend time. One in four pubs believes their future may be untenable, and the Government's £500 million hit to the cost of our pubs doing business will leave at least some of our destinations without the great British pub, something that is so attractive to visitors. I believe that the Minister is earnest in his desire to see 50 million visitors come to the UK each year, but I hope he will appreciate my concern that we need to do more to ensure that there are thriving businesses here to provide things for those visitors to see and do.

I would like the Government to focus more on supporting our best visitor attractions, including the great British pub and the British high street. We must also ensure that the planning system protects and enhances our tourism offer. That means faster approvals for game changers such as Universal, so that we can continue to be a fantastic place for projects and investment, such as that proposed in my constituency. That will mean better transport infrastructure across the whole country.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate in English Tourism Week. Tourism in the fantastic county of Kent is worth around £4 billion per annum. It supports 77,000 jobs, and there is still unmet need. Does he agree that the reinstatement of Eurostar stopping at Ashford and Ebbsfleet would help the county to grow this vital sector further?

Blake Stephenson: That is a fantastic idea. I was travelling just yesterday on the Eurostar and thinking to myself how great it would be if the train stopped at Ashford and Ebbsfleet and passengers could get off, having come from the Netherlands, to savour the delights of Kent, a county that I know very well. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; it is a fantastic idea. Perhaps the Minister will have an update on what is happening with Eurostar.

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): He might.

Blake Stephenson: He might.

Chris Bryant: Or he might not.

Blake Stephenson: He also might not. Let us see.

Better transport infrastructure across the whole country would help our tourism industry, which would include Luton airport expansion in Bedfordshire—perhaps the Minister has an update on that; or maybe he does not.

That will mean finding the right mixture of development in areas like mine to allow for some of the things that we need to take advantage of the opportunities of tourism. In particular, in Bedfordshire we need more accommodation to ensure that people stay awhile in our communities, rather than visiting for a day and going somewhere else for the bulk of their visit. We will also need to protect and enhance some of our beautiful countryside and landscapes, which distinguish our country and our counties from our international competitors.

[Blake Stephenson]

The Greensand Ridge national character area in my constituency of Mid Bedfordshire is characterised by its ancient and modern woodlands, farms and parkland and the historic look and feel of its small settlements, often former estate villages. Many of those settlements are distinctive Bedfordshire “ends” villages—hamlets or small villages built in a line along the road—but development within the national character area is threatening the character of many of those small settlements. We must make sure that delivering new development does not come at the expense of maintaining our communities as places where people from far and wide will be able to feel a sense of unique local character and pride. If our countryside and our towns become identikit places that we could see anywhere, people who want to experience them can go anywhere. We must embrace what makes Britain, and in my case Bedfordshire, a great place to spend time.

I hope it has come across in this debate that I wish the Government the very best in their ambition to deliver their national visitor economy strategy later this year and to achieve 50 million visitors per year. In me they will find a constructively critical friend willing to work across the House to deliver on the promise of the tourism industry for my local economy in Mid Bedfordshire and the UK’s economy as a whole. I hope that as the Minister continues to shape his thoughts on his strategy, he will consider my remarks in that spirit. I hope that his strategy will set out how the Government will protect and enhance the attractiveness of the UK offer to visitors from overseas and domestic holidaymakers. That means protecting the things that make Britain great, from the high street, the local pub and the beautiful countryside to the many set-piece tourist attractions that we are known for the world over. I hope that his strategy will also set out a coherent plan to make the UK more price competitive with our major international competitors. The Government cannot simply talk growth into being. It takes real decisions—tough decisions—on competing priorities to make the UK more competitive and bring about growth.

I mentioned electronic travel authorisations, but the industry also raised with me things such as tax-free shopping, visa costs and air passenger duty in preparation for this debate. It is clear that more must be done to bring the cost of visiting the UK down to deliver growth in tourism. I hope that the Minister’s strategy will set out, alongside the work his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are doing, how the Government’s plans for English devolution will empower local communities like mine to drive our local tourism agendas. In particular, I would like to see the completion of the roll-out of local visitor economy partnerships so that counties like Bedfordshire can take our place at the tourism table and shout more easily about all the fantastic things to come and do in our county.

I would also like to see the new mayors and local authorities backed with a framework and real funding from Government to deliver local tourism strategies. I believe that it is desirable to tie all these strands together for the Government to commit to tourism as a priority. Including tourism in the industrial strategy and having a dedicated tourism Minister working cross-departmentally

—not, as he currently is, a tourism Minister stretched across multiple portfolios and Departments—would be a positive first step towards that.

Finally, the Minister knows that I cannot end my speech without a final expression of hope that we will one day be able to cut the ribbon on a new Universal Studios theme park at Kempston Hardwick in Mid Bedfordshire. I know the Government remain locked in negotiations with Universal, and both parties continue to have my full support to do whatever it takes to secure this fantastic investment in my community. I look forward to hearing ideas from colleagues about how we can best support our tourism industry across the United Kingdom.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I remind Members that if they wish to speak they need to bob.

3.18 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this important debate. If Members are thinking about where to visit in the Easter or summer holidays, I have a location in mind. It is somewhere visitors can pick up a fossil, take a boat trip, see the sets where “Peaky Blinders” was shot, or feed the giraffes. If Members need any more clues, it is the heart of the industrial revolution. If Members are still guessing, the answer is Dudley, with its zoo and castle, the Black Country Living Museum and, of course, the historic canals and caverns, where people can enjoy a leisurely boat trip or the beauty of the canals as they go for a picturesque walk.

Dudley borough had 9.6 million visitors in 2023 and has a visitor economy of £447 million. Dudley has something to offer everybody. Its tourism sector has supported a wide range of jobs, from retail and zoology to site managers and tour guides, and is an integral part of the society and fabric of Dudley. It is therefore time we push forward with a plan to revitalise the tourism industry with a fresh start. I must stress that plans to talk about tourism cannot just focus on hotspots like London or coastal towns; they must also focus on towns that are rich in culture and history.

The Black Country Living Museum, for example, has carefully reconstructed shops, houses and industrial areas that represent the Black Country’s history. It was a pleasure to hear that the museum had a record-breaking year in 2023, with 380,000 visitors, including 53,000 students and pupils. I want to encourage more visitors to come to Dudley, not just for the day but overnight, to stay and expand the nighttime economy, so that our bars and restaurants can benefit from the fantastic offerings of the tourism industry.

The nature of supporting the tourism sector is that every £1 spent is multiplied by visitors spending money on attractions, restaurants, hotels, bars and taxis. There is a remarkable opportunity for the Black Country at the moment, offered by the Dudley Canal Trust: the proposed plan by Dudley Canal and Caverns to extend the unique area from the Dudley canal to the Wren’s Nest. It would be great to connect both areas. It is a UNESCO world heritage site, where people can take a fossil home; it is a secret gem in the Black Country. Its prehistoric geology and nature is a beauty to be seen.

I believe that the area should be more connected. The project is estimated to attract half a million tourists in the first eight years of opening if completed.

It is integral to see Dudley from a different lens, as a place where new meets old. It is crucial that we recognise the value of the entire tourism ecosystem, from small businesses to hotels, restaurants and larger attractions, but we need Government support to ensure that we have the resources and infrastructure to succeed. Stagnation in the tourism industry will come if we do not invest. There are far too many empty shops in Dudley town centre. If the tourism industry could be supported, it would attract more businesses to open.

I have two simple requests: will the Minister meet me to discuss the fantastic project to connect Wren's Nest to the Dudley canal to boost tourism in Dudley, and will he work closely with regional towns such as Dudley to ensure that they are at the centre of the Government's plans for tourism?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I will not impose a formal time limit, but there are eight people trying to take part in the debate, so please be considerate when you give your speeches. I know somebody who will definitely be very considerate, so I call David Mundell.

3.23 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Thank you, Sir Edward—I will certainly try. I want to make two general points and then a specific point about my constituency. First, I very much welcome the announcement that the Tour de France will begin in Edinburgh. As I represent a very large constituency in the south of Scotland, it seems to me inevitable that it would have to proceed through my constituency in order to reach England. I therefore make that plea, particularly given that cycling has become so important to the Borders part of my constituency, with the Tweed valley being a world-class mountain biking venue. The mountain biking community has transformed the economy, particularly of the former mill town of Innerleithen.

My second point is a more general one. I think the Government and others can do more to ensure that tourists come out of London. The majority of tourists come into London. We all pass this crowded centre around Parliament and see the streets teeming with people. Of course London has great attractions, but so does the rest of the United Kingdom. We have heard about Dudley and Bedfordshire. We need to encourage tourists to leave London and see the rest of the United Kingdom. In that regard, I hope the Minister and the Government will continue to work with the Scottish Government on their objectives of promoting Scotland. As the Minister would expect, my view is, of course, that it should be Scotland within the United Kingdom, not Scotland as a separate entity, as sometimes they have been moved to suggest.

Like other Members, I obviously advocate the benefits of my constituency. Because it is very large, if I tried to list the attractions and facilities there I would run the risk of missing some, but it is a very scenic, rural area. I am very pleased that Government support is continuing for the Clydesdale Way, which will link cycle and walking routes in the south Lanarkshire part of my constituency, and for the redevelopment of the Crook Inn, a historic inn in the Borders, which will now have a bunkhouse to support walkers and cyclists.

Recently, the Dumfries and Galloway part of my constituency received a disappointing setback when an article appeared in *The Times* on 26 February by a journalist called Gabriella Bennett, in which she said:

“I hate to say it, but I won't be rushing back to southwest Scotland.”

Journalists in national newspapers sometimes do not realise the impact they can have on local businesses and communities. The article is not just wrong but ill researched, because Ms Bennett says:

“Once you get to Dumfries and Galloway and moon over the nature, there isn't an awful lot left.”

Well, she obviously took no time to find out about the plethora of distilleries, art galleries, delis, cafés, restaurants, museums, outdoor activity centres, off-road cycle centres, castles, public gardens, National Trust houses, farm parks, children's activity centres, history tours, guided art tours, golf courses, independent retailers, the planetarium and book and record shops, to name but a few.

I am delighted to say that there has been a fightback. An article by Jane Morrison-Ross—the chief executive of South of Scotland Enterprise—entitled “Please give southwest Scotland a chance” appeared in *The Times* in response. She said:

“Dumfries and Galloway has more to offer than cookie-cutter tourism”.

That is exactly the position. It is a unique offering, but it is not the same as the offering that, say, Universal Studios or a historic industrial centre offers to visitors. Each of our communities has something unique to offer, and we should not be disparaged for the fact that we are remote and rural, and that we luxuriate in our rurality, the scenery, the quietness and the natural environment.

However, Dumfries and Galloway has other features, one of which would appeal particularly to the Minister: the new £2 million destination spa at the Cairndale Hotel in Dumfries, which is already attracting national attention as one of the best spas in Scotland. It takes up 1,300 square metres over two floors and features a thermal pool, an aroma steam room, Himalayan salt and infrared saunas, a herbal lounge and a private bathing suite. I know the Minister would be very welcome in those premises.

Chris Bryant: Are you inviting me?

David Mundell: I am inviting you, because it is a flagship new development in the constituency.

Ellisland farm near Dumfries, which I visited recently, has had a substantial investment of nearly £500,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. That iconic location, which is the former home of Robert Burns, plays a crucial role in Scotland's history and identity. It will be an immersive visitor experience.

I could go on, Sir Edward, but I will not go on for too long. I will mention the Grey Mare's Tail, the fact that Moffat is the dark sky town and the eagle town, Annan harbour and Annandale Distillery. Of course, I must mention the iconic Gretna Green, which has been for so long the United Kingdom's leading wedding venue. If anyone is so minded, there are some very attractive packages on offer. I hope that, in my brief contribution, I have well and truly suggested that Ms Bennett, in her

[David Mundell]

Times article, was completely and utterly wrong about Dumfries and Galloway, and that it is somewhere well worth visiting.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I assure my right hon. Friend, on behalf of the whole House, that we love south-west Scotland—almost as much as Dudley.

3.31 pm

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. Tourism in England is a vibrant and essential part of the country's economy, given the rich tapestry of historic landmarks, cultural experiences and natural beauty. From the bustling streets of London to the serene landscapes of the Lake district, England attracts millions of visitors each year. The UK Government play a crucial role in supporting and promoting tourism, and ensuring that the sector continues to thrive and contribute to the nation's prosperity.

England is renowned for its diverse tourist attractions. London, the capital city, is a global hub of culture, history and entertainment. Visitors flock to iconic landmarks such as the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace and the British Museum. The city's vibrant art scene, world-class dining and shopping districts make it a must-visit destination.

Beyond London, cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool offer unique cultural experiences. Manchester is known for its rich industrial heritage and vibrant music scene, while Birmingham boasts a vibrant and diverse culinary landscape and impressive architecture. Liverpool—of course, the birthplace of The Beatles— attracts music enthusiasts from all over the world.

The English countryside is equally captivating. The Lake district, a UNESCO world heritage site, offers stunning landscapes, hiking trails and picturesque villages. The Cotswolds, with its charming stone cottages and rolling hills, provides a quintessentially English experience. Coastal towns such as Brighton, Polperro and Whitby offer beautiful beaches and a relaxed atmosphere.

The UK Government recognise the importance of tourism and have implemented various initiatives to support the sector. The tourism sector deal, introduced in 2019, aims to boost productivity and investment in tourism. That initiative includes the creation of tourism zones that bring together local businesses and organisations to develop co-ordinated strategies for growth. Those zones focus on increasing off-season visits and enhancing the visitor experience.

The Government are also investing in skills development to ensure that the tourism industry is well equipped with a well-trained workforce. Two new T-level courses in cultural heritage and visitor attractions and catering have been introduced to provide specialised training for future industry workers. Additionally, the Government are working with industry partners to deliver 30,000 apprenticeships a year by 2025.

In response to the covid-19 pandemic, the tourism recovery plan was launched to assist the sector's recovery. That plan includes measures to support businesses, protect jobs and promote domestic tourism. The Government are also focusing on making the UK the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025, aiming to increase the number of international disabled visitors by a third.

The Colne and Holme valleys that I represent are rich in cultural heritage and community spirit. The Marsden Mechanics, a historic building in the village of Marsden, serves as a vibrant community hub and hosts a variety of events, workshops and performances. The canal in Slaithwaite is another local gem, offering picturesque walks and boat trips that showcase the area's natural beauty. Those valleys are also known for their lively festivals that bring together residents and visitors alike.

In Colne valley, the annual Marsden jazz festival attracts music lovers from far and wide, while the Slaithwaite moonraking festival celebrates local folklore with lantern parades and performances. Last but not least is Holmfirth, a charming market town that offers a unique blend of natural beauty and cultural heritage, known for its picturesque landscapes and as the filming location for the iconic TV series—I am testing people's ages here—"Last of the Summer Wine". [Laughter.] They are laughing, so it is fine.

Chris Bryant: He was in it—the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell)! It was the third series.

Paul Davies: I certainly cannot answer that.

Visitors to Holmfirth can explore the winding streets, stone cottages and of course the River Holme. There are many art galleries, festivals and live events, and the fantastic Picturedrome, an early 20th century cinema that now serves as a popular venue for concerts and performances. Amazingly, we also have Holmfirth Vineyard, which produces local wines and capitalises on the area's unique microclimate.

Outdoor enthusiasts will enjoy the fantastic scenery, the fantastic walks and hiking. We have a wonderful facility, the Holme Valley Camping and Caravan Park, which I visited quite recently. It is ideally suited for people to come and enjoy all the wonders of the Holme valley.

Tourism in England is a dynamic and vital sector supported by comprehensive Government initiatives. From the bustling cities to the tranquil countryside, England offers a variety and a wealth of experiences for visitors. Holmfirth in particular stands out as a charming destination in West Yorkshire, offering a mix of cultural attractions and natural beauty that captivates all who visit.

3.37 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this important debate. The theme of this year's English Tourism Week is supporting people and places to drive growth, which is a sentiment that I fully support—and not just because it refers to driving and I have the world-famous Silverstone in my constituency. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Tourism brings so much to our areas. As my hon. Friend noted, South Northamptonshire may not have the illuminations of Blackpool, the beaches of St Ives in Cornwall or the famous Giant's Causeway of County Antrim, but in addition to our racing jewel in the crown, we have the Stoke Bruerne museum alongside the Grand Union canal; Tanks-alot, a tank driving

experience in Helmdon; Salcey forest, a medieval royal hunting ground; Wollaston Museum; Towcester Museum; some beautiful grade I listed churches; some gorgeous gardens such as the Evenley Wood garden; and beautiful high streets in Towcester and Brackley, the latter of which hosts the Brackley's Got Talent summer show and the former a midsummer festival. Visitors do not need to go to my alma mater of Oxford to see history in action. They can go to Sulgrave Manor, a Tudor manor and the ancestral home of George Washington, the first President of the United States of America.

It was recently announced that a local visitor economy partnership for Northamptonshire has been approved by the Government and the tourism body VisitEngland. That is great, as it comes in the year in which the wider country of Northamptonshire hosts the women's rugby world cup and celebrates 75 years of Formula 1, alongside a cultural programme remembering the anniversary of the great fire of Northampton. It is the first step in a long journey to unlock funding and support, and to allow us to compete on the national stage.

I applaud the Government's ambitious strategy to grow inbound tourism to 50 million visits by 2030, but I return to the theme of this week—supporting people and places to drive growth. Many people who run tourism businesses do not feel that support, because they are worried by the Budget announcements on employer national insurance contributions and minimum wage increases, alongside the reduction in business rates. Those policies do not help them to grow.

In response, the Government often just cite the £22 billion black hole or 14 years of chaos, but I gently remind them that that is of little comfort to those business owners. Dismissing years of hard work with a slogan, while pushing on with harmful measures, does not do justice to the worries that they are facing. I implore the Minister to speak to the Chancellor ahead of her spring statement next week and ask her to think again about how she can support our employers, grow businesses as they so desperately want to, and hire young workers and give them their first jobs in our local communities. All those things are slipping away under this Government.

I want my destinations to continue—unlike Oakwood theme park in Wales, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire mentioned, which has announced its closure, with national insurance a contributing factor. Our tourist destinations are based on not just bricks and mortar, but the very people who run them, and we must remember them in all that we do. During the upcoming Easter recess, I urge Members to support their local pubs, take a day trip to their local tourist attractions, and help to preserve the heart of our local communities.

3.40 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this debate. Tourism is a cornerstone of life in South East Cornwall. From the beautiful sand beaches of Whitsand bay to the historic harbour at Polperro, our coastline is a true gem. Visitors come to Looe for its fishing heritage and vibrant seafront, while the wild beauty of Bodmin moor offers a stark contrast to those picture-perfect seaside towns, and Port Eliot is a stunning house and gardens with a rich cultural tapestry. Whether it is surfing, sailing, hiking or simply enjoying a Cornish

pasty with a sea view, South East Cornwall has something for everyone, attracting visitors from across the UK and internationally.

We are so proud to welcome visitors, but we must also ensure that tourism works for the people who live year-round in Cornwall and other coastal communities such as mine. Those communities are distinct from inland neighbours in ways that bring both pride and specific challenges. Tourism brings jobs and investment, but our local services, housing and infrastructure must be able to support residents and visitors alike.

Many industries in my constituency are tied to tourism, and they struggle outside the peak seasons. They rely on the summer booms to sustain them through the quieter months. Although we must celebrate everything that tourism brings, it cannot be our only route to prosperity. We cannot have local families and businesses sitting idle, waiting for the summer season to return. It is important to have balance in our community, as the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire mentioned.

Supporting tourism is not just about increasing visitor numbers. As other Members have said, it is about ensuring that the communities sustaining it can flourish year-round. That means investing in local infrastructure, transport and housing, so that coastal towns such as mine are places where people can afford to live, work and visit. Supporting our local attractions enriches our lives at home and boosts the economy. South East Cornwall has so much to offer. Our community is resilient, but we certainly need recognition and support for the work that goes on year-round.

Labour now represents more coastal seats than ever before. We have the opportunity to deliver the sea change around our coastal towns that is so desperately needed.

Chris Bryant: Terrible!

Anna Gelderd: It was terrible, but it had to be done.

I ask the Minister to outline what support the Government will provide to areas such as South East Cornwall, where tourism is a key part of our economy, to ensure that tourism is sustained and managed, and that it grows sustainably. It is vital that my local community is equipped to thrive in the long term, and that our coastal towns remain vibrant and resilient not just during the peak season but year-round.

3.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for his passion for making the best of our potential. Other hon. Members have raved about their constituencies, and it will come as no surprise that I will do something similar. The only difference will be that at the end, I expect everybody to sign up for a trip to Strangford—they can book their flights on British Airways, Aer Lingus or however they want.

In Northern Ireland, tourism generates some 4.9% of GDP. It is important for us, contributing £750 million to the local economy each year. The industry offers a high number of entry-level positions, and we are proud that it provides training particularly for young people.

[Jim Shannon]

It is one of the few sectors where the majority of employees are women, so there are specific opportunities for more ladies to have jobs in the sector.

External visitors were estimated to have taken some 3.3 million overnight trips to Northern Ireland in 2023. Expenditure associated with those trips was just short of £1 billion, meaning that tourism is worth almost £1 billion as an export business. In addition to that, 2.1 million domestic overnight trips were made by local residents in 2023. We also have a very strong connection with our Scottish Gaelic cousins. There have always been relationships, friendships and families between Scotland and Northern Ireland. My ancestors came from the lowlands of Scotland to Northern Ireland, so that is important to me. Those are some of the things that we can work on.

The central economic theme for Ards and North Down borough council is tourism, which creates jobs, wages and opportunities. We have not yet come close to the potential that we hold, but my local council is working on displaying to the world all that we have to offer. From Airbnbs with stunning sea views to sea-bathing facilities for those who are game enough to try wild-water bathing, from beauty salons to beautiful vistas, and from tours at the world-class Echlinville distillery to rounds of golf on our second-to-none courses, Strangford has it all to offer. From water sports to dolphin-spotting boat tours, in or out of the lough, there is so much for every age to partake of.

We also have a rich culture and history, from our historical monastic trail—St Patrick's, obviously—to one of the top 10 gardens in the world in Mount Stewart, excellently run by the National Trust; that is a place to be visited. From world war sites to modern day marvels, it is all served with a side of the warmest hospitality and the tastiest home-cooked, farm-fresh food that one could ever hope to have. I defy anyone in this House and further afield to try to offer the mix that Strangford has naturally at its fingertips.

Here is the issue. When someone looks up city breaks or adventure weekends, they will have to scroll to find Northern Ireland. I believe that does a disservice to the entirety of the United Kingdom. We are very proud to be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; I say that every time because it is what I believe, and what I think we need to focus on. Although I recognise the benefit of an all-Ireland approach to tourism promotion on paper, in reality we are the poor cousins. That is why I ask our four strong nations to do more to promote each of our nations individually. England is more than London, in the same way that Northern Ireland is certainly more than the Giant's Causeway, as phenomenal as that is.

We need to promote the quick, hour-long flight between London and Belfast, and the removal of APD would help with that. The hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire referred to air passenger duty as one of the issues that constituents had brought to his attention when he talked to them over the weekend. No one who comes to Northern Ireland on a break regrets it; most people just do not know it is an option. If someone books their flight well in advance, they can get it for slightly over £100. If I try to change my flight on the night it costs

almost £500. I will not be doing that, but I give that as an example of where British Airways have you—but I cannot use that terminology as it would not be appropriate.

The benefits of tourism are clear. There must be no barriers to enjoying this United Kingdom as whole. I wish the Minister well, and he has got a keen interest in this. He shows his enthusiasm for this issue, and I know that when we seek the questions we will get the answers. He will encourage us in our quest to put tourism at the top of what we are.

Colleagues of mine made their way to St Patrick's day events in Washington in an attempt to secure a two-way traffic of holidaymakers between us and the States. The hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) referred to one President of the United States; we in Northern Ireland can claim 18 Presidents who were Ulster-Scots, with that history and those cultural links. We believe that our historical and cultural connection with the United States is special. It highlights our shared history, and the possibilities in the future. It is hoped that the success of that trip to Washington will be seen in increased visitor numbers.

The history of this nation is an attraction, but our biggest attraction is the strength of the character of our people. Nothing encourages me as much as the people I meet. The people of Northern Ireland, and the people of Wales, Scotland and England as well, are always very hospitable and chatty, always engaging socially, and always trying to help. That is the sort of nation we have, and the sort of tourism we can build on. We can offer more people more opportunity to be involved in our tourism industry. This rising tide will certainly lift all the ships around this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and invigorate our tourism industry once more.

3.50 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing this debate. I am sure my husband, who is a Bedfordshire native, would have very much enjoyed his hymn to Bedfordshire. It has been a real pleasure to be a part of this debate, and to listen to Members from across the United Kingdom speak with such pride about their communities and extol the virtues of a visit.

Estimates show that visits to the UK are set to rise to above pre-pandemic levels, but in recent years the growth and prosperity that the tourism sector provides to our economy have been hampered. The pandemic is, of course, the primary explanation of the huge reduction in the number of people visiting the UK, but another key factor is Britain's exit from the European Union. In response to a survey asking individuals why they would not consider travelling to the UK, around 60% of respondents identified political uncertainty as a deterrent, and around 45% cited potential increases in post-Brexit travel and accommodation costs.

The UK tourism sector directly employs approximately 3.1 million people, and businesses reliant on tourism-generating revenue have reduced hiring rates since 2016. That has impacted people's livelihoods: individuals reliant on the tourism industry have experienced heightened job insecurity due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and Brexit. During a cost of living crisis, it is so important that people feel secure in their fields of work.

My constituency is home to a number of popular tourist destinations, including Richmond Park, after which my constituency is named. The decline of tourism to the UK has been felt by businesses around my constituency, because the park itself hosts 5.5 million visitors every year. Many of the hospitality businesses in the area rely on the footfall that the park attracts, and I have already received multiple emails from constituents saying how concerned they are about rumoured cuts to the park's police department, which will detract from the tranquillity and safety of Richmond Park.

The park police conduct excellent work in the Royal Parks across London, ensuring that criminal activity and antisocial behaviour are kept to a minimum. The service they provide ensures that Richmond Park remains one of London's top tourist destinations. The tourism industry is tied to so many different sections of our society, and that is just one example of how insufficient funding for an important department can have a knock-on effect.

I am also the proud representative of Kew Gardens which, according to the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, is the 13th most-visited attraction in the UK, with just under 2 million visitors in 2023. If anyone is thinking of something to do this weekend, I recommend a visit to Kew Gardens, particularly to see the blossom and magnolia in their peak season—I swear that it is the best place in the UK to be this weekend. At the moment, they are accompanied by a musical soundscape from students of the Royal College of Music, so it is well worth a visit.

If people are looking for something to eat or drink afterwards, I can recommend a visit to the Original Maids of Honour tea room, just over the road. It is named after the dainty little tarts that have been baked since Tudor times. Henry VIII was allegedly so taken with the recipe that he kept it under lock and key at Richmond Palace, which can unfortunately no longer be visited because it burned down in the 15th century.

Kew Gardens has been suffering from the continued suspension of rail services. The District line and the Mildmay line have seen repeated cancellations and suspensions of services, particularly over the past year. I have heard directly from the director at Kew Gardens how those have affected visitor numbers, not just to Kew Gardens itself but to all the nearby businesses and services. That goes to show how cuts to transport or railway maintenance impact our tourism sector.

Tourism plays a huge role in ensuring the viability of our businesses, and we want the Government to reflect that role by upgrading its status with a dedicated Minister of State for tourism and hospitality. They could provide a holistic view across Government Departments and help to resolve not just some of the issues in my constituency, but issues raised by hon. Members throughout the debate. Promoting our tourism sector should be a focus for the Government. The appointment of a dedicated Minister would provide much-needed oversight and forward thinking to drive tourism and investment in the UK.

In addition, the UK's rich and vibrant cultural heritage is a national treasure, and our creative and tourism industries contribute billions of pounds to our economy and employ millions of people. Our globally renowned creative industries attract visitors to the UK, and we are proud to be home to some of the most visited galleries,

theatres and sports venues in Europe. Many of the creative industries intersect with tourism, and the Liberal Democrats support measures that allow creative industries to flourish, which means making tourism more accessible.

We want to ensure that people everywhere can enjoy the benefits of sport, music and the arts. One such measure would be to rejoin Creative Europe. The creative industry is one of the many sectors that was severely damaged by the catastrophic Brexit deals patched together by the last Conservative Government. The increased red tape, unnecessary bureaucracy and increased costs associated with travel, trade and hiring have left many creative industries struggling. Will the Minister commit to bolstering our tourism and supporting our cherished creative industries by committing to rejoin Creative Europe?

Tourism does not just enrich us economically. The benefits of expanding our horizons would allow for opportunities more broadly. As the Minister will be aware, the previous Government accepted an agreement that allowed EU member state nationals visiting the UK to benefit from a six-month visa waiver, while UK nationals are limited to a 90-day visa waiver when they visit the Schengen zone. That makes tourism challenging for more people—a further example of the appalling deal that the previous Conservative Government secured. By addressing this inequality and bringing forward a more reciprocal agreement, we could encourage more people to travel and explore, broadening opportunities for all British people—that should be central to any Government policy.

I take this opportunity to renew Liberal Democrat calls for the Government to consider entering into a UK-EU youth mobility scheme. We have been talking about this a lot in Parliament—

Chris Bryant: Oh, you have?

Sarah Olney: We have! We have had countless debates and I have mentioned it on many occasions at Cabinet Office questions—my more usual home. Indeed, a Petitions Committee debate is scheduled in this very Chamber for Monday afternoon, when we will doubtless raise the issue again. I urge the Government to consider such a scheme and the opportunities it would create for young people. Some of the recruitment pressures the tourism industry faces could be alleviated by considering the merits of a UK-EU youth mobility visa.

To summarise, the tourism industry in the UK has been blighted by Britain's exit from the European Union and the catastrophic deal the previous Government reached with our neighbours. This has impacted the viability of our businesses and the job security of millions of people. I encourage the Government to take the steps outlined in my speech to help to bolster our tourism sector.

3.57 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I want to praise some of today's fantastic contributions. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing the debate and making a passionate speech, not least in respect of what he called "Universal Studios Bedfordshire",

[Saqib Bhatti]

with which I wish him all success. I thank the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar). As someone who was born and brought up in Walsall, not too far from Dudley, I can attest to the wonderful Black Country and what Dudley has to offer. She made a wonderful case for that.

The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) took us on a tour of the whole of the UK—the urban and the rural—and that was very much appreciated. My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) gave a wonderful tour of her constituency. If I visit her there, I am torn between driving a tank, visiting Silverstone, or doing something at a much gentler pace and visiting some of the churches. The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) talked about the important issue of coastal towns and sustainable tourism. Our good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—a friend of all of ours—made a wonderful case for his constituency. He made the case for wild-water bathing—I guess the clue is in the name—golf and whiskey, which sounds like a perfect holiday. I am sure someone will take him up on that.

I want to single out my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who gave a wonderful, succinct tour of his constituency. Although I noticed that I did not get an invite to the spa, I recognise how much of a one-man tourism champion he is for his constituency. I hope Gabriella Bennett was listening; hopefully she will reconsider her views—and maybe he will give her a tour of the constituency as well.

As we heard from a number of hon. Members, tourism is at the heart of our local economies across all four corners of the UK. Each region's unique history and heritage draws people from all over the world to visit the UK. Whether it is a golf trip to Scotland, a visit to the incredible Titanic museum in Belfast, a walking holiday in the stunning Welsh hills, or a trip to London—or anywhere else in England—there is something exciting to do wherever people are in the UK.

Just yesterday, in the glorious spring sunshine, the shadow Secretary of State and I visited the Charterhouse in central London, which has a fascinating history dating back to the 14th century. The Charterhouse now acts as a museum, a charity caring for people over the age of 60, and a venue for many different events, with the museum gaining support from the national lottery heritage fund. As evidenced by my visit yesterday, we have a thriving heritage sector—in my view, unrivalled the world over.

There are so many other reasons to visit the UK. We have a wonderful hospitality and nightlife economy across the United Kingdom, incredible sports venues and competitions, and some of the most remarkable natural landscapes in the world. In England alone, the tourism sector contributes more than £70 billion to the UK economy annually and employs more than 1.6 million people directly, with millions more benefiting indirectly.

For many of those people, those jobs are essential lifelines. There are thousands of students and other part-time workers who work hard all summer to give themselves that extra bit of cash over the academic year. Some of our retirees busy themselves during the week by volunteering at a local museum or a stately home. Put simply, the UK's tourism sector impacts us all and we should be incredibly proud of it.

That is why English Tourism Week is a critical opportunity to celebrate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire again for tabling this debate at such an apt time in the calendar. The Government have an ambition to achieve 50 million visits; I support them in that ambition, but they are yet to unveil a clear strategy, so I look forward to hearing more; I am sure the Minister will enlighten us on how he is progressing with the release of that strategy. There are many thousands of businesses that rely heavily on a thriving tourism sector, and it is urgent that the Government do all they can to help champion it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire alluded to, I must also look at the impact of the recent Budget. Many hon. Members from across the House have championed tourism in their constituencies, but it is impossible to ignore the dark cloud that looms over the tourism industry. Inevitably, the disastrous Budget by the Chancellor has created a perfect storm for the UK's tourism sector.

The shadow Culture, Media and Sport team hosted a roundtable in February and heard from representatives across the UK tourism sector who were deeply concerned about the rising cost of national insurance contributions. It is estimated that the hospitality industry will incur an extra £1 billion-worth of costs for 774,000 workers who will be newly eligible for employer national insurance in April when the Chancellor's tax rises kick in. In particular, it appears that the lowering of the threshold will cause enormous damage to the industry—but do not take it from me; take it from the chief executive of UKHospitality, Kate Nicholls, who said:

“The change to employer NICs is one of the most regressive tax changes ever.”

Perhaps the Minister can comment on that, because it is a serious concern that many people in the hospitality and tourism sector are raising. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire raised the important issue of pubs, and I hope the Minister will talk about those concerns too.

It is not just the rise in national insurance contributions that will have a huge impact on the tourism sector, however. The shadow Culture, Media and Sport team have also heard from representatives of the UK's most recognisable historic houses and stately homes at our recent roundtable, where they articulated the devastating impact of both business and agricultural property relief changes. Given that the Government have set a target of 50 million annual visitors by 2030, and that almost a quarter of respondents in VisitBritain's most recent sentiment tracker said they would visit a heritage site on their next trip, we cannot afford to put our heritage at risk—but I fear Labour is doing exactly that.

A survey in December 2024 by Historic Houses found that 87% of respondents would be impacted by the changes to BPR and APR, meaning that cash will be diverted from business investment, salaries, repairs and maintenance. Staggeringly, 41% of respondents said they will have to make redundancies or freeze the hiring of new staff. That might mean that some of our most beloved heritage sites are less sustainable and attractive to foreign visitors, less able to recruit local staff—often in rural areas—and less likely to remain open for the public to better understand Britain's rich history. Many of these sites are vital to rural communities and now they are being put at risk, which puts those communities at risk too.

With many businesses in the tourism sector already on the edge, it is deeply concerning that the Chancellor's decisions last October may push them over the cliff edge. The rising cost of national insurance contributions, minimum wage increases, union-enhancing legislation reminiscent of the 1970s and the reduction in business rates relief could have a terrible impact on businesses in the sector: that is what they are telling us. More importantly, it could mean that thousands of people looking for part-time work this summer, especially in rural and coastal communities, will struggle to find it. That could have terrible consequences for the Government's No. 1 mission of economic growth.

I consider the Minister to be a good man; I believe he is sincere in his ambition to increase visits to the UK, but I have asked him before about an impact assessment as a result of the Chancellor's Budget and he has not been forthcoming with that, so perhaps today will be the day that he will share some of those figures on the impact of that Budget on the tourism sector. Across this House, we all agree that tourism is vital for our constituents, and we support his ambition to attract 50 million visitors to the UK by 2030, but the actions that his Government are taking may well do the complete opposite. I hope he can reassure the House and the sector that he will fight for the tourism industry, because we Conservatives will continue to do so.

4.6 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): It is a delight to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. Nobody has yet mentioned Gainsborough Old Hall, one of the most beautiful sights in the country.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson): this is "Blake 2", the second debate we have had on this subject since he has arrived in the House, so I commend him for his dedication to tourism issues. He congratulated the Government on our commitment to the East-West Rail and the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, which will be an important driver of growth in his constituency. Many people have said that they simply do not understand why previous Governments did not get round to doing this.

I note the poker face the shadow Minister is adopting at the moment, but he knows, I am afraid, that I cannot go very far in what I can say about Universal Studios. I have said before that the theme park will be absolutely transformational. One of the key aspects that I pointed out to the executives—I met them when they were over a few weeks ago, and hope to meet them again soon—one of the key aspects of the site is that 80% of the population are within two hours' travel. For both international and UK visitors, it will be a significant addition to our portfolio in the UK and I very much hope that we can get it over the line.

I could take offence at the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire's demands for a dedicated tourism Minister, but I have decided that he already has one, so that is fine: I am a dedicated tourism Minister, and I am absolutely determined to make sure that we make a difference in this territory. When I was a Back Bencher, I was always calling for new Ministers for this, that, and the other, but one of the things about the UK is that we have more Ministers than France and Germany put together—or, for that matter, Australia, India, and New Zealand put together. The constant demand for separate

Ministries can be a mistake, not least because of the connections between issues. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) pointed out, the connection between tourism and the creative industries is so significant that I think it would be a mistake to separate them. We need to make sure we are making the big argument on behalf of a very large sector, rather than hiving tourism off to a separate Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) has written to me, and I will try to respond as fast as I can. Her idea sounds perfectly good; some of the responsibility for what she talked about lies with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and some lies with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, but there is no reason why we cannot have joined-up Government. If we did, we might have a joined-up geopark, as well, so that is something I will look at for her.

The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) made a good point about the importance of working with Scotland. Scotland has managed to develop its own brand identity for international tourism—something that other parts of the UK have not done. We need to build on that, so I am happy to work with the Scottish Government. I have already been to a spa in Scotland this year—the right hon. Gentleman was not there—at the Cameron House Resort on Loch Lomond. We went out on a boat in the middle of Loch Lomond on the coldest day imaginable, and yet the glass of champagne was very welcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) pointed out that the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale was in the original series of—*[Laughter.]* No, he and other hon. Members highlighted that visiting places where films and TV programmes have been made is one of the key drivers for both domestic and international tourism, a joy for many people in the UK, and—in a sense—part of why people come here. I have often wondered whether, at Heathrow or any of our ports, we should have an actor greeting people, though I do not know who it should be—Daniel Craig as James Bond, Olivia Coleman, or Adjoa Andoh.

The hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) referred to Silverstone. It is obviously key to what we in the UK do really well, building on science, innovation and technology—in which we need to do better—as well as sport and tourism.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd)—and what a delight to say "my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall"—made an important point: tourism is great but must be balanced with the other needs of local communities. A community can feel completely denuded because all its accommodation is used for short-term lets that are then empty for large parts of the year. That can be a significant problem, not least because the tourism industry itself needs houses for its workers to live in, so we need to get this right. That is one reason why we want to pursue the legislation introduced by the previous Government on short-term lets; I hope we will be able to do so soon.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is my hon. Friend—made an important point about the character of our people. In the end, tourism is hospitality, and the word "hospitality" comes from a word for

[Chris Bryant]

a host, or guest. If the host is welcoming—if the character of the people is welcoming—that makes a dramatic difference to the whole tourism offer.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park made several points about the EU, and persuaded me that Brexit was really not a good idea. We are working on many of the issues she referred to, including the question of Creative Europe. In the last few weeks, I have discussed that with a European Commissioner. As the hon. Member may know, there will be a summit on 15 May, and we hope to get to a place of much greater cultural interchange and dismantle some of the friction. That matters to the creative industries and the art market—we are the third largest art market in the world and it has been terribly difficult; if someone owns a Matisse and lives in Italy, the London art market is probably the best place in the world for them to sell it, but following Brexit it has been almost impossible to bring an artwork into the country, sell it and send it on with any kind of ease. I am delighted that only last week the Treasury and DCMS, working together, sorted that out for the British art market.

The UK offers a phenomenal plethora of styles of tourism and visitor experiences. As a former vicar, I think of it as the “Hymns Ancient and Modern”—we do it all. We have the very ancient: Stonehenge is perhaps the most famous in the United Kingdom, but there are many others dotted across the whole country, including way up in the isles of Scotland. We have Roman ruins all over the place, including the Tower of London—although for many people that is associated more with Tudor times. The Natural History Museum has just had some of its best-ever visitor figures, making it the second most visited tourist attraction in the UK after the British Museum. Many people also want to see the Angel of the North, a piece by one of our modern great artists, or to visit the Eden Project or many other places across the UK that are brand-spanking new.

On Tuesday, I was in Bath for English Tourism Week. Bath shows it all. It has the Roman baths, though I did not go in this time—as a Minister, I did not think it would be entirely appropriate to get into my bathers. It is the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen’s birth. You can visit Lady Danbury’s house from “Bridgerton”, which is the Holburne Museum, one of many jewels in the crown of our small museums and galleries, which are often not well known and which we need to make more of.

Bath is also going to have a brilliant new £45 million fashion museum in the next few years, building on one of the biggest collections of fashion in the world. If anybody did not manage to go to the DIVA exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum—I am sure the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale went—it was absolutely spectacular and one of the best exhibitions I have ever been to. We have the best castles, in Wales, and probably the best stately homes in the whole of Europe.

We are phenomenally good at putting on live events, including theatre. I do not just mean the London theatre, where we can see some of the best productions in the world and some of the most famous actors live on the stage—I recently saw Rami Malek in a great production of “Oedipus” at the Old Vic; those performances are also probably much cheaper than they would be on

Broadway in the United States of America—but in Leeds, Nottingham, Bath and Chichester. All over the country, there are theatres putting on magnificent productions. Of course, we also have comedy, which is often forgotten as part of our creative industries. Leicester is perhaps one of the most famous places that has a festival, but there are many venues all around the country.

We have great music gigs, with Coldplay being one of the most successful live giggers last year, bringing in thousands of pounds. When I met my Italian opposite number in Naples, I asked him, “What can I do for Italy?” He said, “Get me tickets for Oasis.” It is not only about the large venues, with P!nk and Sam Fender, for instance, performing in Newcastle and at the Stadium of Light. It is also about the small venues; FKA twigs is performing in a tiny venue tomorrow night, to just 200 people. For many, that is just as important as the big venues.

Then there is football. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale also referred to the Tour de France. Sport in general is a very important part of the way we do our tourism.

Of course, there is our nature. We have already heard reference to the Lake district; there are also the Munros in Scotland, the Jurassic coast, the Llŷn peninsula, the Gower peninsula, and one of my favourites, Lindisfarne, which is perhaps one of the most beautiful, sacred and holy places in the whole of our country and in Europe.

What do we need to do? Many Members have referred to the fact that we need to get to 50 million international visitors by 2030. That is money coming into the UK—earning foreign cash is really important. We have to have a national strategy. We have never had one before. If I manage to get this national strategy to pass, I hope that the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire will withdraw his demand for the sacking of this Minister and for having a dedicated one. We have set up a visitor economy council, which has had its first meeting; we have sub-committees working away on specific elements. We are going to have a bigger council meeting with a wider working conference in a couple of weeks’ time in Birmingham.

We need to improve the end-to-end visit. I wonder if any hon. Members have got off a plane at Gatwick recently and tried to get on a train. I defy anybody, unless they have three PhDs—actually, it is probably even worse for those who have three PhDs—to understand the right train to get on at Gatwick, and the right ticket. We need to make these experiences far easier. Leeds station is also completely incomprehensible. I have no idea how to get out of the station. It is a completely impossible conundrum. We need to improve that.

We need to get better at languages so that all the languages that international visitors might need are available not only in Bicester Village, but in many other places across the whole of the United Kingdom, because that is a part of our welcome.

I would love us to be able to sort out a decent transport system to Stratford-upon-Avon. It is one of the great places for many millions to visit—for many reasons as well as the theatre and the connection to Shakespeare. There is great hospitality there, but it is very difficult to get to by public transport.

We need to address the skills shortage and probably the labour shortage, which may go to one of the points that was made earlier by the Liberal Democrats. I am

passionate about this. There are many countries in the world where people think that working in hospitality is not just a job that they might do because there is nothing else to do, but that it is a career that they take real pride in. Someone might be a waiter all their life because they are in a service industry that they care passionately about, and they love engaging with people and making sure that they have a good evening. Yes, we need to do more about that. That is why I want to create—in this Parliament, if possible—five centres of excellence for hospitality in the United Kingdom to match those anywhere else in the world, so that people know that we really do this well. They would cover not only skills that might be taught at a local college, but those relating to running a hotel business, management, marketing and all the elements that make for really good tourism.

The hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire referred to all 650 constituencies—well, he is right. We already have 38 local visitor economy partnerships in England. They cover nearly all of England but, oddly enough, not his patch. We really want to develop them across the whole of England and build a full national strategy with the home nations. I am fascinated by the destination development partnerships that have been growing up in, for example, the north-east; they bind together a whole region to address issues that cannot be addressed town by town.

I want a real welcome and a quality experience for every single person, whether they are a domestic visitor or otherwise. We have to look specifically at the issues that affect coastal areas—historic areas where people used to go on holiday in this country, but now do so less. We also have to do something about mobile coverage, which is just embarrassing. I was in Godalming the other day, and there was absolutely no mobile coverage in the centre of town. I could not even park my car because I could not download an app to do so, let alone find my way to Busbridge village hall, which I was trying to find.

We need to be proud of our food and drink. I am passionate about that. We have better cheese and sparkling wine than France—it is categorically proven now. I love Italy in many ways, but it has only one pudding: tiramisu. We have Sussex pond pudding, jam roly-poly, apple pie, apple dumpling, apple crumble, apple cobbler, Bakewell tart, bread and butter pudding, summer pudding, queen of puddings, banoffee pie, Eton mess, Eve's pudding, tipsy laird, cranachan, treacle tart, figgy pudding, junket—I have had lots of that—lardy cake, knickerbocker glory, rice pudding, Shrewsbury cake and spotted dick, and that is to say nothing about trifle. We can beat the world when it comes to puddings and food, and we should be proud of that.

David Mundell: I am very disappointed that the Minister missed out Ecclefechan tart, which is a delicacy from the community of Ecclefechan in my constituency—it is a treacle-based tart.

Chris Bryant: That is only because I had written it down but could not read my handwriting.

I want to say two final things. First, of course I recognise the problems that the industry faces, and I am seeking to address many of them. There are two ways of looking at what we have done for the hospitality industry.

Obviously, it had 70% relief on business rates, but that was not guaranteed for the future. It was going to go down to zero, but we are committed to keeping it at 40%; that is important.

I accept that there are difficulties for many in relation to the minimum wage. I still think it is important that we pay people properly in this industry, because that is part of changing the industry into one with not just jobs but careers in which people can take pride. Of course, I recognise that the national insurance contributions will be a significant cost for many, but we need to bear in mind the additional expenditure that we are able to bring to bear on so many aspects of the British economy and our public services through the money that that will bring in.

Finally, we need to embrace our history better. There are lots of things that we do magnificently when we talk about our history. Television programmes like “Wolf Hall” enhance that, and that is brilliant and wonderful. We have a responsibility for our museums and galleries. Sometimes places like the British Museum are able to show, unlike any other museum in the world, the whole of the world to the world, and that is a great opportunity.

Lord Ashcroft has a phenomenal collection of Victoria Crosses—the largest in the world. They have been sitting in the Imperial War Museum for a while and have been very well attended. Everybody absolutely adores not just the medals themselves but the stories behind them. I am passionate about trying to find a new home for that collection. I have been talking to Lord Ashcroft and I am determined to find one. If anyone in the room has any ideas about how we could find a new home for that Victoria Cross collection, please do get in touch. I know that there will be people from across the Commonwealth and the whole world who want to see the collection in a permanent home. With that, I commend the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire on this debate and beg that he withdraw his demand that I be sacked.

4.25 pm

Blake Stephenson: I thank the Minister, hon. Members and hon. Friends, who have joined me to debate the Government's strategy to support the tourism industry. I was delighted to secure this important debate in English Tourism Week. I was even more delighted that Members from across the United Kingdom came and we learned all sorts of things about the United Kingdom—we did not just confine ourselves to England.

This week we rightly celebrate the brilliant tourist attractions across our country. It is an opportune time for us as parliamentarians to reflect on the valuable contribution that tourism makes to our local economies. I very much enjoyed the tour we took through the UK this afternoon. I am not sure whether I would prefer to go dolphin spotting and whiskey drinking in Northern Ireland, and neither am I sure which order we are supposed to do those in, or go to the spa in Scotland—alone, perhaps, not with other Members.

All of us in this place will have in our constituencies businesses, venues and attractions that benefit from a vibrant tourism economy. That is why I support the Government's ambitions to achieve 50 million tourism visitors by 2030. I will be eagerly scrutinising the tourism strategy the Government will bring forward later this year and, from what I have heard today, the Minister

[Blake Stephenson]

will reflect on the points made as he brings together the strategy. I hope that that will include a reflection on the role of English devolution, on how the Government can help to increase the UK's price competitiveness and on how his Department will work across Government to support the industry and ensure that we have the right business support. That particularly applies in the context of the increase to employers' national insurance contributions and the other overheads that hospitality and leisure businesses are facing.

I cannot conclude this debate without repeating my desire to work with Government to grow our tourism economy in Mid Bedfordshire and Bedfordshire as a

whole. Universal's proposed theme park in my constituency would absolutely turbocharge the local economy, and we must make sure the UK as a whole has the right strategy to take full advantage of it.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): It is only a pity that nobody mentioned beautiful, bracing Skegness in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the tourism industry.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 20 March 2025

TREASURY

Annual European Union Finances Statement

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones):

I am today laying before Parliament “The European Union Finances Statement 2024 on the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement” (CP 1296). This is an annual publication; this year’s edition covers the period from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024. This publication is available on gov.uk:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/eu-annual-statement>

The publication sets out the Government’s updated estimate of the financial settlement on withdrawal from the EU. HM Treasury estimates that the current total net value of the financial settlement is £30.7 billion since the UK ceased to be an EU member state in February 2020. Of this, £25 billion has been paid up to the end of December 2024, and the forecast of future outstanding net liabilities is £5.7 billion.

[HCWS536]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Varying the Leveson Order

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This is a joint statement made with the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

As Ministers with joint responsibility for the Leveson inquiry into the culture, practices, and ethics of the press, today under section 20(7) of the Inquiries Act 2005, we have decided to vary the restriction orders issued by Sir Brian Leveson on 2 December 2011 and 29 November 2012. This variation, at the request of Associated Newspapers Ltd, will enable Associated Newspapers Ltd to fulfil its preservation and disclosure obligations in relation to documents provided to the Leveson inquiry in its possession, obligations that come from claims brought against Associated Newspapers Ltd by Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon, Elizabeth Hurley, Sir Elton John, David Furnish, Sir Simon Hughes, Prince Harry, The Duke of Sussex and Sadie Frost Law.

The documents were prepared by the Information Commissioner’s Office and consist of spreadsheets of the materials seized from the private detective Steven Whittamore/JJ Services during the course of Operation Motorman, a 2003 investigation by the Information Commissioner’s Office into allegations of offences under the Data Protection Act 1998 by the British press.

We have decided to vary the restriction orders so as to allow Associated Newspapers Ltd to retain the documents (previously retained in breach of the restriction orders) and disclose them solely for the purposes of the claims.

In this case, in our judgement, the paramount public interest lies in enabling Associated Newspapers Ltd to meet its disclosure obligations, so that justice can be done.

A variation notice has been shared with the parties to the legal proceedings, and published on gov.uk. This decision makes no comment on the merits of the claims, which is wholly a matter for the courts to determine.

[HCWS535]

EDUCATION

Families First Partnership Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):

Today, I am launching the programme guide for the families first partnership programme, which will begin delivery from April 2025. This represents a major milestone in the Government’s commitment to rebalancing the children’s social care system through earlier intervention—and ensuring that we break down barriers to opportunity and provide all children with the best start in life.

The publication of the programme guide confirms our expectations of statutory safeguarding partners—children’s social care, police and health—and relevant agencies, including education and childcare settings, when it comes to implementing reforms to family help, multi-agency child protection and family group decision-making. We are building on a body of evidence about what we know works to support families to stay together and thrive.

The programme guide is just one aspect of the wider implementation support offer we are providing through the programme. It includes sharing learning from the families first for children pathfinder, which has been testing reforms in 10 local areas, along with the best practice and best evidence from across children’s social care.

The families first partnership programme is backed by over £500 million of funding in financial year 2025-26, via the local government finance settlement—nearly doubling investment in preventative services. Over time, we expect this investment to safely reduce the number of looked after children.

Our ambition is for high-quality local services that place children and families at the centre of their design and provide meaningful and appropriate support and protection for families as their needs change over time. We will only achieve this if our journey of change is taken as a team, using a multi-agency approach to enact whole-system reform. We envision a transformed system where practitioners from social work, police, health, education and beyond collaborate to promote the wellbeing of children and keep them safe from harm.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all staff across children’s social care, police, health, and education for their tireless efforts in ensuring all children receive the support and protection they need.

Together, we can create a system which provides children and families with the right support at the right time, ensuring more children can grow up with the right love and support around them.

[HCWS539]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Review of Disclosure and Fraud Offences: Part 1 Report

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I am pleased to inform the House that the Home Office has today published Jonathan Fisher KC's independent review of disclosure report, "Disclosure in the Digital Age".

The review's findings highlight the significant challenges caused by the exponential growth of digital material in criminal investigations, particularly in serious and complex cases. This has placed significant burdens on law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and criminal courts. The growing scale of the problem now impedes the ability of the Crown to swiftly bring criminals to justice.

In response, Jonathan Fisher KC has made 45 recommendations which mirror the disclosure regime's impact on the full breadth of the criminal justice system. As published today, his key overarching recommendations for reform are:

- to modernise existing legislation and reduce administrative burdens by utilising advanced technology.

- to improve criminal court processes with consideration for an entirely new intensive disclosure regime court pathway, designed for the most complex criminal cases.

- to enhance disclosure quality by designing a new national learning standard across all law enforcement agencies.

I thank Jonathan Fisher KC for his work in providing us with such a comprehensive review. The Government will now carefully consider all recommendations made in the report and will work at pace to provide a Government response later this year.

I am confident that we can work together to design a modern disclosure regime that can keep pace with the rising level of digital material, facilitate swifter justice for both victims and defendants and continue to build public confidence in the criminal justice system.

The report has been laid before parliament today (CP 1285) and it will also be available on <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/independent-review-of-disclosure-and-fraud-offences>

[HCWS538]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

EWS1 Professional Indemnity Insurance Scheme: Contingent Liability Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): In September 2022, the EWS1 professional indemnity insurance scheme launched for competent fire safety professionals undertaking EWS1 assessments—fire safety assessments for the external wall systems in residential buildings. The scheme aimed to enable competent professionals to access the indemnity cover they need to undertake external wall assessments.

On 27 June 2022, the Minister of State for Housing published a written ministerial statement notifying

Parliament of an unlimited contingent liability, with the Government Actuary's Department making a best estimate of expected losses of circa £100 million.

The scheme closed on 30 October 2023. Departmental research showed that assessors can access suitable insurance from the open market at a competitive premium and with a wider scope of coverage. The market has responded to the protection gap the Government were looking to address, which removes the requirement for the Government-backed scheme. Continuing with the scheme would no longer be a good use of public funds.

Government action has helped to get the market moving again and address this issue. The relevance of EWS1 forms is declining as wider Government interventions have taken effect that support lenders to reduce their reliance on EWS1 forms and instead use other forms of documentation to support mortgage lending decisions. The changes we have made have helped improve access to cover across the professional indemnity insurance market.

Policies sold under the scheme to date will continue to be insured under the original terms. Due to improving market conditions, fewer policies were sold than anticipated. The maximum possible loss from claims arising is £70 million. That may decline further, should policies be cancelled. The policies have a 15-year term, meaning that claims are possible until 2038. The risk is limited by the number of buildings, and number of EWS1 assessments. To further mitigate this risk, we only offered professional indemnity insurance cover for accredited professionals who have the requisite training, expertise and knowledge to undertake the EWS1 assessment. In addition, completed EWS1 assessments are subject to an audit process to ensure they are being completed in line with the British Standards Institution PAS 9980 methodology.

The Treasury approved the proposal to launch the scheme and have been informed of its closure. My Department will keep Parliament informed of any changes to this contingent liability on a regular basis.

A departmental minute will today be laid in Parliament, providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS537]

JUSTICE

Whiplash Injury (Amendment) Regulations 2025

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I would like to inform the House that I am laying the draft Whiplash Injury (Amendment) Regulations 2025 by way of affirmative procedure.

Subject to approval by both Houses, the regulations will increase the fixed tariff for compensation for whiplash injuries lasting up to two years which occur on or after 31 May 2025. The regulations will implement the recommendations made by the Lord Chancellor in her report of the statutory review of the Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021, published on 21 November 2024.

The whiplash tariff compensation figures will be around 15% higher than the original tariff, which was brought into force in 2021 by the Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021. This is both to account for the effects of inflation since 2021 (by measure of the consumer

prices index) and to include a buffer for expected inflation until 2027. The uplift will ensure that claimants can continue to receive appropriate compensation for whiplash

injuries that occur before the next statutory review of the tariff. The original whiplash tariff from 2021 will continue to apply to relevant whiplash injuries from road traffic accidents that occur before 31 May 2025.

[HCWS534]

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**not later than
Thursday 27 March 2025**

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