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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 8 April 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

11.34 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Treasury questions, I have agreed to a request from the Chancellor to make some brief comments about the global financial situation, following which the shadow Chancellor and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson will be allowed to respond and ask a question. I will then call other hon. Members to ask the questions on the Order Paper in the usual way. Other Members may well wish to refer to the Chancellor's comments in their supplementary or topical questions, and I will take a more liberal view of the scope of supplementary questions than is usually the case. I call the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you say, I would like to make some brief remarks on the current economic situation.

The United States decision to impose tariffs has had, and will continue to have, huge implications for the world economy. These implications have been reflected in the reaction we have seen in global markets in recent days, which the financial authorities have of course been monitoring closely. This morning, I spoke to the Governor of the Bank of England, who confirmed that markets are functioning effectively and that our banking system is resilient.

I know, too, that this is an anxious time for families, who are worried about the cost of living—we have your backs. British businesses are worried about what a changing world will mean for them—we have your backs, too. This Government are clear-eyed that our response to global change cannot be to watch and wait, but instead to act decisively, to take the right decisions that are in our national interest, protecting working people. All the decisions that we make as a Government will be underpinned by the stability of our non-negotiable fiscal rules.

A trade war is in nobody's interests. That is why we must remain pragmatic and cool-headed, and pursue the best deal with the United States in our national interest. That remains our priority. It was part of the discussion that I had with US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent last week. But we have been clear that nothing is off the table. That is why we will continue to back British businesses during these uncertain times, particularly in industries that are most affected, as we rebuild our industrial base here in Britain.

We showed that backing yesterday when the Prime Minister and I announced new measures to give British car makers certainty and stability, and to support them on the transition to electric vehicles. We have put forward plans to support our life sciences sector by cutting back

the time it will take to set up clinical trials in the UK. It is why we are working with our international allies to reduce barriers to trade right across the world. Over recent days I have had discussions with my counterparts in Canada, Australia, Ireland, France and Spain, and with the European Commission. We will pursue those talks in earnest. Tomorrow, I will hold talks with the Indian Government as part of our two nations' economic and financial dialogue, as we seek to secure a new trade deal with India.

Finally, we must go further and faster in our mission to kick-start economic growth. I know that the challenges facing the global economy, and their potential impact, could be profound. As a Government, we must step up to that challenge to deliver security for working people through our plan for change, which is underpinned by stability, reform and investment—prioritising the builders, not the blockers; reforming our public services, not defending the status quo; investing in our long-term infrastructure, not cutting it for the short term. Security for working people, renewal for Britain—that is our focus, and that is what this Government will deliver.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): I thank the right hon. Lady for advance notice of her comments.

This is a time of great concern for millions of people up and down our country, for businesses, and, as an open-trading nation, for our economy at large. Free trade has been the bedrock of prosperity for our country, and for many countries around the world, for decades. It has raised billions of people out of poverty. Tariffs are the enemy of free trade, and we on the Conservative Benches will do whatever we can to assist the Government in getting those tariffs down.

Having said that, of course we will never cease to be an effective Opposition who vigorously hold the Government to account—not least on the disastrous decisions that they have already taken in respect of our economy. We will be responsible when it comes to these matters, particularly where market sensitivities are engaged.

I want to ask the right hon. Lady the following questions. First, could she provide further details of the US negotiations and specifically whether further meetings with Scott Bessent and others have been arranged that involve her? Secondly, which areas beyond tariffs are being discussed in those negotiations? Thirdly, which sectors beyond cars and life sciences are being considered for potential Government support? Finally, could she update the House on what options there are for protecting sectors of the economy that might be affected by the dumping of goods as a consequence of trade diversion?

Rachel Reeves: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that response and for his offer to work constructively. I know from my time as shadow Chancellor that those moments when we can work constructively together in the national interest, whether in response to covid or in supporting Ukraine against the aggression of Russia, are when this House is at its best.

The shadow Chancellor asked for further details in a number of areas. Discussions are ongoing across a range of Government Departments, including the Treasury, with the United States, and I will be meeting US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent shortly. Beyond tariffs, we are

discussing a range of different areas, but the focus is on reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, with a particular focus on those sectors that are subject to the higher tariffs.

Although the 10% tariffs are lower than those for many other countries around the world, and we welcome that, the additional tariffs on cars, on steel and potentially on life sciences pose a real challenge to our country, because those are some of our biggest export markets. That is why we made the announcements yesterday, and in those sectors—automotives, life sciences and steel—we will continue to take the action that is necessary, working in partnership with business and trade unions, to make sure we are addressing those issues. We are also using institutions such as the British Business Bank, the National Wealth Fund and UK Export Finance to help businesses through these times.

The shadow Chancellor also mentioned concerns around dumping. We are working with colleagues around the world to understand those implications, but our first priority is not to create more trade barriers but to reduce the ones that exist today.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): People up and down the country will be incredibly concerned about what Trump's trade war means for their living standards and their communities. At the same time, people want to show that Britain is not going to take Donald Trump's trade tariffs lying down. We welcome the Chancellor's announcement that the Government will be working further and faster with our allies abroad. Can she confirm that any new trade deals will be brought before this House for a vote before they are ratified? At the same time as working with our allies abroad to create new export markets, will the Chancellor and the Government commit to a "Buy British" campaign as part of a broader national effort to encourage people to buy British here at home?

Rachel Reeves: I thank the hon. Lady for those questions. This is a time for pragmatism and cool heads, not to rush a response. We are working closely with business. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade announced in the House last week a call for evidence on the response that businesses are looking for. Ratcheting up barriers to trade and ratcheting up tariffs will not be in our country's interests, whether in terms of inflation or, indeed, for supply chains. We need to have cool heads and think about the national interest, not give knee-jerk reactions.

We are very much focused on doing deals with other countries around the world. There is the EU-UK summit on 18 May. We are hosting the economic and financial dialogue with Minister Sitharaman, who is coming to London today for those conversations, and those discussions are ongoing with a number of countries. Of course, any treaties would be brought forward for ratification by this House.

In terms of buying British, I think everyone will make their own decisions. What we do not want to see is a trade war, with Britain becoming inward-looking, because if every country in the world decided that they wanted only to buy things produced in their country, that would not be a good way forward. Our country has benefited hugely from access to global markets, and we

will continue to want to be able to do that, because that is in our national interest, for working people and businesses in this country.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Tax Evasion

1. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help tackle tax evasion. [903656]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Closing the tax gap and ensuring that everyone is paying the tax they owe is one of the Government's top priorities. The autumn Budget marked a step change to close the tax gap with the most ambitious package ever. The Government built on that in the spring statement, taking the total additional gross tax revenue raised per year to £7.5 billion by 2029-30.

Paul Waugh: The UK tax gap grew by a shocking £5 billion in 2023, in the dying days of the Conservatives, and former Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi was sacked for failing to declare an investigation by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs into his tax affairs. I welcome the Treasury's crackdown on tax avoidance. Does my hon. Friend agree that Labour's prudence with a purpose will be shown by investing those taxes in the child poverty strategy this summer?

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. He is right to say that the £7.5 billion of additional revenue from closing the tax gap is a huge boost to the public finances, which enables us responsibly to fund public services and deliver key priorities. Those priorities include free breakfast clubs at all primary schools in England. The first 750 of them are beginning this month via our early adopters scheme, which is worth £450 to parents and carers. To go further the Government will bring forward their comprehensive child poverty strategy as soon as possible.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): What steps are the Government taking to address the concerns of overseas companies that are evading VAT and online sales by fraudulently registering UK addresses?

James Murray: At the spring statement the hon. Gentleman will have seen the Government set out progress on measures in the autumn Budget to tackle a range of sources of tax avoidance and the tax gap. That includes prosecuting more fraudsters, introducing a new HMRC reward scheme for informants, tackling phoenixism and tackling the offshore non-compliance tax gap.

Economic Growth

2. **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the spending review to help increase levels of economic growth. [903657]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Growth is the No.1 priority of this Government. That is why in the autumn Budget and the spring statement we unlocked an additional £113 billion for capital spending, compared with the plans that we inherited from the previous Government. Yesterday we announced significant support for the automotive sector and life sciences, and ahead of the spending review in June we have announced the roll-out of an additional 60,000 places in construction skills so that we can build the homes and infrastructure that our country desperately needs.

Deirdre Costigan: To drive progress on our growth mission and get the most out of taxpayers' money, it is vital that Departments work collaboratively and not at odds with each other. Will the Chancellor outline how she is promoting cross-departmental working and planning as part of the spending review?

Rachel Reeves: The Chief Secretary to the Treasury is working closely in a constructive way to bring together clusters of colleagues to discuss some of the pressing issues that span Departments and that no one Department can address on its own, whether that is reform of special educational needs and disabilities provision for early years, or tackling issues around homelessness and the cost of temporary accommodation. We are working cross-Government to address some of those cross-cutting issues.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The Chancellor is right to focus on increasing economic growth, so will she please explain why my office is still waiting for a response on behalf of a small business to a letter that I sent on 12 December, asking her to look into the impacts of her national insurance rise on small businesses? We asked for an update on 11 February, I raised a point of order on 10 March, and I still have not had a response. Will she please get a response to me as soon as possible?

Rachel Reeves: I will follow up on that issue. The smallest businesses—those that employ the equivalent of four people on the national living wage—will be paying no national insurance at all from this April. Up to 1 million of the smallest businesses will be paying less or the same national insurance as they were paying previously.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Since the spring statement the world has been rocked by the announcements by President Trump on tariffs last week. It is an event as significant as the financial crisis of 2008, or perhaps as covid, and in those instances the state unleashed everything it could to try to resolve those issues. Is the Chancellor considering changing any of her rules to ensure that everything that the state can throw at this problem is being done?

Rachel Reeves: It is incredibly important to retain cool heads at this moment. The tariffs have been imposed, and we are working closely with our friends and counterparts in the United States to reduce the impact from those, not just in the UK but around the world as well. As I said in my opening remarks, at the same time we are looking to secure better trading relationships with some of our biggest trading partners around the

world. Of course, as we did yesterday, we are looking at some of the sectoral responses, including on life sciences, automotives and steel, but the fiscal rules are very important for giving our country the stability it needs. We saw what happened when the previous Government lost control of the public finances: it resulted in interest rates going through the roof, meaning higher costs for businesses and for working families. We will not make those mistakes. That is why the fiscal rules are non-negotiable and stability for this Government is sacrosanct.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Is now not the right time to start trying to make our own luck? In that light, would it not also be the right time for the Chancellor to give the green light to the upgrade of the A66 between Penrith and Scotch Corner? Some 25% of traffic on that A road is freight, which is twice the average for A roads across the country, and it is outrageous that so much of the road is single carriageway. Would it not be great for the economy, as well as save lives, if the Chancellor gave the upgrade the green light today?

Rachel Reeves: Impressive. We will be considering all such schemes as part of the spending review, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to go further and faster to grow our economy. That is why we are spending £113 billion more on capital investment in this Parliament, compared to the plans that we inherited, which means that we can upgrade more roads, rail lines and energy infrastructure, and build the 1.5 million homes our country needs too.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Two weeks ago, the spring statement rushed through changes to disability benefits, or “pocket money” to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, to help plug the £14 billion gap in public finances created by the first Labour Budget. Now we are already in the Office for Budget Responsibility's scenario 2 on tariffs, and the Chancellor is once again forecast to be out of room on her fiscal targets. What does she plan to ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to do to update departmental budgets in his multi-year spending review in order to avoid punishing businesses and people once again with further taxes?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman is jumping the gun somewhat. We delivered the spring statement just two weeks ago, in which we were able to restore the fiscal headroom after the change in global bond yields. We will set out the Budget in the autumn, moving to one fiscal event a year, which is very different from the multiple Budgets we had from the previous Government. We have set the spending totals for the spending review and we will be setting out the departmental allocations on 11 June.

Second Homes

3. **Andrew George (St Ives) (LD):** What assessment she has made of the potential impact of her tax policies on investment in second homes. [903658]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): While short-term lets and second homes can benefit the tourist economy, we recognise that they can impact the availability and affordability of main homes in some

communities. That is why we have enabled councils to charge a premium of up to 100% on the council tax bills of second homes, increased the higher rates of stamp duty land tax on the purchase of second homes and abolished the furnished holiday lets tax regime.

Andrew George: I am grateful to the Minister for that response, but I believe we can go further, because this is not about the politics of envy but about the politics of social justice. In Cornwall, it cannot be right that through the small business rate relief system, over £500 million of taxpayers' money has gone into the pockets of holiday homeowners in the last 10 years. Many of those homeowners have flipped their second homes into the small business rating system to take advantage of that loophole. Will the Minister meet me so that we can find a more equitable way of spending public money that goes into first homes rather than second homes?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I agree with him about the importance of taking the right action to tackle second homes. I understand he had a meeting with the Minister for Housing and Planning last week, and I would be happy to follow up any items that arose from that. Our plan to build more homes includes 4,500 new homes in every year in Cornwall, and I hope he will support those building plans too.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I wish to add my voice as an MP from Cornwall to say that some of the actions the Government have taken so far on second homes have been really helpful. The Renters' Rights Bill will help with those evictions when people are flipping their houses. I also ask that we look at the loophole between council tax and business rates, and at the registration or licensing scheme on second homes, which the Government will hopefully bring in soon.

James Murray: I appreciate the concerns that second home owners may move to the business rates system. I emphasise that there are requirements that must be met before properties can be assessed for business rates. Those have recently been strengthened, but we will keep them under review.

New Homes: Affordability

4. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase the affordability of new homes. [903659]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have set out our ambitions to build 1.5 million homes during this Parliament as part of our plan for change. At the spring statement I announced steps towards that ambition, with an additional £2 billion investment in social and affordable housing next year as a down payment on further investment at the spending review in June.

Dr Huq: I welcome the Chancellor's "build, build, build" policy, but with temporary housing in London costing £4 million a day, soaring rents and a frozen local housing allowance, it is no wonder that London councils fear going bankrupt and having to rehouse people from

outside the capital, where only 5% of homes are affordable. In the comprehensive spending review, will my right hon. Friend look into possibly uprating this stingy Tory legacy, so that Londoners are not forced out of London?

Rachel Reeves: The key thing we need to do is build the homes our country desperately needs. That is why I put £600 million of investment into creating 60,000 additional places for people to learn the construction skills we need, and into good jobs, paying decent wages and building the homes we need. That is also why we are reforming the planning system, so that we can actually get those homes built. We are backing the builders, not the blockers, which is what the Conservatives did.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): At the weekend, *The Times* revealed the problems in the retirement housing market, in terms of both new builds and resales, and many of my constituents have been experiencing a loss on the houses and flats that they have inherited. Does the Chancellor consider the housing market to be adequately providing decent, affordable homes for those who are downsizing as well as first-time buyers?

Rachel Reeves: I would be very happy to arrange a meeting for the hon. Lady with the relevant Minister to discuss some of those specific issues around retirement properties. She makes a really important point. We need to make it easier for people to downsize to free up those properties, including in the private sector, so that more homes are available for families.

Economic Growth: North-East

5. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to increase economic growth in the north-east. [903660]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): Securing economic growth across the country is the Government's No. 1 mission. We are working in partnership with the Mayor of the North East, providing the North East combined authority with an integrated funding settlement from '26-27, and working with it on its local growth plan.

Emma Foody: The combined authority has identified a key growth corridor sweeping across my constituency, but a historical lack of investment to upgrade the Moor Farm and Seaton Burn roundabouts causes relentless disruption and holds back growth, investment and opportunity. There is a business plan in the north-east growth plan and in the road investment strategy. Does the Minister agree that that is exactly the sort of scheme that this Labour Government should support to boost economic growth in every region?

Emma Reynolds: The Government are committed to improving roads. We agreed a £4.8 billion settlement for National Highways and funded a £500 million uplift for local roads in this financial year. Funding for the RIS3 programme, which my hon. Friend mentioned, will be considered in phase 2 of the spending review, and I encourage her to continue to engage with the Minister for roads on this issue.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I presume Mr Lamont thinks it is north-east Scotland, rather than north-east England.

John Lamont: This Government decided to cancel the A1 upgrade, which will harm the economy not just in the north-east of England, but in the south of Scotland. What economic impact assessment did the Government make before deciding to cancel that vital road link?

Emma Reynolds: Nice try. In terms of north-east growth, I have already said that we are working very closely with the Mayor of the North East combined authority. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman asks questions about roads relevant to his part of the country at Transport questions.

Mr Speaker: I now call the Minister to answer Alistair Carmichael's question on the potential impact of changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief on farmers, which was omitted in error from earlier versions of the Order Paper.

Farmers: Tax Reliefs

6. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If she will meet farming representatives to discuss the potential impact of changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief on farmers. [R] [903661]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): As the Minister with responsibility for the UK tax system, I have had several meetings with organisations on this matter since the autumn Budget last year. On 18 February, I and the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs met the National Farmers Union, the Tenant Farmers Association, the Country Land and Business Association, the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers, the Ulster Farmers Union, NFU Cymru, NFU Scotland and the Farmers Union of Wales.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Chancellor's human shield for that answer, but the fact that the Chancellor—who is sitting on the Front Bench—was not prepared to stand up and answer for herself demonstrates a distinct lack of respect for farmers, bordering on contempt. Will she not meet the farming unions, the banks, the professional organisations, and even the supermarkets themselves to hear why they all think her calculations are wrong? If the Minister wants to ask her before he stands up, I am sure we will all allow him a second or two.

James Murray: That was not the most dignified question from the right hon. Gentleman. On the Chancellor's behalf, I have met numerous organisations about this matter, including those I listed a moment ago. I met the right hon. Gentleman himself when he came to the Treasury, and of course there have been extensive debates in this place. We may not agree on the way forward, but I do not think anyone can accuse us of not having listened.

Foreign Investment: UK Summit

7. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the UK international investment summit 2024 on levels of foreign investment. [903662]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): Increasing investment in the UK, both public and private, is the Government's absolute priority. It is the route to restarting badly needed productivity and wage growth. As the hon. Member will know, at the international investment summit, companies committed to a record-breaking £63 billion-worth of investment, which is set to help to create around 30,000 jobs.

Lincoln Jopp: I thank the Minister for that answer. I particularly thank him for saying that investment is the Government's top priority, because the Government announced on 17 October that they had secured this £63 billion. We have heard from the Chancellor that she is going to act decisively, so I just want to check her track record on that. The Government have had six months and £63 billion. How much money has gone out of the door for those oven-ready projects across the country?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member will be excited to know that the Business Secretary will be announcing in the coming weeks that shovels are already in the ground, or will be going into the ground, for some projects. I am a very good colleague to Ministers, so I am not going to pre-empt that announcement today.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): A recent PWC survey showed that the UK is now the second most attractive investment destination among global chief executives, ahead of countries such as China, Germany and India. That shows that the Government's careful stewardship of our economy has led to stability within the global landscape. Does the Minister agree that the UK is now open for business after years of Conservative chaos?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend consistently asks good questions that go to the heart of the matter. If I look back over the past 14 years, I see that British business investment has been the lowest in the G7 year after year. We are going to put that right.

Economic Growth: Transport Infrastructure

8. **Sadik Al-Hassan** (North Somerset) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase economic growth through new transport infrastructure. [903663]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The growth mission is the central mission of this Government. At the Budget, we delivered a £1.1 billion cash increase to the transport budget for 2025-26 compared with 2024-25, representing a 1.5% real-terms increase. We will set out further spending plans for transport in June.

Sadik Al-Hassan: What value does my right hon. Friend expect that the recently announced and much-anticipated Portishead and Pill railway line will add to the local economy of my constituency of North Somerset?

Darren Jones: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaigning on this issue. As I represent the neighbouring constituency, I declare that the project may have some indirect benefit for my constituents. I can confirm to the House that the project supports regional and national strategic objectives. The West of England is the most productive city region outside of London, and it is set to continue to grow. An efficient and reliable rail link between Bristol and Portishead will support a range of large and small sites for housing and employment across the region, halving journey times and opening a wide range of job and leisure opportunities for the residents of North Somerset.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): If steel production ceases or is curtailed at the Scunthorpe steelworks, there will be a massive impact on the wider economy in northern Lincolnshire. Can the Minister give an assurance that contingency plans, including improvements to transport infrastructure, are in place should the worst happen?

Darren Jones: We recognise how important this issue is for the hon. Member's constituency, the region and, indeed, the national economy. My ministerial colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade are in discussions on this particular issue, but in our infrastructure strategy we are considering, as he would expect, the best value for aligning investments between housing, rail, energy and other types of infrastructure to deliver growth for everyone, in every region of the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): We know that the Energy Secretary is against airport expansion unless it is in Doncaster, and we know that many Labour MPs are against airport expansion unless it is in Pakistan. To be fair, at least the Chancellor wants airport expansion actually in this country, but at the same time she is jacking up air passenger duty by as much as 16%. Only this Chancellor could be pro-airport, but anti-passenger. Labour's Climate Change Committee wants to see air passenger numbers fall by 2030, so I ask the Minister: does he?

Darren Jones: No.

National Wealth Fund: Regional Growth

9. **Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the national wealth fund to increase regional economic growth. [903664]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The national wealth fund has had constructive meetings with all our mayors, and we have given a mandate to the national wealth fund to work with mayors on tailored offers for their communities. I am meeting Mayor Andy Burnham later today to take forward that shared objective to ensure that growth is generated everywhere and felt in all parts of our country.

Navendu Mishra: As a fellow north-western MP, I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, share my pride that the banks of the River Mersey were the birthplace of the industrial revolution, and my constituency of Stockport continues to be a hub for innovation. We have many fantastic businesses in Stockport, including KNDS in the Heaton, which manufactures military bridging systems and the Boxer armoured vehicle for the British Army. Can the Minister outline how the national wealth fund will fuel economic growth in Stockport and the investment we need in our local infrastructure?

Rachel Reeves: I visited Stockport with my hon. Friend and the Mayor of Greater Manchester last year to see the regeneration work happening there, linking new investment in housing with transport infrastructure. I thank my hon. Friend for his leadership. Last month, alongside the increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, we also set the national wealth fund's strategic direction, with a focus on support for the defence sector through dual-use technology, creating more good jobs in all parts of the country, including Stockport.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Economic policy should benefit all regions of Britain, including rural counties such as Lincolnshire, where we grow a disproportionate amount of the food that feeds the nation. Does the Chancellor recognise that, in an age when the two biggest economies in the world are protecting their industries—including agriculture—the time has come to reinvest in manufacturing and to consume more of what we produce here in Britain? To echo the call of the Liberal Democrats' spokesperson, we should buy British. That means using Government procurement to back British jobs, British projects and British workers.

Rachel Reeves: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has set out new reforms for procurement rules to enable just that. We want more British businesses to win contracts. We want more small businesses in Britain to win contracts—businesses in all parts of the economy, including in food and farming. In farming, we gave a record settlement of £5 billion in the Budget last year to support this important part of our national economy.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): There is currently no tram network from central Sheffield to Oughtibridge, Wharnccliffe Side, Deepcar or Stocksbridge, and no operational train service to those areas. My constituents want the Sheffield tram network to be extended to Stocksbridge and to connect those rural communities with jobs, education and hospitals, as well as supporting the advanced manufacturing district and the steel plant in Stocksbridge. Will the Minister meet me and the Mayor of South Yorkshire before the spending review to discuss the next steps to establish the Stocksbridge extension to the Sheffield tram-train service?

Rachel Reeves: The Chief Secretary is working closely with mayors, including Oliver Coppard, to understand their priorities for the places that they represent for the purpose of the spending review in June, and will continue that work. At the same time, as the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies) pointed out, we are backing the airport at Doncaster, bringing more good jobs to South Yorkshire.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): What discussions has the Chancellor had with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that the national wealth fund is used to promote economic growth in Northern Ireland? Does she not agree that the big impediment to growth is the fact that she is taxing businesses to death?

Rachel Reeves: The Office for Budget Responsibility has revised growth upwards from next year, and expects the economy to be bigger at the end of the forecast period than it thought at the time of the Budget last year. We are using the national wealth fund, the British Business Bank and UK Export Finance to support businesses throughout the UK, and we were recently able to announce significant investment at Thales in Belfast to create jobs in the defence industry there for the export of goods to Ukraine.

Pensioners: Cost of Living

10. **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): What fiscal steps she is taking to support pensioners with the cost of living. [903666]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): The Government's top priorities for pensioners are to raise the state pension and to rescue the NHS. This week more than 12 million pensioners saw their state pensions rise by 4.1%, well ahead of inflation. That is worth an extra £470 a year for someone on the full new state pension, and £360 a year for those on the full basic state pension.

Anna Sabine: I have 250 pieces of outstanding casework relating to the winter fuel payment. An elderly constituent emailed me during the winter, enclosing a picture showing that her thermometer was at 15° and saying that she had to remain in bed for as long as possible each day to stay warm. Given that energy bills are now increasing, does the Minister agree that the decision to cut the winter fuel payment has already had serious consequences for the welfare of pensioners throughout the country?

Torsten Bell: What the Government are doing is raising the state pension, extending the warm home discount, and ensuring that an extra 50,000 people have had access to pension credit over the last six months. When Members talk about mistakes that have had lasting consequences for pensioners, I look back to the coalition Government's decision to cut the rate of energy installations by 90%. Pensioners are living with that legacy, in leaky homes, day in day out, but this Government are getting on with insulating homes throughout the country.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The 4.1% increase in the new state pension will make a huge difference to pensioners in my constituency. What more are the Government doing to tackle the cost of living crisis left by the last Government?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for being a regular attendee at Treasury questions, and indeed, as far as I can work out, at every other departmental questions session. He is right to suggest that we will do more, because we are not just increasing pensions above the rate of inflation this year but doing so throughout the current Parliament, and that should raise the state pension by up to £1,900 by the end of the Parliament.

High Streets: Liverpool Riverside

11. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): What discussions she is having with Cabinet colleagues on helping to improve high streets in Liverpool Riverside constituency. [903667]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): Liverpool City Region combined authority will benefit from the £900 million UK shared prosperity fund, which will allow authorities to invest in local communities such as my hon. Friend's. From the start of 2026-27, her combined authority will receive a single flexible pot through its integrated settlement. Integrated settlements will allow local leaders across the UK to deliver important projects for their areas, including high streets. To fulfil our manifesto pledge, we intend to introduce permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties—including those on high streets—from 2026-27.

Kim Johnson: Everton, in my constituency, is the most deprived area in the country, and residents have received a double blow as a result of the imminent closure of Lloyds Bank and the planned closure of the Crown post office, which will have a devastating impact on residents and businesses alike. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss those closures and the desperate need for a banking hub in the area?

Darren Jones: As every constituency MP will know, the closure of banking services on our high streets is always a difficult decision. The Government are committed to championing access by rolling out banking hubs across the country. We are committed to delivering 350 of those hubs, and 220 have already been announced. The closure of the post office that my hon. Friend mentions will trigger a further cash access assessment for her constituency. I would be pleased to arrange a meeting for her with the relevant Minister to look at the options for her constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Is there a Liverpool overspill in Strangford? I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: The Minister's response is key. He is right to highlight the issues, whether they are in Liverpool, Everton, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast or Strangford. In Northern Ireland, we have made the most of over-the-shops apartment conversions as opportunities for housing. Does the Minister agree that the possibilities for the regeneration of high streets and town centres also include housing opportunities?

Darren Jones: We have a shared ambition to ensure that our high streets are thriving communities for the people who live, shop or work there. We are delivering an integrated settlement for combined authority mayors in England, and have delivered a real-terms increase in funding for the Northern Ireland Executive—the largest since devolution began—to invest in exactly those types of local projects.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): To follow on from what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, high streets up and down the land, be they in

Liverpool Riverside, St Albans or anywhere else, have just been hit with the double whammy of the jobs tax and higher business rates bills. What steps are Ministers taking to prevent an epidemic of boarded-up shop fronts in the next 12 months, before the new rate comes in next year?

Darren Jones: As I have informed the House already, we are committed to supporting independent businesses and retailers on the high street. The change to employer national insurance contributions was designed to support smaller businesses in our country; over 50% of businesses will pay the same national insurance as before, or less than they did under the previous regime. The hon. Lady alluded to the fact that we are bringing forward permanent deductions in business rate taxation for the retail, hospitality and leisure sector, which will be important for the long-term sustainability of the businesses she mentions.

Investment: Regulatory Policies

12. **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of her Department's regulatory policies on trends in the level of investment. [903668]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): We have heard from UK businesses that our regulatory system often holds back growth and investment. We recently published a regulation action plan, and committed to cutting the administrative costs of regulation for businesses by 25% by the end of this Parliament. We are going further, faster than ever before to streamline regulation and make Britain the best place in the world to do business.

Callum Anderson: The Minister will know that both domestic and international investors are often influenced by decisions taken by multiple agencies, regulators, and indeed Government Departments, which is why consistency is key. Can the Minister update the House on how the Treasury is supporting a whole-of-Government and whole-of-regulator approach to delivering coherent UK regulatory frameworks that strike a balance between protecting consumers and boosting the global competitiveness of the UK economy?

Emma Reynolds: This is a whole-of-Government approach, and we have secured 60 commitments from key regulators to improving the business environment. The Government are streamlining regulation and stripping back its duplication, to ultimately deliver a regulatory system that encourages new investment, innovation and growth.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Inward investment projects in Scotland grew by 12.7% in 2023, compared with 6% across the rest of the United Kingdom. 2023 saw record investment in Scotland, which maintained its position as the top-performing area of the UK for the ninth year running. International businesses want to locate in Scotland because they understand that GDP per person in Scotland has grown by 10.5%, compared with 6.5% in the rest of the UK, since 2007. What impact does the Chancellor think her fiscal interventions since October will have on the attractiveness of Scotland as a destination, and what discussions has she had with the Scottish Government about the jeopardy that she has placed our economy in?

Emma Reynolds: The Chancellor delivered the biggest ever settlement for Scotland in October 2024, and I think the answer is "thank you".

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): There is a great deal of speculation about the future of the cash individual savings account. As we know, it is an important savings mechanism for many savers across the country, all of whom will be dismayed at the loss of a significant cash savings opportunity. Just as importantly, cutting cash ISAs will deprive building societies of important funds for their balance sheets, reducing the amount of capital available for the residential mortgage market. This point has been raised with me by the mutual societies. Given that the loss of the cash ISA would have a profound effect on mutuals' ability to raise debt capital, what research have the Government undertaken to establish the extent of the damage that such a measure might inflict on the residential mortgage market, which is not just important for all our constituents, but crucial for the 1.5 million new homes that the Government propose building?

Emma Reynolds: I work closely with the mutuals and other financial services firms, and I think the hon. Member is slightly jumping the gun, if he does not mind my saying so. We are considering options to reform ISAs, but we need to get the balance right between cash and equities. We know that many people have investments in cash ISAs who could think about investing in our capital markets, which would be a win for them through higher returns, and also for the economy. However, we absolutely understand the role that cash savings play in people having money for a rainy day.

Lowest Incomes: Support

13. **Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support people on the lowest incomes following the spring statement 2025. [903670]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Helping people into good work and financial independence is at the heart of our approach to supporting people on the lowest incomes. That is why we have increased the national living wage by 6.7%, which is equal to £1,400 this year for someone working full-time. Our plan to make work pay will tackle the poor job security and working conditions that have been holding back our economy, and the pathways to work Green Paper announced an additional £1 billion investment in employment, health and skills support.

Ms Abbott: It is all very well for the Minister to talk about helping people into work, but is he aware of the many millions of people on personal independence payments who rely on them in order to work? Yet that PIP will be slashed as a consequence of the spring statement. Is he also aware that very many people would prefer the Government not to balance their books on the backs of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society? Why are the Government rejecting a tax of just 2% on people with assets of over £10 million, which would raise over £24 billion?

James Murray: At the autumn Budget last year, the Chancellor announced a series of reforms to fix the public finances in as fair a way as possible, and make sure that the wealthiest in society pay their share of tax. The welfare reforms announced in the spring statement are principled reforms to help get people back into work, because work is the best way out of poverty. The reforms also provide support for those who need it and make sure that the system is sustainable for the future.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): Earlier this year, I spoke to members of my local Christians Against Poverty debt support team in Guildford, and they explained to me that they support many low-income individuals out of debt, but they are no sooner out of debt than they start accruing it again, because universal credit is insufficient to cover their basic needs due to the cost of living in areas such as Guildford. What work has the Minister done to assess whether universal credit levels are sufficient to cover the varied and increasing basic living costs across the country, and to prevent people on the lowest incomes from getting further into difficulty and debt?

James Murray: The Government have already taken action on the fair repayment rate, lowering the cap on deductions from universal credit to 15%—it was 25% before the autumn Budget last year. That will benefit 1.2 million households by an average of £420 a year, and 700,000 of the poorest families with children will benefit.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Businesses have just been hit by the Chancellor's £25 billion jobs tax, which will cost working families £3,500; also, business rates are nearly doubling for hospitality and retail businesses. How does imposing taxes that the Office for Budget Responsibility says will result in lower wages, higher prices and fewer jobs help growth and those on the lowest incomes, and will the Chancellor keep her promise not to come back with more taxes in this Parliament?

James Murray: The shadow Minister talks about business rates support. I remind him that if we had carried on with the plans inherited from the Conservative party, business rates relief would have ended entirely this month. It is only thanks to a decision of this Government that rates relief is continuing for this year, ahead of permanent reforms that will permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure premises on the high street from April 2026. That is thanks to a decision this Government made.

Wealth Tax: Potential Merits

14. **Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the potential merits of introducing a wealth tax. [903671]

19. **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential implications for her policies of the findings of Oxfam's poll on taxation, published on 25 March 2025. [903678]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): This Government are committed to ensuring that the wealthiest in our society pay their fair share of tax. The Chancellor announced a series of reforms at autumn

Budget 2024 to help fix the public finances as fairly as possible. Those reforms included increasing the rates of capital gains tax, increasing air passenger duty for private jets, and raising stamp duty for buyers of second or more homes.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: Analysis from a number of disability groups shows that the "Pathways to Work" Green Paper will have a detrimental effect on more than 3 million people, while polling from Oxfam shows that 77% of the public would rather the UK Government increased taxes on the very richest than cut the benefits of the poorest in society. Should we not be looking at raising funds from those with the broadest shoulders?

James Murray: As I made clear earlier, the Government have already made changes to make the tax system fairer, and to ensure that the wealthiest pay their fair share. The reforms to the welfare system are principled reforms to tackle perverse incentives that encourage inactivity. We need to support those in most need, get people back into work wherever possible, and protect the sustainability of the welfare system.

Brian Leishman: Let us be frank and not spin it: for 14 years, we saw austerity that ripped the heart out of communities; we then had a global pandemic, during which inequality was accelerated; and we are still feeling the effects of a cost of living crisis that is making ordinary people poorer. The public do not want cuts or austerity—they want an annual wealth tax on the very wealthiest in society. Is it not time we had a Government who do something different, give people what they want, and are willing to redistribute wealth for the benefit of many in society, and to improve living standards?

James Murray: I politely suggest that if my hon. Friend thinks we are imposing austerity, he has not read the Budget very carefully. It contains increases to revenue spending in all Departments—across the public spending envelope—and an increase in capital investment. We are ensuring that we build for the future while protecting our fiscal rules. Let me be clear: those fiscal rules are not a nice-to-have addition to the way we approach the economy. Fiscal irresponsibility has a huge cost, as we saw under the previous Government.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): We support the Government in trying to determine a fair level of tax, especially for the very wealthy. However, will the Minister establish, if he can, the number of people who might leave the country as a result of a wealth tax, and therefore pay no income tax whatsoever?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point: we need to ensure that the wealthiest in society pay their fair share, while also attracting talent from around the world to the UK to work, invest and help to grow our economy. It is on the back of that investment and economic growth that we will make people across the UK better off, and get more money into their pockets.

Banking Services

15. **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure rural communities have access to banking hubs. [903672]

16. **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): What steps she is taking to help protect in-person banking. [903673]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): The Government understand the importance of in-person banking to communities and are working closely with the industry to roll out 350 banking hubs across the UK. More than 220 hubs have already been announced, of which more than 135 are already open.

Sir Julian Smith: Rural communities such as Settle in North Yorkshire are really struggling with the loss of face-to-face banking services. Link hubs are one route for them to replace the banks that are closing. I urge Ministers to do what they can with Link—I accept that it is an independent organisation—to help it to relax the criteria for rural communities, allowing them more face-to-face banking services.

Emma Reynolds: I would be very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman if he wanted to discuss a specific banking hub that is being considered. We work very closely with Link. As he will know, his Government passed the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, under which the Financial Conduct Authority, Link and the financial services sector ultimately have power over the criteria, which is not something we are planning to change.

Lewis Cocking: How does the Minister plan to make it easier to establish banking hubs in communities that have lost all of their banks? I did have a meeting set up with the previous Minister, but she left Government before that meeting could take place. Will this Minister agree to meet me so that I can discuss the establishment of a banking hub in the town of Cheshunt in my Broxbourne constituency?

Emma Reynolds: I am always happy to meet colleagues and will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): The criteria applied by Link are too strict, and banks are being able to walk away from their customers. In Eltham, we have had a salami-slicing process of banks gradually leaving the high street, but, because we have a building society, we cannot ask for a hub. Will the Minister undertake to review Link's approach, because it is making it difficult for customers to carry out their banking business?

Emma Reynolds: As I said in my previous answer, we do not have any plans to change the Link criteria; those are a matter for Link. However, there are some flexibilities in the way that it applies the criteria, depending on the local population, travel times to nearby bank branches and, indeed, the number of small businesses in an area. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend if that is of concern to him.

Topical Questions

T1. [903681] **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): Mr Speaker, you shocked me by moving to topical questions so quickly, but I have now found my page and am ready to answer them.

Mr Speaker: You need to get a new watch!

Darren Jones: From ferries to the National Care Service, we have seen failure after failure from the SNP in Scotland, including a track record of waste. In contrast, this Labour Government are tackling waste and investing in frontline services such as our national health service, which has seen waiting lists fall for each of the past five months in England. We hope that the people of Scotland will soon have the opportunity to experience such a transformation.

Douglas McAllister: The Chancellor set out in the spring statement a clear plan to drive better value for taxpayers, including through the transformation fund, which will transform frontline delivery while making savings in the long term. Does he agree that that is in stark contrast to the SNP Scottish Government's record of waste?

Darren Jones: As my hon. Friend knows, we have given the Scottish Government the largest increase in spending since devolution began. The people of Scotland expect that money to be spent well, which we are doing in England by transforming public services and improving the national health service. However, given that SNP Members are not present in the Chamber today, the people of Scotland need to know that they will have to elect a Labour Government in Scotland later next year for that to happen.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): It was obvious to many before the emergency Budget that the President of the United States was going to be slapping tariffs on our exports. May I therefore ask the Chancellor why it was that she came forward at the emergency Budget with a recklessly slender slither of headroom—the same headroom that she had at the time of the autumn Budget, which proved then to be entirely inadequate. She blew that headroom and more due to her disastrous economic choices.

Darren Jones: I am sorry to disappoint the shadow Chancellor, but I am afraid that, because of the ordering of questions, he is stuck with me. To answer his question, he will have seen at the Budget that we increased the fiscal headroom back to our agreement of £9.9 billion, which was more than the headroom that we inherited from the Conservative party. The key difference is that this is a Government who take economic and political stability seriously, because when a Government lose control of the economy, they lose control of family finances and, ultimately, end up in opposition.

Mr Speaker: Just to correct the record, the Order Paper has not changed at all in topicals.

Mel Stride: You are quite right about that, Mr Speaker, as you are about everything. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman is completely wrong when he says that he inherited less headroom than was the case at the autumn Budget. He inherited, on the current Budget, £23 billion,

and he took it down to £9.9 billion to be precise. He also loosened the fiscal targets, which is why he is not underwater already on the targets that we had when we were in government.

May I ask him this: the fiscal targets are looking like they will be under a great deal of pressure come the autumn. There is a great deal of speculation and uncertainty among businesses as to whether this will lead to tax increases. Can he take away that uncertainty now, particularly given the tariffs and all the uncertainty that is vested in that, to make it clear at that Dispatch Box that there will be no further increases in taxation on businesses this Parliament?

Darren Jones: My apologies, Mr Speaker. It was our ordering that caused the problem, not the ordering of questions in the House.

The right hon. Gentleman knows that tight decisions were taken at the Budget, but we have been very clear that we are working hand in glove with businesses to be able to bring growth back to the economy and to ensure that investment—private sector and public sector—is coming forward. As he will know, from his time of swimming underwater, this Government are taking a different approach to fiscal discipline, and he should welcome that.

T5. [903685] **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): The defence sector is a vital part of our local economy in Derby, particularly with the landmark £9 billion deal struck with Rolls-Royce, which is supporting the Royal Navy's submarines and providing a major jobs boost. Does the Chancellor agree that national security goes hand in hand with economic security and, in turn, financial security for households?

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The first duty of any Government is to keep the nation safe. That is why we are increasing defence spending as a share of GDP to 2.5%—the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. Derby has a vital role to play within the UK's defence sector, particularly in nuclear engineering and aerospace, as demonstrated by the landmark £9 billion deal with Rolls-Royce, which will create up to 1,000 jobs in the city and protect thousands more.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I welcome the fast action by the Government to convene the automotive industry in reaction to President Trump's damaging tariffs, but the measures in and of themselves will not create new export markets or stimulate demand here in the UK. Will Ministers look at Liberal Democrat calls to reintroduce the plug-in car grant and equalise VAT for electric vehicle pavement charging? Will the Government instruct the valuation office to scrap business rates for EV charging bays until the transition is complete?

Rachel Reeves: The support that we announced yesterday on the phase-out of internal combustion engine cars was very much welcomed by the automotive sector. It will give much more flexibility around the allowances and around plug-in hybrid vehicles. All of that is welcome, but we are keeping a watching brief as well as trying to

ensure that there are new markets for cars made in Britain in other countries around the world by securing more trade deals.

T6. [903686] **Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Ind): What is the Chancellor doing to support businesses and boost wages in towns such as Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield, which were forgotten for 14 years under the previous Government?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is doing great work supporting local businesses in Burnley, including the digital marketing start-up Door4, which I know he has been championing.

T2. [903682] **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I have been contacted by many local businesses, including the Cross Keys pub in the Holt Heath nature reserve and the BEAR café in Wimborne. They are two different venues in two different locations, but both tell me that these are the most extreme trading conditions ever seen in hospitality. With national insurance, minimum wage and energy and food costs, will the Chancellor consider a reduction in VAT on hospitality sales to protect high streets and local producers and to save our communities?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): I am unclear, given the hon. Lady's remarks, whether she is opposed to the increase in the national minimum wage, but she should know that we have extended support for businesses in business rates relief this year, which would have been ended entirely under the plans we inherited from the previous Government, and there will be permanently lower multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure premises on the high street from April 2026.

T7. [903687] **Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): As a north London MP, I know that tackling the high housing costs in this city is a priority for my constituents. It is my belief that one route to that is investing in the country as a whole, so that we are not just flying on one London-shaped engine. To that end, did you know, Mr Speaker, that Leeds is the largest city in western Europe that does not have a tram or a mass transit system? That is a damning indictment of decades of economic failure. Will the Chancellor do all she can to ensure that the Leeds tram is built as fast as possible so that her constituents and mine can be better off?

Rachel Reeves: Hear, hear. I had better declare an interest as a proud Member of Parliament for Leeds West and Pudsey. West Yorkshire combined authority is receiving £830 million for transport spending through round 1 of the city region sustainable transport settlement. That includes £200 million for the development of a mass transport system. For too long Leeds has lacked this. This Government will put that investment in and get those trams running.

T3. [903683] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): With the jobs tax and the increase in business rates, and as a result of US tariffs, it is vital that we stimulate the UK economy. What is the Chancellor's plan, and can she expect us to see interest rates fall? Perhaps if she was listening to the question, she would be able to answer.

James Murray: I think that was a question about business rates reform. As the right hon. Lady will know, we published a discussion paper on transforming business rates. I am sure that the right hon. Lady will have read and responded to that, so I will look out for her consultation response in what we have received. Transforming businesses rates is about ensuring that we make the business rates system fit for the future to support investment and business growth right across the UK.

T8. [903688] **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Goodwin International, which is building a multimillion-pound production unit in Newstead in Stoke-on-Trent South, creating up to 100 jobs in defence manufacturing? Does he agree that increased investment in defence spending will have a tangible impact on my constituents, fuelling jobs and local investment?

Darren Jones: Yes, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on championing jobs and businesses in her constituency. As she knows, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have confirmed that defence spending will increase to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and that a minimum of 10% of the Ministry of Defence equipment budget will now be spent on novel technologies such as drones and artificial intelligence, which will create highly skilled jobs and drive benefits to the wider economy, including in her constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South.

T4. [903684] **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Earlier, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), the Chief Secretary rejected Labour's Climate Change Committee's advice regarding aviation policy. That also goes directly against what the Energy Secretary had committed to. Who in Government should we believe when it comes to aviation policy?

Darren Jones: The right hon. Member knows that we are supporting airport expansion alongside investment in things like sustainable aviation fuel to be able to reduce carbon emissions from long-haul flights as well as supporting investment into decarbonised surface transport, to help people get around the country and to their airports. Opposition Members might want to welcome investment into this country, as opposed to talking it down.

Margaret Mullane (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Will the Minister introduce a 12-month delay to the incoming change in taxation for double-cab pick-up trucks? The manufacturers and their commercial customers feel that they have had insufficient time to adjust to the new changes this month. Can he share with us any impact assessment work carried out on the reclassification of double-cab pick-ups and what effect it would have on the sector in Britain?

James Murray: We have engaged with the automotive sector on this issue, and there are generous transitional arrangements in place to mitigate the impact. The Government have had to take difficult decisions, but at the autumn budget 2024 we prioritised long-term support for growth-driving sectors, including more than £2 billion over five years to support the automotive sector.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Ineffective energy trading with the EU is a major barrier for global investors. According to Energy UK, we are losing out on £30 billion of investment in interconnectors alone. What will the Government do to improve our energy trading with the EU to unlock this vital opportunity?

James Murray: The Prime Minister's plan for change sets out our ambitious but achievable target of clean power by 2030. The clean power action plan demonstrates the significant investment requirements to reach that target, including in renewable infrastructure, and the actions that we will take to facilitate that. We have already taken action to remove the de facto ban on onshore wind in England, approved major solar projects and delivered a record-breaking renewables auction.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The last Government left 4.5 million children in poverty, but, like many colleagues, I am alarmed that the impact assessment of the spring statement suggests that that number will rise, not fall. Will the Minister tell me when we can expect the results of the child poverty taskforce? Will they be delivered in time to influence decisions in the spending review?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend knows that the Government are committed to reducing child poverty and that we will be bringing forward a child poverty strategy later this year. It will look at levers that support households to increase their income, such as supporting parents into secure employment, supporting progression in the labour market and considering social security reforms. I confirm that the work of the taskforce is feeding into the spending review.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Chancellor talked earlier about the Government's response to the new US trade policy, but what are the Government doing about China's abuse of the world trade system? In particular, what will they do to challenge China's status as a developing country at the World Trade Organisation? That is the means by which China dodges so many of the rules imposed on countries such as Britain and others in the west.

Rachel Reeves: Trade issues are for the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, but I will say this. There are rightly concerns about global trade imbalances, but the response of the United States by putting tariffs on all countries—including the UK, which does not have a trade surplus—is a disproportionate response to a genuine problem of global trade imbalances.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I very much welcome the Chancellor's commitment to investing in life sciences in this country. May I encourage her to support the bid for a national mental health diagnostics and research centre in my constituency, not least because poor mental health is estimated to cost this country up to £300 billion a year in lost economic production?

Rachel Reeves: Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced reforms to speed up clinical trials to ensure that the best new drugs can come to this country, benefiting from our NHS. On the issue of mental health treatment, I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of addressing that, both for the health and wellbeing of

individuals and because of the economic benefit that he speaks to. I am happy to arrange a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): On 30 October, the Chancellor upended our economy through tax rises and punitive death taxes. She has delivered a devastating blow to family farms and small family businesses—the very backbone of our economy. When will the Chancellor recognise that she is elected by the people, for the people? Every day that she avoids engaging with the farming community is another day of wilful neglect. Our farmers are being driven out, not by market forces but by a Government blind to their struggles and deaf to their voices. When will she listen and speak with them?

James Murray: As the hon. Lady and I have discussed in several debates in recent months, the decision we took on agricultural property relief and business property relief was difficult, but it was the right and balanced one to ensure we protect family farms and small businesses while fixing the public finances in a fair way. Fixing the public finances is in the interest of every Member of this House and all the constituents we represent, because it underpins the investment we are putting into the future of this country and into getting the economy growing.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Many thousands of my constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire South work in and rely on public services that are on their knees after 18 years of under-investment by the SNP Government at Holyrood. Will my right hon. Friend set out how the views of my constituents will be reflected in the spending review?

Rachel Reeves: Because of the decisions that we made in the Budget last year, we were able to provide a record settlement for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is a shame that the SNP MPs are not in the Chamber today. It is now the SNP's responsibility to spend that money wisely and invest in public services. We are bringing down NHS waiting lists in England and Wales; the same cannot be said of Scotland.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): In July 2023, my constituent Alison claimed a refund of overpaid tax that was mistakenly paid twice. In February 2024, she was told that her claim would be assessed by 20 March, in July 2024 she was told that it would be by 22 October, and in December she was told that she could not have a date but that the department had definitely received her

claim 16 months previously. She has heard nothing since. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me to discuss this very vexed situation for someone who has very little money, given that this claim is nearly 21 months delayed?

James Murray: I was sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent's experience with, I assume, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Even though, as the Minister with responsibility for HMRC, I cannot get directly involved in individual cases, I am happy to raise it with HMRC and make sure that it gives the matter proper attention to try and resolve it.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Local businesses have huge potential to create local growth in our community. It was fantastic to see my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury visiting Derby South earlier this year and engaging with business leaders. Does the Minister agree that continued engagement with business leaders is absolutely key to building the business confidence that we so desperately need and which was shattered by the previous Government?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the invitation to join him in his constituency. I very much enjoyed the regional reception with business leaders, as I have done in every region and nation across the country during the spending review. We will continue to work hand in glove with them to unlock investment, create jobs and create growth for everybody, across the whole country.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Earlier, when the Chancellor was talking about the impact of tariffs, she pledged that the Government would act in our national interest. How can it be in the whole national interest, so long as the trade laws governing Northern Ireland are not the trade laws of the UK but those of a foreign jurisdiction, namely the EU?

Mr Speaker: We have an urgent question shortly.

Rachel Reeves: We inherited the settlement made by the previous Government, as the hon. and learned Member will know. There is a summit between the UK and the EU on 18 May where we will be looking to reduce the barriers to trade between the whole of the United Kingdom and the European Union. We recognise the specific issues around Northern Ireland, particularly in regard to the response to the tariffs, and we will continue to work with the Executive there to ensure that we get the best outcome for the people of Northern Ireland.

EU Tariffs: United States and Northern Ireland Economy

12.50 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will update the House on the likely impact on the Northern Irish economy of EU tariffs on the US.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As the Prime Minister has said, tariffs are not good news for anyone and no one wants a trade war. The Government are doing everything possible to keep Britain secure during this new era of global instability, and we will always act in the best interests of businesses in Northern Ireland. As part of our customs territory and internal market, Northern Ireland exporters are facing a general 10% US tariff and a 25% tariff on steel, aluminium and cars, like other exporters across the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is not therefore uniquely disadvantaged. We are, of course, preparing for the EU's next move and any possible retaliatory tariffs that it may or may not introduce, as well as considering the impact that new EU tariffs would have on Northern Ireland businesses importing from the United States of America, because under the Windsor framework, the EU tariff would apply.

As hon. Members will know, however, because of the Windsor framework, businesses can reclaim any such tariff through the existing duty reimbursement scheme in cases where US imports into Northern Ireland do not then enter the European Union. The customs duty waiver scheme also allows duties to be waived entirely, subject to an overall limit. These schemes work in our national interest, and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is continuing to talk to and support any businesses that might be affected, to help them understand how to use the duty reimbursement and customs duty waiver schemes. The Minister for the Cabinet Office has talked about all this with EU counterparts in recent days, because the Government are fully aware of how sensitive this issue is for businesses in Northern Ireland. What we need in these circumstances is a calm and considered response, and that is what the Government will continue to provide.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. It is incredibly important that this House has the opportunity to question the Government on this issue before the Easter break and before the implementation of these tariffs. I have enormous respect for my opposite numbers in the Northern Ireland Office, but it is totally unacceptable that we should have got to this stage in proceedings without a Minister coming to the House to update us on the likely impact on businesses in Northern Ireland of this emerging tariff war between the US and the EU. As the House will know, this comes off the back of the considerable damage done to the economy in Northern Ireland by the Budget last year, by the increases in national insurance contributions and by the changes to the national minimum wage, which have completely undermined business confidence and which are driving unemployment in the region.

I ask the right hon. Gentleman to answer the following three questions. First, a week on from the United States' announcement and some time after the EU's publication of a 99-page draft of its tariff responses, have the Government now done an impact assessment of what this means for the Northern Irish economy and for businesses in Northern Ireland, and will he publish it?

Secondly, he rightly mentions the duty reimbursement scheme, which would allow businesses taking goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and having to pay the EU tariff to reclaim that tariff. That scheme is now going to be put under enormous pressure. It is going to have to deal with volumes not foreseen when it was originally put together. Does the Secretary of State have complete confidence that it will be able to reimburse businesses in a timely fashion so as not to disrupt trade?

Thirdly and finally, because Northern Ireland remains within the EU customs code, affected Northern Ireland businesses buying affected goods will have to pay EU tariffs, but the same competitive businesses in GB will not. What are the Government going to do to ensure that such businesses are not left disadvantaged, and that we do not see serious distortions of trade? With that in mind, will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that in the event that we see a major diversion of trade, his Government will be prepared to use article 16 of the Windsor framework, which allows the Government to take decisions to ensure that businesses in Northern Ireland are not damaged? It is incredibly important that businesses hear from the Secretary of State that the Government are prepared to protect them in the event that this tariff war creates a diversion of trade for business there.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I am slightly surprised by his initial comment, because of course we touched on this matter in Northern Ireland oral questions—

Alex Burghart: Only because I raised it.

Hilary Benn: Indeed, but we touched on this matter in Northern Ireland orals last week, and the Business Secretary made a statement to the House last week.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's questions, of course the Government have been preparing for and looking at all eventualities, but until we know what the EU retaliatory tariffs are, it does not make much sense to publish speculation about their potential impact.

On the duty reimbursement scheme, I have met HMRC officials, because I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important that the scheme works effectively, depending on the number of Northern Ireland businesses that are affected, to reimburse tariffs. I would just say, however, that Northern Ireland imports about £800 million-worth of goods from the United States of America, which is about 2% of Northern Ireland's total purchases. That impacts upon his third question. We are going to have to take this a stage at a time. The Prime Minister has made it quite clear that he will do what is in the national interest to protect our businesses, our companies and our economic future, but it is precisely because of the Windsor framework that the duty reimbursement scheme exists.

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

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The EU is currently consulting its member states on the goods that it may target in response to the US tariffs. The Secretary of State has spoken about there being no need to make an assessment yet, but in advance of the EU imposing retaliatory measures, has he made any assessment at all, if there is any point? Is he engaging with the European Commission to ensure that the interests of Northern Ireland businesses and consumers are fully taken into account in determining how the EU responds to the US tariffs?

Hilary Benn: As I indicated in answer to the Opposition spokesperson, of course the Government have been preparing for all eventualities, but as I also indicated, there is no point in publishing something that is not based on the actual tariffs that the EU decides to impose. Therefore, it is sensible to wait until that moment arrives.

Secondly, the EU will take such action as it determines to be in its interests in response to the 20% tariffs that the United States of America has imposed on the EU in addition to the tariffs on steel, aluminium and cars. Let us not forget that the Windsor framework gives Northern Ireland businesses unique access to the European market, which is not something that is enjoyed by businesses in Great Britain.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): As the *Financial Times* reported at the weekend—and as I think the Secretary of State has just confirmed—in the event of EU retaliatory tariffs, goods imported from the United States into Northern Ireland will by default be effectively forced down the red lane. That, of course, means additional customs checks, time and red tape and, in the event of their imposition, EU tariff rates for goods coming into Northern Ireland, irrespective of their ultimate destination. That risks a scenario where Northern Ireland importers are penalised more than almost any other businesses in either the UK or the EU, first at the border and then in administering the reclamation of those costs.

Let us be clear: this chaotic situation is entirely the consequence of Donald Trump's destructive trade war. What are the Government doing to ensure that President Trump and the US Administration are alert to the deeply destabilising effects of their tariffs policy on the Good Friday agreement and the prospect of peace in Northern Ireland? What active steps are the Government taking to mitigate the potential disruption to Northern Ireland businesses that are now unwittingly caught up in Donald Trump's trade war?

Hilary Benn: The single most important thing we can do for those businesses in Northern Ireland is, as I indicated a moment ago, to ensure that the duty reimbursement scheme works speedily and effectively—provided that those businesses can demonstrate that their goods are not moving into the European Union, for the obvious reason that otherwise Northern Ireland would become a back door for goods seeking to avoid the retaliatory tariffs. The Government will take all necessary steps to protect British businesses in the very difficult circumstances that we are facing, including by continuing to seek to negotiate an economic deal with the United States of

America, which we have been engaged in for weeks now. What comes out of that remains to be seen, but it is part of the Government's calm and considered approach.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): The complexity of trade relationships on the island of Ireland is a result of Brexit. Working north-south is as important as working east-west. Does the Secretary of State agree that strengthening relationships not just with the European Union but with the Republic of Ireland Government can put Northern Ireland into a pivotal position to navigate this new uncertainty?

Hilary Benn: We are all having to navigate this new uncertainty as a result of the decision that the US Administration have made. It is certainly true that leaving the European Union has created new complexities. The reason why there is a Windsor framework is that there are two entities—the United Kingdom and the European Union—with different trading rules but an open border, and some method therefore had to be found to deal with the consequence of that. As I have said to the House before, trying to wish away that basic fact has not really worked.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): It is important that we keep cool heads. There will be attempts, subsequent to my question, to relitigate the Brexit wars. The fact of the matter is that the 2019 Brexit deal and the Windsor framework give Northern Ireland a unique competitive advantage: 10% exports and access to the single market. Will the Secretary of State consider a rapid automatic reimbursement scheme, as the shadow Secretary of State alluded to? That scheme is at the centre of easing tensions should there be retaliation on the EU side.

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the benefits that the Windsor framework has given businesses in Northern Ireland in terms of access to the EU market. I would just say to him that, in the event of EU retaliatory tariffs, "rapid automatic" does not quite square with the needs of businesses in Northern Ireland that import American goods, because they have to demonstrate that those goods are not then moving on to the European Union. That requires them to provide evidence to HMRC in order to get the tariff reimbursed.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his initial response to the urgent question. Of course, this situation is a reminder that the people of Northern Ireland were absolutely right to oppose Brexit in that referendum. I am really disappointed that the shadow Secretary of State started his supplementary question by complaining about the lowest-paid workers in Northern Ireland getting a pay rise—absolutely incredible. The Secretary of State touched on the trade negotiations between the UK and the United States. Can he reassure us that the situation in Northern Ireland is absolutely at the heart of those negotiations?

Hilary Benn: I am very happy to assure my hon. Friend that the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, are uppermost in the minds of all Ministers in trying to deal with the situation we now find ourselves in.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State says that the EU will take action on tariffs in its best interests, but businesses in Northern Ireland expect the Government to take action in the best interests of the United Kingdom—including Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. He talks about how this can all be resolved by the reimbursement scheme. The fact of the matter is that the reimbursement scheme has failed. Businesses have to produce masses of information, and there are delays in payments—some businesses have to wait for hundreds of thousands of pounds to be reimbursed in taxes. That is not the answer. Surely, the answer is for the UK to collect the taxes that we impose on American goods and leave the EU to collect the taxes that it imposes.

Hilary Benn: What the right hon. Gentleman proposes ignores the reality that faces Northern Ireland as a result of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, and the fact that there was a problem that had to be solved. The duty reimbursement scheme owes its existence to the Windsor framework. It is important, as I have said to the House, that the scheme works effectively, but businesses do need to provide information to demonstrate that the goods have not subsequently moved into the European Union, for reasons that I think he understands.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I am particularly concerned about the cash flow of small businesses in Northern Ireland in the event that the EU increases its tariffs. In his discussions with HMRC, has the Secretary of State established what the average waiting time is for the duty reimbursement scheme to kick in? Is there any prospect of shortening that time if the amount of money out of the door increases in the event of EU tariffs?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point for businesses in Northern Ireland. As he would expect, I have had precisely that discussion with HMRC. The honest answer to the question of how long it takes is that it depends on how quickly businesses provide the necessary information to demonstrate that goods have remained in the United Kingdom and have not moved to the EU. Once that information is provided, the scheme should work effectively. It may help him if I point out that the customs duty waiver scheme—a separate scheme—allows up to €300,000 per company over a three-year rolling average, which will obviously benefit small businesses. If they come within that heading, they do not have to pay the tariff up front.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Sadly, I have heard nothing today that will give businesses in my constituency any reassurance that the UK Government are prepared to protect them. I recognise that it is not good practice to comment on speculation, but it is and would be good practice to leave businesses in no doubt that the Government—their Government, to whom they pay hefty taxes—will protect them from EU tariffs. We cannot be left in a scenario where businesses are reliant on a duty reimbursement scheme that does not work—it takes months to get repayments. Will the Secretary of State give more clarity to businesses in Upper Bann that he will protect them?

Hilary Benn: I have done my level best to set out the situation. We all understand the reasons. Northern Ireland gains from the Windsor framework because of its access—*[Interruption.]* Well, it does gain from access to the EU market that other parts of the United Kingdom do not enjoy. But there is a consequence, which is what we are discussing in relation to the imposition of tariffs by the United States of America. That is a decision that the US Administration have taken, and we all have to deal with the consequences. HMRC has of course already been talking to businesses that might be affected to ensure that they understand how the tariff reimbursement scheme and the customs duty waiver scheme work.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Government's advice to Northern Ireland businesses seems to be, "Keep calm and carry on." Well, that creates an awful lot of uncertainty for small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State put a little more meat on the bone in relation to what the Government are doing? As he said, the EU will take action in its interests, but that action may not be in the interests of Northern Ireland businesses or consumers. What will the Government do?

Hilary Benn: In the circumstances in which this country and many countries around the world find themselves, we are having this discussion because of a decision that the United States Administration have taken. We do not control that. What we do have to seek to control is our response to it. I have tried to lay out for the House today what the position is and what is available to support businesses that may be affected by the EU tariffs, once we understand what those are. We will see how extensive they may or may not be, and then businesses will start to work out for themselves what is the consequence and how we can use the mechanism of the reimbursement scheme in the Windsor framework to get back the money that they have to pay in a tariff.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Businesses require clarity and certainty. Will the Secretary of State undertake to come back to the House as soon as we have that clarity and certainty? Will he ensure that the EU understands that the open border he keeps talking about is an unclosable border and tries to give businesses more certainty so that they can develop in the future?

Hilary Benn: Notwithstanding what we have been discussing today, Northern Ireland imports about £800 million-worth of goods from the United States of America, which is about 2% of the total purchases made by Northern Ireland. The rest—98% of the purchases—is unaffected by any EU retaliatory tariffs relating to goods brought into Northern Ireland. As I travel round Northern Ireland, I see that there are great business opportunities and lots of investment coming in. As I said to the House last week, Northern Ireland has a higher rate of growth than the UK as a whole and the lowest unemployment.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, is the right hon. Gentleman not embarrassed that he and his Government have no control over the tariffs in respect of goods imported into Northern Ireland? Is the obvious and inevitable

answer not to repatriate to the United Kingdom control over trade laws? What happens if Northern Ireland is used as a conduit by the Republic of Ireland or the EU to export goods to the US? Who checks those goods and where?

Hilary Benn: As I think I have said to the hon. and learned Gentleman before, I would not have started from here myself in relation to the cause that led eventually to the negotiation of the Windsor framework, which was a huge improvement on the Northern Ireland protocol. We do not control the decisions that the United States Administration have taken. What we have to do is make sure that we stand with businesses, including in Northern Ireland, to provide them with support, and a mechanism that allows them to reclaim the tariff is the most practical step we can take. It is already in place because of the Windsor framework.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State has outlined the case, but I am afraid he has not given any answers, and that is disappointing. The promise was made to Northern Ireland MPs that we would not be disadvantaged by any EU retentions. That is clearly not to be the case, and Government need to address that directly. Will the Secretary of State set out when discussions to extricate Northern Ireland from EU rules will begin and when we can expect to see our interests looked after, as was promised by both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State? I was here last week when we got those promises, but today, unfortunately, we do not.

Hilary Benn: The situation that Northern Ireland businesses may find themselves in if there are EU retaliatory tariffs is a product of the Windsor framework, which gives benefits to businesses in Northern Ireland as well as requiring the payment of the tariffs that can be claimed back. The single most important reason for sticking with the implementation of the Windsor framework is that we want to negotiate closer economic relationships with the European Union, including a sanitary and phytosanitary and a veterinary agreement.

Members from Northern Ireland have on many occasions raised the consequences of the current arrangement. Things could be a lot easier if we get that agreement, but as I have pointed out to the House many times before, if we do not honour the last agreement that the United Kingdom as a country signed under the last Government with the European Union, how exactly do we expect to get a new agreement—in particular an SPS and veterinary agreement, which would help many businesses in the movement of goods across the Irish sea?

Tackling Child Sexual Abuse

1.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): With permission, I will make a statement updating the House on Government action to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation and on progress on the recommendations of the independent inquiry.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation are the most horrific and disturbing crimes—an abuse of power against those who are most vulnerable, leaving lifelong trauma and scars. Best estimates suggest that 500,000 children are sexually abused every year. Analysis by the police found that there were 115,000 recorded cases of child sexual abuse in 2023; 4,228 group-based offences identified by the CSE taskforce, of which 1,125 were family abuse; and 717 were sexual exploitation cases. In a growing number of recorded cases, the perpetrators themselves are under 18.

The House will be aware that, in its first year of operation up to March 2024, the grooming gangs taskforce contributed to 550 arrests across the country. In the last nine months of 2024, the taskforce contributed to 597 arrests. In other words, it surpassed in that nine-month period what it achieved in its first full year of operation. Data for the first three months of this year is currently being collected from forces and will be available early next month, but all round we are making progress at every level to increase the number of investigations, the number of arrests and, most importantly, the number of victims who are seeing their attackers brought to justice.

Despite the seriousness and severity of these crimes, there has been a shameful failure by institutions and those in power over many years to protect children from abuse or exploitation, so we are today setting out a progress update on action this Government are taking to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation, to get support and justice for victims, and to ensure that perpetrators are caught and put behind bars.

Action on CSA since the election means that we are introducing a new child sexual abuse police performance framework, including new standards on public protection, child abuse and exploitation; legislation targeting online offending, including abuse and grooming enabled by artificial intelligence; new powers for Border Force to detect digitally held child sex abuse at the UK border; new restrictions preventing registered sex offenders from changing their names to hide the threat they pose; and increased investment in law enforcement capability, through the police undercover online network and the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme.

In the Home Secretary's statement to the House in January, she set out what we are doing to crack down on grooming gangs, and today I can provide an update on that work. Baroness Casey's three-month national audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse is ongoing. It is building a comprehensive national picture of what is known about child sexual exploitation, identifying local and national trends, assessing the quality of data, looking at the ethnicity issues faced, for example, by cases involving Pakistani heritage gangs, and reviewing police and wider agency understanding. We are developing

[Jess Phillips]

a new best practice framework to support local authorities that want to undertake victim-centred local inquiries or related work, drawing on the lessons from local independent inquiries such as those in Telford, Rotherham and Greater Manchester. We will publish the details next month.

Alongside that, we will set out the process through which local authorities can access the £5 million national fund to support locally-led work on grooming gangs. Following feedback from local authorities, the fund will adopt a flexible approach to support both full independent local inquiries and more bespoke work, including local victims' panels or locally led audits of the handling of historical cases.

The chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council, Gavin Stephens, has, at the Home Secretary's request, urged the chief constables of all 43 police forces in England and Wales to re-examine their investigations into group-based child sexual exploitation that resulted in a "no further action" decision. As of 1 April, the Child Sexual Abuse Review Panel can review child sexual abuse cases that took place after 2013. Victims and survivors can now ask the panel to independently review their case if they have not already exercised their victims' right to review.

I can also announce that we intend to expand the independent child trafficking guardian scheme across all of England and Wales, providing direct support to many more child victims of sexual exploitation and grooming that to date has only been available in selected areas. These measures will enable more victims and survivors to receive the truth, justice, improvements and accountability they deserve and put more vile perpetrators of this crime behind bars.

Much of this crucial activity builds on the vital work of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse that was undertaken between 2015 and 2022. Let me, on behalf of the whole House, again thank Professor Alexis Jay for chairing that seven-year national inquiry with such expertise, diligence and compassion. IICSA revealed the terrible suffering caused to many child sexual abuse victims, and the shameful failure of institutions to put the protection of children before the protection of their own reputations. The inquiry drew on the testimony of over 7,000 victims and survivors, and considered over 2 million pages of evidence. Its findings, culminating in the final report published in October 2022, were designed to better protect children from sexual abuse, and address the shortcomings that left them exposed to harm. The publication of that final report two and a half years ago should have been a landmark moment, but instead the victims and survivors were failed again. None of the inquiry's recommendations were implemented or properly taken forward by the previous Government in the 20 months they had to do so.

As part of today's progress update on our action on child sexual abuse, the Government are setting out a detailed update and timetable for the work that is under way on the IICSA recommendations. I can announce to the House that, to prioritise the protection of children and improve national oversight and consistency of child protection practice, this Government will establish a new child protection authority. Building on the national child safeguarding review panel, the child protection authority will address one of IICSA's central recommendations

by providing national leadership and learning on child protection and safeguarding. Work to expand the role of the panel will begin immediately, and we will consult on developing the new authority this year. We have also asked Ofsted, His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services and the Care Quality Commission to conduct a joint thematic review of child abuse in family settings, starting this autumn.

The IICSA report recommended the introduction of a new mandatory duty to report—something that the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I have all supported for more than a decade. In the Crime and Policing Bill we will now be taking forward a new mandatory duty to report child sexual abuse for individuals in England undertaking activity with children and, crucially, a new criminal offence of obstructing an individual from making a report under that duty. Mandatory reporting will create a culture of openness and honesty, rather than cover-ups and secrecy. It will empower professionals and volunteers to take prompt, decisive action to report sexual abuse. It will demonstrate to children and young people that if they come forward, they will be heard. Anyone who deliberately seeks to prevent someone from fulfilling their mandatory duty to report child sexual abuse will face the full force of the law.

Today's update also sets out how the Government are supporting victims and survivors in accessing support and seeking justice. We are tasking the criminal justice joint inspectorates to carry out a targeted inspection of the experiences of victims of child sexual abuse in the criminal justice system. We are instructing the Information Commissioner's Office to produce a code of practice on the retention of personal data relating to child sexual abuse. In some cases, where serious institutional failings contributed to the abuse, those institutions have provided financial redress schemes or compensation to victims and survivors who are affected. We continue to support those schemes as recognition by those institutions that they badly failed children in their care.

On the IICSA proposal for a wider national redress scheme for all victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in institutional settings, the scale of that proposal demands that it is considered in the context of the spending review later this year, and we will make further updates at that stage.

One crucial area where we want to make immediate progress is the provision of therapeutic services for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. We will therefore bring forward proposals in the coming weeks to improve access to those services; further details will be set out following the spending review. Ahead of the spending review, I can announce that in this financial year the Home Office will double the funding it provides for national services, supporting adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and providing more help to those adults who are living with the trauma of the horrific abuse they suffered as children.

Finally, we want to speed up progress to make it easier for victims and survivors to get recompense directly from the institutions that failed them. We are therefore removing the three-year limitation period on victims and survivors bringing personal injury claims in the civil courts, and shifting the burden of proof from

survivors to defendants, thereby protecting victims from having to relive their trauma to get the compensation they are owed.

Today's update, building on the measures that the Home Secretary announced in January, demonstrates this Government's steadfast commitment to tackling child sexual abuse. The measures we are implementing will protect more children, find more criminals, and deliver support and justice to more victims and survivors. But this is not the end point; it is just the beginning. We will continue to drive forward reforms to protect more children from abhorrent abuse, and support more adult survivors of those traumatic crimes. As we pursue our safer streets mission, we will use every available lever to drive progress on these issues, across Government and beyond.

I want to finish with a word for the victims and survivors. No one should go through what they did. While the failings of the past cannot be undone, we can, we must, and we will strain every sinew to prevent them from being repeated. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Katie Lam.

1.25 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

In January, the Home Secretary said that the Government would conduct five local inquiries into the rape gangs who have terrorised so many innocent children. More than three months since the Government announced those local inquiries, Tom Crowther KC, a barrister invited by the Home Office to help establish them, knows almost nothing about their progress, and neither do we. Why is the framework for local inquiries now being led by Ministers, rather than by independent voices such as Tom Crowther? Why is the £5 million set aside for inquiries no longer being allocated, but instead delivered on an "opt-in" basis? What do the Government intend to do about local leaders who say there is no need for an independent inquiry, as they do in Bradford and in Wales?

The girls we are talking about are predominantly white. The men who preyed on them were predominantly Muslim, generally either from Pakistan or of Pakistani heritage. One of the victims from Dewsbury was told by her rapist:

"We're here to fuck all the white girls and fuck the Government."

Does the Minister accept that in many cases these crimes were racially and religiously aggravated? How, without a national inquiry, can we understand what part those factors played?

There is no question but that the state has failed these children time and again. Take the case of "Anna" from Bradford. Vulnerable and in residential care, at the age of 14 she made repeated reports of rape and abuse to social workers who were responsible for her. Just the following year, aged 15, she "married" her abuser in a traditional Islamic wedding ceremony. Far from stepping in to stop it, her social worker was a guest. The authorities then arranged for her to be fostered by her abuser's parents. The ringleader of the Rochdale rape gang, Shabir Ahmed, was employed as a welfare rights officer by Oldham council. Yet not one person—not one—has been convicted for covering up these institutionalised

rapes. Why have Ministers refused to establish a dedicated unit in the National Crime Agency to investigate councillors and officials accused of collusion and corruption?

I am sorry to say that that unit must also investigate police officers. In one case, the father of an abuse victim in Rotherham was arrested by South Yorkshire police when he attempted to rescue his daughter from her abusers. He was detained twice in one night, while on the very same evening, his daughter was repeatedly assaulted and abused by a gang of men. It is clear that these criminals were unafraid of law enforcement. In Kirklees, Judge Marson said:

"You were seen with your victim on at least three occasions by the police...none of that deterred you, and you continued to rape her."

How, without a national inquiry, can we know how and why these monsters enjoyed effective immunity for so long, and how can we be sure that it will not happen again?

Conservative Members have voted for a national inquiry, and tabled amendments that would guarantee the publication of ethnicity data on a quarterly basis, terminate the parental rights of convicted sex offenders, and make membership of a grooming gang an aggravating factor during sentencing, so that offenders get the longer, harsher sentences that they deserve. Will the Minister commit to accepting those amendments to protect our children?

Finally, I would like to read to the House one particular ordeal—just one example of what these children have suffered. I must warn colleagues, and especially those in the Gallery, that this is extremely graphic, but we must not look away or sanitise this evil. Sentencing Mohammed Karrar of Oxford to life in prison, Judge Peter Rook said: "You prepared her"—that is his victim, a 13-year-old girl—

"for gang anal rape by using a pump to expand her anal passage. You subjected her to gang rape by five or six men. At one point she had four men inside her. A red ball was placed in her mouth to keep her quiet... When she was 12, after raping her, she threatened you with your lock knife. Your reaction was to pick up a baseball bat with a silver metal handle, strike her on the head with it, and then insert the baseball bat inside her vagina."

This is not about me, the Minister, the Home Secretary or any hon. Members in the Chamber; it is about the little girls, up and down our country, whose brutal and repeated rapes were permitted and hidden by those in the British state whose jobs were to protect them. They deserve justice. In five towns, those children and their families may get partial answers, but I have mentioned five towns in the past few minutes alone, and there are at least 45 more. In those places, children and their families will get no answers at all, so what does the Minister have to say to them? The British people deserve to know the truth. What darker truths does the suffering of those girls reveal about this country—and why will the Government not find out?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady; I think it is a shame that she referred to only one sort of child abuse victim, when the statement is clearly about all child abuse victims. There should be no hierarchy; we are also talking about children raped by their fathers or raped in other circumstances, such as in children's homes and institutions, over many years. It is a shame that she did not speak about any of their experiences, notwithstanding the very graphic and upsetting stories that she did tell.

[Jess Phillips]

Obviously, I have worked for many years with the exact girls that the hon. Lady talked about. Much of what she already knows is because of the inquiries that have already occurred, such as in Rotherham and in Rochdale. She did not refer at all to the two-year inquiry that was part of the IICSA panel. That was a statutory inquiry that looked into lots of areas, and I wonder if she maybe wants to reacquaint herself with the 200 pages of that report.

I understand the hon. Lady's sense of anger and urgency about the issue. None of this is her fault—she was not here at the time—but she worked with the then Minister, who sat in offices where I now sit and did not lift a single finger on any of the recommendations contained in the Jay inquiry. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), spent almost two years as Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire. During his time in that role, he held 352 external meetings, including 23 separate meetings on the policing of protests, but not once did he hold a discussion on grooming gangs or what the police were doing to investigate them. He did not have one meeting with the police, victims, local authorities or Alexis Jay, who had some choice words to say about some of the special advisers—I do not know if the hon. Lady knows who they were—in the Department when Alexis Jay was trying to get her requirements across the line.

Today, the Government have published a detailed and systematic action plan for the future. It is not about headlines; it is about the frontline. It is about how these things are going to take time in lots and lots of areas of our country. This does not happen overnight because somebody wins a political argument. It is going to take work, and I very much welcome the hon. Lady joining me, unlike in the years when I was the Opposition spokesperson, when the current shadow Home Secretary never bothered to involve me.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today's action plan. I particularly welcome the creation of a new child protection authority and the doubling of funding for groups who are helping survivors and victims of child abuse, up and down the country. The independent inquiry into grooming gangs in Rochdale, commissioned by Greater Manchester's Mayor, Andy Burnham, was detailed and thorough, and found serious failings by the statutory authorities. The priority for my constituents is to ensure that we are protecting women and girls in the here and now, as well as convicting perpetrators of past crimes. Few people know that there is no specific criminal offence of grooming, so may I thoroughly welcome the Government's decision to make grooming an aggravating offence in child sex abuse, with longer sentences? That is long overdue, as it was recommended in Alexis Jay's inquiry, but ignored by the previous Government.

Jess Phillips: I have enjoyed working with my hon. Friend, and other people in Rochdale, over the years on these issues. I hope that places like Rochdale, where there have already been independent inquiries, will be able to access some of the flexible funds to do victim-led follow-up work on where we are now. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend in the future and yes, I too am pleased that grooming will be an aggravating

factor. It was a recommendation from Jay—in fact, it was recommended even before the final IICSA recommendation.

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

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement and for the progress update to Parliament, as promised. We welcome the progress that is being made by the Government on this issue, which tragically continues to blight our society.

As the Minister said, children across this country are still victims of these abhorrent crimes, and survivors await justice from previous abuse and exploitation. The Liberal Democrats believe, as Members from across the House would echo, that no child should ever be subjected to sexual abuse or exploitation, and it is clear that real action is needed to prevent such sickening acts from occurring. We have made it clear that steps must be taken at all levels of Government to better protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation in the future, and to fully deliver justice for survivors and victims. In particular, we welcome the Government's announcement of a new child protection authority and extra funding for national services that support adult survivors of sexual abuse. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) tabled an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to establish a child protection authority, and I know she is delighted to see that coming forward today.

The Lib Dems are committed to working proactively and constructively with the Government and the whole House to support and protect vulnerable children at risk of exploitation and abuse, unlike the Conservatives, sadly, who are still shamefully using the victims of grooming gangs scandal as a political football—[*Interruption.*] The Liberal Democrats continue to commend the work of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse by Professor Alexis Jay. We continue to call on the Government to urgently implement all 20 of her recommendations that, as the Minister has mentioned, the Conservatives failed to act on in government.

The Minister has spoken about some of the recommendations today, namely national leadership, learning on child protection and safeguarding, and a mandatory duty to report, but can she commit today to implementing all the report's recommendations? In so doing, can she confirm that the new child protection authority will act as a national oversight mechanism to monitor the implementation of the Jay review's recommendations across all relevant agencies and Departments? If not, will such a mechanism be brought forward? The Lib Dems support anything that will deliver justice for victims and help to prevent these sickening crimes from happening in future.

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for her work in this area. I am always keen to encourage cross-party work on these issues, and I recognise that the child protection agency had been pushed for previously.

A consultation will be launched on exactly what the oversight mechanism of the CPA will look like. It will initially be part of the national panel, and that will then be built on. The consultation will take time rather than

up-ending an entire system—that will be the process that we will go through—and I would very much welcome help from Members across the House in that process. On the implementation of all the recommendations in the Jay review, a detailed plan has been published today as part of this announcement. I invite hon. Members to look at that and to push for more, as I would do if I were not in my current ministerial position.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): When Alexis Jay appeared before the Home Affairs Committee earlier this year, she was clear that at no point in seven years, under seven Conservative Home Secretaries, did anyone say that her inquiry was either too broad or too narrow, and nobody suggested to her that there needed to be further inquiries beyond what she produced. I welcome the Minister's announcement that the three-year limitation period will be lifted, because we know that the average length of abuse for children is four years, and the average length of time that it takes someone to disclose their abuse is 26 years. Will the Minister set out how the child protection authority will work in practice? What will the funding situation be and what discussions has the Minister had with the Treasury? What is the timing to get it up and running as soon as possible, and may I ask for a guarantee that the voices of survivors will be central in the establishment of the authority?

Jess Phillips: I agree with my hon. Friend that the voices of survivors have to be part of absolutely everything that we do going forward. The CPA will immediately form part of the panel and extra funding will be provided in this year's funding to build on the analytical resources that it needs. The consultation will be ongoing with experts, including the likes of Alexis Jay, who has been very involved in the conversations—finally; unfortunately, she had previously been left out in the cold—and we will look at what the best model will be, along with survivors and experts in the field.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I have to say that I am completely infuriated by today's statement. Here we are, on the very last sitting day before the Easter recess, and the Government have all but admitted that no real progress whatsoever has been made on their promise to launch five local rape gang inquiries before Easter. It gets worse: for more than five years, leaders at the very top of Bradford council in my constituency have denied, refused and covered up, every single time I and victims, survivors and their families have called for a full rape gang inquiry across Keighley and the wider Bradford district.

Yet the Minister and this Government refuse to face the facts. Bradford's leadership simply will not act by itself, so why are this Government letting the very councils that failed victims decide whether they want to be investigated? When will this Government step up, use their statutory powers and give the victims and survivors in areas such as Keighley and the wider Bradford district the full inquiry that they have wanted for almost two decades?

Jess Phillips: First and foremost, I pay the hon. Gentleman absolute credit. For years, he has spoken up about this issue—I am actually surprised that we have not had closer conversations. I would very much welcome

some time with him to understand exactly what is going on in his local area—I think that is actually being arranged, from the letters he has sent to me. I am more than happy to sit down with him. Absolutely nothing that I have said today suggests that Bradford would not be able to access funding from the Home Office, just as Oldham has, to undertake the work that might be needed there. I would very much welcome a conversation with him about that.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and the progress that she is making. I thank her for her very long and deep commitment to this issue and to seeing justice for victims. I will ask her about the version of mandatory reporting that she proposes to introduce. My understanding is that the mandatory reporting duty will apply in situations where a person has witnessed abuse or received a disclosure of abuse, which seems to be quite a high bar. There are many examples of abuse taking place in schools and in children's homes, for example, in which it emerged later that suspicions of abuse were very widespread, but nobody witnessed the abuse, received a disclosure of it or reported their suspicions, allowing the abuse to continue. Is my hon. Friend confident that the version of mandatory reporting that she is introducing is at the right threshold? Will she commit to review the impact of the new measure once it has taken effect and to strengthen it in future if needed?

Jess Phillips: I praise my hon. Friend for her commitment to these issues over the years. She is right: the thresholds for mandatory reporting are a finely balanced tool. We had to land on the criminal justice outcomes for the most egregious cases, as other Members have mentioned, where it seemed that social workers were directly covering up and where there were professional sanctions when people just failed to report. She talked about the issue of signs. I very much hope that that will be dealt with in the training and the roll-out of this measure, but when any new law comes into place and we roll out training, we will absolutely review it as we go along.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I welcome the mandatory reporting progress. It is worth acknowledging the Bill that I led through the House, which has now paid out £100 million in Northern Ireland to survivors of institutional sexual abuse. During the progress of that Bill and the discussions I had, the mealy-mouthed apologies from institutions were abhorrent. May I urge the Minister to push very hard on church institutions and other institutions to ensure that they pay and they apologise?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. Some of the changes that the right hon. Gentleman will read about in the documents that will be published subsequently concern that exact issue of an apology, and the limitations of mealy-mouthed apologies. What that means to the victims is so awful, so I will absolutely commit to push the institutions to do exactly what they need to do to make honest apologies. I have to say that, in recent weeks and months, we have not always had the best examples of that on display.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): The victims of child sexual abuse were badly let down by institutions. We must recognise that this continues, and that it is the

[Harpreet Uppal]

responsibility of us all to act, so I warmly welcome the commitment to introducing mandatory reporting. It has taken too long to get to this place. Will the Minister say a little more about the training that will be available to professionals and volunteers, so that they can spot the signs and indicators? Will she say more about how we will ensure that local victim panels are resourced adequately?

Jess Phillips: In answer to my hon. Friend's first question, at the beginning of next month, we will publish exactly how local panels can be set up and the work that can happen in local authority areas. Alongside the mandatory duty legislation, there will be written guidance, and training will be provided. When we talk about people who work with children, we often think of teachers or social workers, but we are also talking about sports coaches, people in the clergy, and lots of other people, so the guidance will have to be both quite widely drawn and specific.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement. I share her disappointment that the Conservatives have sought to pick out one particular community. Day after day in this Chamber, they vilify Muslims. As somebody who has Muslim family and brown skin, I say that we feel increasingly uncomfortable in our own country, given the attacks that we hear, day after day, from the Conservatives on all Muslims. It is an absolute disgrace.

I welcome the child protection authority. On the fact that the Conservatives did not introduce it when they were in government and able to do so, Professor Jay told me that they claimed that they did not have legislative time. We all know that they did. I press the Minister to give me her personal assurance that she will work with her colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to ensure that we strengthen our online safety regulation and do not water it down in any way, because Professor Jay is very clear that online sexual exploitation and abuse are huge and growing.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Even in the two and a half years since Alexis Jay published her review, we have come to know even more about the harms occurring online. The Online Safety Act 2023 finally came into force only last month, but the Government have made it clear that where there is a need to go further on various issues, such as on the recommendations made by Alexis Jay, we will absolutely look at that.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As many have said, any time we look at child sexual abuse in this place and beyond, we must always put the victims first. I welcome the statement by the Safeguarding Minister, and the emphasis that she has placed on supporting police investigations across the country to get justice for victims, and to ensure that those responsible are put behind bars. The grooming gangs taskforce contributed to 550 arrests, and we have heard today that there were 597 arrests in the last months of 2024. Will she give us further details on how the new measures will ensure that we can truly work collaboratively across Government, police forces, the public sector and local authorities to protect all children from sexual abuse, and to ensure

that, as a Government, we do not allow the shameful failure of institutions that protect themselves before they protect our children?

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Really working in partnership, and not just saying that we are, is important at the highest level, here in these buildings and in Whitehall. We have set up an inter-ministerial group—I am a member of it, together with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby)—to ensure that we are working together. The level of engagement from Ministers and Secretaries of State, working through the Cabinet Office, has made it a pleasure to produce these documents. We have to make sure that this work is also happening locally. Measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to improve multi-agency working, and the reform of social work, will be vital to our finally getting a grip on this issue.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I know that the Minister will join me in paying tribute to child sexual abuse specialist prosecutors, who deploy their considerable expertise to put together cases that can be based on complex and—as we have heard—very distressing evidence. Will the Minister make sure that a fair share of resources reach those prosecutors? She will recognise that just as the public expect child sexual abuse to be detected, they also expect it to be effectively prosecuted.

Jess Phillips: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a really good point. The legal process is a forgotten part of the system; having worked for many years with Nazir Afzal, for example, who was the prosecutor on the Rochdale cases, I can say that those prosecutors can really be forgotten. We have asked the joint inspectorate to look specifically into the justice system and what needs to be done, but there are undoubtedly cases waiting in the long backlog because the prosecutors, defence and court space are not available. Dealing with that has to be part of a much bigger piece of work, but I will absolutely take away what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has said.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement, and I pay tribute to her for her considerable expertise in this field. The victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse have spent far too long waiting for justice. As my hon. Friend said, childhood sexual abuse knows no hierarchy; it also knows no borders. We have different legislative systems within this country, and we cannot allow action to be taken in one area only, with victims potentially being left out. What discussions is my hon. Friend having with the Scottish Government, so that we can take this work forward on a joint basis?

Jess Phillips: We have had discussions with our Scottish counterparts on some of the legislation that we are currently passing, including the legislation on child sexual abuse online, artificial intelligence, and some of the dangers that Alexis Jay rightly pointed out in the final recommendations of her report. We have those conversations; obviously, issues of child protection are devolved to Scotland, but we cannot do this work in isolation, especially because children are trafficked across

the border. I am always very happy to work with counterparts in the Scottish Government to drive progress—and, frankly, to learn from them sometimes.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I share the anger and frustration expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) about the lack of progress on inquiring into the rape gangs, and I was incredibly disappointed by the Minister's failure to answer a single question put to her by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), including the refusal to acknowledge that these crimes were racially and religiously aggravated. I will repeat just one of those questions: in many of the rape gang cases, councillors, council workers and police officers were complicit and often corrupt, so why are the Government refusing to set up a specialist unit in the National Crime Agency to investigate those who should have protected those innocent girls, but instead participated in and facilitated their abuse?

Jess Phillips: To answer the hon. Gentleman's question, if criminal cases can be brought against any of those people, I am more than happy to speak to the taskforce that is working to improve the number of arrests—as I said, we have seen an increase in arrests—and see where criminal cases can be brought against them. I am more than happy to see those people locked up for as long as they deserve. However, we were left for some decades without a mandatory reporting duty on the statute books, one that would enable us to take to task, through the criminal justice system, the people who covered this up. We will rectify that.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement; I do not think there is anyone who could lead more credibly on this issue. It is absolutely disgusting that the last Government had 89 weeks to implement the recommendations of the Jay inquiry but implemented absolutely zero of them, yet Conservative Members come here today to grandstand on this issue. A decade ago, the Director of Public Prosecutions recommended mandatory reporting—he happens to be our Prime Minister now, of course—so it has taken 10 years for this to happen. What has been lost in that time, and what can be gained in the coming years?

Jess Phillips: Unfortunately, what has been lost in that time is the ability to hold people to account. Even if, in a statutory inquiry, information was found out, for example about councillors, that would not lead to their arrest—that is not what a statutory inquiry does. Nobody is in prison as a result of any of the statutory inquiries we have had, so we want to focus our attention on criminalising those people. I am afraid to say that in the absence of mandatory reporting, we have seen lots of people get away with cover-ups in the intervening years. What I hope for the future is not that I see lots of people locked up who are bad, but that this change creates a culture of openness and transparency in child protection services. That is what should be celebrated, not the reputation of the organisation.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My blood is boiling as I listen to the stuff coming from Conservative Members. If they had read the independent

inquiry into child sexual abuse, they would recognise that there are hundreds of thousands of people alive today—people just like me, white girls—who suffered at the hands of white men who have got clean away with it, because nothing was done for so long. I welcome today's statement. I think it is absolutely brilliant, and I am very glad to hear that it is the start of a plan, not the finish.

Of course, this is not rocket science. I recognise the value of mandatory reporting and the importance of criminalising those who obstruct reporting by individuals, but could we step that down a little bit, and say that those who coerce people into not reporting, or gently discourage them from doing so, should also be criminalised? As the Minister knows, I have been working on an amendment to clause 45 of the Crime and Policing Bill that would cover religious institutions and faith-based organisations. There should no longer be a convention of absolute confidentiality for those who take confession in a religious setting; there is a conflict and a tension there. We need to make sure in some way that it is made explicit that no one should be excluded from mandatory reporting.

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We now have many laws on coercion in our country—passing laws on coercion is something that the previous Government did do. If it can be evidenced that anybody coerced somebody into not reporting, or gently tried to cover something up, that would be seen as criminal and considered to be a cover-up. Obviously, this will all be tested when such cases come to pass.

Funnily enough, the Crime and Policing Bill Committee, which I am also meant to be on, may get up to clause 45 today—we will get back to that Committee immediately after this statement. I am more than happy to have conversations with the hon. Lady, but the Church, faith leaders and faith groups are absolutely within the purview of the measures. Making sure that we do not create workarounds for certain things is in everybody's best interest.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), gave very graphic and disturbing examples of horrific abuse suffered by just a couple of the young ladies affected by these grooming gangs. She asked important questions about the gangs, and I was disappointed that instead of answering her questions, the Minister talked about the number of meetings that her predecessors have had, and about the fact that many girls are abused by people who are not in grooming gangs. Of course that is true, but both are important.

The Minister, in answer to an earlier question, invited another Member

“to push for more, as I would do if I were not in my current ministerial position.”

Why are the inquiries limited to only five areas? What about those in the other areas? Does she not recognise that giving people a choice on whether their area is investigated or not is an incentive for those who wish to cover up either to not bid or to not bid well for those inquiries? Above all, who or what is preventing her from delivering the more that she would push for if she was sitting here?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely nobody is stopping me from pushing for more, as I am sure all my ministerial colleagues would tell the hon. Lady, having been in meetings with me. I think this is about the point of view of Parliament. Parliament is here to strength-test the things we do, and I welcome that. To the point that the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) made, this is just the beginning, not the end, as I said in my statement.

The details of how local areas can bid into that scheme will, as I have said, be published by the end of the month. I mentioned grooming gang victims many, many times throughout my statement. I also mentioned other victims in the many other inquiries that have gone on. I only wish that people were quite so well versed in some of the other areas. My only criticism of the shadow Minister on the shadow Front Bench is that she only mentioned one; I mentioned many.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I know the Minister is passionate about this issue and I commend her for her efforts. Would she not agree that the sentencing for these most abhorrent crimes needs to truly reflect the seriousness of the offence? I do not think anyone can sit in this House today and not be broken or feel sick to the pit of their stomach when we hear accounts from the Front Benchers. Anyone who takes away the innocence of a child must serve the toughest of sentences. After all, these children have been subjected to a lifetime of trauma as a result of these horrific acts.

Jess Phillips: The hon. Lady makes a good point, because for the victims I have worked with over the years, it is a life sentence; it is not something that goes away. That is one of the reasons I feel strongly about trying to improve the levels of therapeutic support for children and adults, and that has been a real priority for me. She is absolutely right on the sentencing. The Government are undertaking a sentencing review in the broader sense, and we are putting grooming as an aggravating factor into sentencing and into the law. I am meant to be in two places at once, and in fact that clause is probably being discussed in Committee literally right now.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the Government's statement and the progress they are making on implementing recommendations from the Jay review, and I am deeply disappointed that the Conservatives have chosen to respond to the statement in this way and refuse to acknowledge any progress that the Government are making after years of inaction on the Conservatives' part.

As the Minister knows, before being elected to this House, I was the chief executive of Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Services, an organisation that supports victims of child sexual abuse. I know how vital these support services are to rebuilding the lives of those who have been shattered by abuse, helping them to become adults who can live a more settled and fulfilling life. That organisation is dealing with a funding cut of around a third, and it has already had to close its helpline. I know that many other similar organisations across the country are facing a similar cliff edge due to funding cuts, as well as pressures from inflation and

national insurance increases. I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement of a doubling in funding for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that children who have been victims of child sexual exploitation and grooming can receive timely access to appropriate victim support and trauma-informed services?

Jess Phillips: Specifically on victims of grooming, we will set out the commissioning for the new service across England and Wales for the independent child trafficking guardians, as I said in my statement. Children who access through the national referral mechanism as trafficking victims—lots of British children who are groomed access through that system—will be able to access support through that service. As is laid out in the documents, improvements are needed in children's sexual violence therapeutic support. Anyone who has worked on the frontline would know that, as would anyone who has tried to make a referral through the generic services. It would be disingenuous of me to stand here before the comprehensive spending review and make a commitment—I am not sure the Chancellor would thank me—but one of the major recommendations of IICSA was about children's therapeutic support, which is very much at the front of my mind while we go through the comprehensive spending review.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers and her commitment to bring justice for the victims. No one denies that the hon. Lady has a big heart and a real determination to get the answers we all wish to see. With sexual offences at an all-time high in Northern Ireland—I know that she has an interest in Northern Ireland—and with some 4,232 such incidents recorded between April 2022 and March 2023, which was an increase of some 4.7% on the previous year, it is clear that the protection of children, our most vulnerable people, needs to be a priority. What discussions will she have with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that Northern Ireland has the support needed to address these horrifying figures? We have to understand that every incident reported sits against those that are not. We are perhaps just not getting to the real figure.

Jess Phillips: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that although we have arguments in this House about data, what data has not been collected and what progress we have made, the reality is that we will never know about the vast majority of data, because we do not ever see it. That is something we should all strive to overcome. I visited Northern Ireland recently and went to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and worked specifically with the team dealing with online child sex abuse. We looked at the processes they were undertaking through undercover action on that particular issue. That will continue, and not just because part of my heart is in Northern Ireland through my father. Having worked with the PSNI and met those in the Executive, I know that there is real determination in Northern Ireland. That is perhaps because it is largely led by women—well done, Northern Ireland—but there is real appetite, and we will happily work with those people as much as we can.

Horizon Redress and Post Office Update

2.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Post Office, Horizon redress and Post Office finances. We inherited a Post Office in crisis. It had a grim past, a poor commercial track record, unstable leadership and its record on compensation was widely perceived as legalistic, slow and adversarial. Since this Government came into office, the total amount of redress paid to victims of the Horizon scandal has increased by more than three and a half times. Between July last year and 31 March this year, more than 3,300 victims have received compensation for the first time. Approximately £892 million has now been paid to more than 6,200 claimants. We have also established a new compensation scheme, so that those postmasters who finally had their convictions overturned by Parliament last year get redress. We are working on our approach to redress for postmasters who fell victim to the flaws in the Capture system.

Unlike the previous Government, we set out a clear forecast for compensation within the autumn Budget of £1.8 billion from 2024-25. As the House will know, the Government previously committed to provide the majority of group litigation order claimants with substantial redress by the end of March. I can confirm that, as promised, 76% of those who submitted claims for compensation have received substantial redress. All those who submitted a claim before Christmas have received an offer or, in one case, a substantial interim payment instead. We will also take further steps to increase the pace at which claimants' challenges can be resolved fairly. Facilitated discussions will be reintroduced to the GLO scheme for this purpose.

Most recently, we announced that from 3 June my Department will take over responsibility for the overturned convictions scheme from the Post Office. We have also welcomed Fujitsu's commitment to contribute to the Government's compensation for the victims of the scandal. During a meeting between the Secretary of State and Fujitsu's chief executive officer in March, an agreement was reached on beginning talks ahead of the conclusion of Sir Wyn Williams' inquiry.

The House will be aware that the Secretary of State announced the Government's intention to establish an appeals mechanism for claimants who were unhappy with offers that they had received under the Post Office's Horizon shortfall scheme. Today we are publishing the guidance and principles for the HSS appeals, and by the end of this month we will begin to accept applications from eligible postmasters who are currently involved in the Post Office's dispute resolution process. The document sets out the underlying rules that will govern the assessment of appeals, and also provides information on, for instance, the eligibility criteria to help postmasters and their legal representatives make their claims. We developed this in consultation with the Horizon compensation advisory board, claimants' lawyers, and representatives of postmasters' organisations.

Later this month we will begin writing to the legal representatives of potentially eligible postmasters who are currently involved in the dispute resolution process, inviting them to transfer their claims to the new HSS

appeals scheme. If postmasters do not have legal representatives, we will write to them directly. Shortly after that, we will open the scheme to all other eligible postmasters. As with the GLO scheme, my Department will aim to respond within 40 working days of the submission of a substantially complete appeal in at least 90% of cases. We will encourage postmasters entering the process to engage legal advisers, and we will meet their reasonable legal costs through a tariff that we have agreed with claimants' lawyers. Postmasters will not have to pay a penny of income tax, capital gains tax, national insurance contributions, corporation tax or inheritance tax on any compensation that they receive through the new process.

As we look to the future, we will also continue to address any concerns about the Post Office's past behaviour. I am therefore pleased to be able to provide an update on the Government-funded Post Office process review scheme, which will provide redress for postmasters who lost out financially owing to issues connected with Post Office products, policies or processes. Those issues are unrelated to Horizon but are part of the company's efforts to rebuild trust with its postmasters and ensure that past failings are fully addressed. The scheme is due to be launched in the next month, and the Post Office will write to all of those potentially affected with further details, including information on how postmasters can apply.

We will consider carefully the conditions and recommendations of Sir Wyn Williams' inquiry when it is published. While tackling the awful legacy of the Horizon scandal, the Government are also determined to make the Post Office more sustainable for the future, and we remain committed to publishing a Green Paper to consider its long-term future. In particular, I look forward to hearing the visions and ideas of stakeholders, including key trade unions, sub-postmasters and others.

It has been apparent for some time that the Post Office is heavily reliant on Government funding. Its chair's transformation plan was announced in November, with the aim of putting the company on a path towards financial stability and delivering a "new deal for postmasters". The plan requires the company to make difficult decisions about, for example, the need to look seriously at efficiencies in its headquarters and the branch network to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

Today the Post Office has announced that it would be moving to a fully franchised network as part of those plans. That will realise significant savings, potentially amounting to £100 million over the duration of the current Parliament. Before this announcement, many Members wrote to me expressing concerns about their local directly managed branches, and we have heard those concerns. The Post Office will therefore ensure that each directly managed branch will be franchised, either on site or in a location nearby, so that service provision will remain in place in communities. Making those changes will ensure that the company is more sustainable.

To support Post Office provision in every community across the UK, the Government plan to provide up to £83 million of subsidy next year. That is up from the £50 million provided under the last Government, and is in addition to the uplift that we provided in the last financial year. The Post Office needs to transform the outdated technology on which it depends, and we therefore

[Gareth Thomas]

plan to provide up to £136 million of funding for its new future technology portfolio in the 2025-26 financial year. Over the next five years this work will address technology needs across the business, which will include replacing Horizon, reducing central costs and ensuring that postmasters have the tools they need to serve their customers. To enable the Post Office to continue to administer redress payments to postmasters and respond to the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry, the Government will provide up to £57.9 million of funding. These funding streams are subject to the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and referral to the Competition and Markets Authority.

An announcement on banking framework 4 has not yet been made, but I am hopeful that there will be a positive announcement soon, as post offices continue to provide vital banking services in every community up and down the country. Together, these steps will help to pave the way towards a more sustainable future for the Post Office.

During my engagement with the National Federation of SubPostmasters, concerns have been raised that the Post Office may have acted improperly in the course of the network transformation programme during the 2010s. There are claims that the Post Office and its representatives put undue pressure on postmasters, and may have given unregulated financial advice to encourage them to move on to contracts that were ultimately not in their best interests. Those allegations must be taken seriously. I am therefore commissioning an independent review of the conduct of the programme to establish whether there was any improper or coercive behaviour, and I will update the House on the scope and timing of the review in due course.

It remains our priority to speed up the delivery of fair compensation to all the victims of the Horizon scandal, and to secure and strengthen the Post Office for the future. There is more to do, but I commend this statement to the House.

2.16 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for advance sight of it. I also thank the campaigners on this issue, with whom I worked for more than five years—both as a Back Bencher and as a Front Bencher—and, indeed, I thank Lord Beamish and Lord Arbuthnot for their work on the Horizon compensation advisory board, which we established on a cross-party basis during our tenure.

I agree with the Minister that, although good progress has been made, there is much more to do. It is good that £892 million has been paid to 6,200 sub-postmasters, a tenfold increase on what we saw only a couple of years ago. It is clear that most of that has gone out of the door because of what this Parliament did last June, when it overturned the convictions by statute, and because of the introduction of fixed-sum awards, which have revolutionised the ability to pay compensation quickly.

I am proud to say that we did all that in the House on a cross-party basis, and it was the right thing to do. I worked with the then shadow Secretary of State for Business and Trade and with this Minister and others in their former roles, and our work was strongly supported

by the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), the then Business Secretary, who is now Leader of the Opposition, and the then Chancellor and his Ministers. I am therefore a little disappointed that the Minister has sought to suggest that he took over a crisis.

We have made much progress on this matter on a cross-party basis, and my remarks today will continue to be made on that basis, but for all the progress the Minister talked about in his statement, I did not hear about a single aspect of the Horizon programme that was not already in train under the last Government, in conjunction with the then Opposition. The Minister mentioned a three and a half-fold increase in July, which I welcome, but as he will no doubt concede, it happened as a result of the overturning of the convictions by Parliament and the introduction of the compensation schemes. The redress scheme, for example, was set in train by the last Government with the co-operation of the then Opposition, as was the investigation of Capture.

The Minister says that the compensation was not budgeted for, but that is not right. Last year's Budget simply said that the money had been reallocated from departmental expenditure to annual managed expenditure. He implies that the money was not there to pay out to postmasters, when the work had been done on a cross-party basis. It is absolutely wrong to give that impression to people out there who are still waiting for redress. The HSS appeals system was something that we advocated for and put in place, as were the fixed-sum awards for overturned convictions and the Horizon shortfall scheme.

The Minister talks about the unstable leadership of the Post Office. We thought it was right to put a new chair in place, and we have every confidence that Nigel Railton, whom we put in place, will do a fantastic job. We support his transformation plan and the move to a fully franchised network, which we think is the right thing to do.

I will ask the Minister some questions, if I may. It is not clear what he will do about victims of the Capture programme, even though it has been acknowledged that the Post Office was at fault in some of those cases. Will he bring forward legislation to overturn their convictions by statute? I know the advisory board believes that that is the right way forward.

On compensation, when I was in the Minister's role, I said that a named individual should oversee the compensation schemes, and the Business and Trade Committee has advocated for that. There should be one individual to oversee all the schemes, who will put their reputation on the line for delivering compensation. Although the fixed-sum awards are working, the full assessment route still has problems. Something that the Minister did not mention in his statement, but which we looked at, was a pilot of a more tariff-based scheme, whereby people who have suffered from mental health difficulties could be paid more rapidly, rather than going down a full assessment route.

The Minister mentions the timescales. Currently, there is a time parameter of 40 days for a response from the Department to a new claim, but the clock is reset when the claimant says that the claim is at the wrong level. Will he look at that?

What progress has the Minister made on an interim payment from Fujitsu? What progress has been made on establishing what Ernst and Young should have done

in 2011-12, when it was aware of the huge liabilities that the Post Office had on its books due to this particular problem? Will he be ambitious on the banking framework to make sure that postmasters get a good deal, and what progress has the chair made on his commitment to reduce the highest-paid roles in the Post Office's central management tier to make sure that more of the revenue that flows into the Post Office flows out to postmasters?

Gareth Thomas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I join him in commending the work of all those who have campaigned, and who continue to campaign, for the victims of this horrendous scandal. I pay tribute to the noble Lords Arbuthnot and Beamish. In a spirit of cross-partisanship, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work in the past. I know that he worked extremely hard to try to move things forward, and I very much respect the job that he did.

Let me attempt to do justice to the detailed questions that the hon. Gentleman asked. On Capture, we are actively working on a redress scheme. We have had a series of meetings with some of the sub-postmasters who were affected by the problems in the Capture software and their legal representatives. He will be aware that a number of cases with the Criminal Cases Review Commission relate to Capture, and we think it is appropriate that the CCRC is allowed to continue to review those cases.

As I outlined in my opening remarks, the Secretary of State recently met the global chief executive of Fujitsu during his visit to Japan. I have met the chief executive of Fujitsu in the UK, and I said to him that an interim payment would be a significant step in the right direction.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the Post Office's accountants. He may be aware that the Financial Reporting Council is looking at this issue and has been talking to the Horizon compensation advisory board. It is an independent body, and I am sure that he and the House will recognise that it is right that we respect the right of that independent body to do its work.

The hon. Gentleman said, quite rightly, that the full assessment of claims occasionally has problems. That is one of the reasons why I referred to the fact that we are bringing back facilitated discussions, particularly on the GLO scheme. Although there has been significant progress in settling two thirds of the GLO claims that have been put in, we think that those facilitated discussions will help to make it easier for fair compensation to be allocated in a timely way to those victims of the scandal.

Where a case for interim payments is made to us, we always encourage our team to make such payments in order to try to ease the financial pressures, and therefore the trauma, that victims still experience. The hon. Gentleman will know that there were concerns in the past about the letters requesting further information. I have seen some previous examples of those requests, and I can well understand the frustration of sub-postmasters, their lawyers and campaigners. When we request further information, it is to make sure that we can offer an increased payment to sub-postmasters going forward. However, I recognise that there will be some scepticism because of the history around requests for information.

We will continue to do everything we can to get payments out to people as quickly as possible, and we have taken further steps to work with the Post Office to

identify victims who had not previously come forward. Some 6,000 new claimants have now come forward, and we are trying to process their cases as quickly as we can.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, particularly the reference to the discussions with Fujitsu. The Horizon software is still being used by the post office network, and I understand that the contract with Fujitsu is worth about £2.4 billion over its lifetime. We should not lose sight of the fact that Fujitsu was heavily involved in supporting the Post Office's prosecution of innocent sub-postmasters. Can my hon. Friend say exactly how he will ensure that Fujitsu pays the appropriate amount of money to compensate for its role in this affair?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise the concern across the House. My hon. Friend has followed this issue for a long time, and I recognise his continuing interest. He will forgive me if I do not give a running commentary to the House on the negotiations that we will have with Fujitsu. We are obviously waiting for the conclusions of Sir Wyn Williams' inquiry and his judgment about the level of responsibility that Fujitsu must accept. As I alluded to in my answer to the Opposition spokesman, an interim payment by Fujitsu would be a significant step forward.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): We Liberal Democrats welcome the progress that the Government have made, but the redress payment processes are still too slow. First, victims claiming under the Horizon shortfall scheme continue to face significant up-front complexity without legal advice. I welcome the Minister's announcement that the Government will be writing to that group, but could he please outline a time by which they will receive those letters?

Secondly, the Minister announced that any compensation will not be subject to a penny of income tax, capital gains tax, inheritance tax or other taxes. Could he confirm whether that will require primary legislation? If so, will it be limited to this scandal or apply to other scandals as well? I am thinking in particular of the cross-party campaign on Philomena's law because some victims of that scandal are struggling to access their compensation.

Thirdly, this scandal has involved many individuals working at the Post Office, Fujitsu and others. The Government have committed to bringing forward a statutory duty of candour; they initially said they would do so by 15 April, which is the 36th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. At business questions last week, the Leader of the House cast doubt on whether that deadline would be met, because the Government say they will take whatever time is necessary to get the issue right. We Liberal Democrats want the drafting to be done correctly, but is there any update on when we can expect the statutory duty to be brought forward?

Fourthly, the evidence of whistleblowers at Fujitsu was crucial in exposing the lies about Horizon. We Liberal Democrats have repeatedly called for an office of the whistleblower, and we have put down amendments to the Employment Rights Bill to strengthen protections for whistleblowers. Would the Government work with us on that issue?

[Daisy Cooper]

Finally, I was surprised to see the announcement about directly managed post offices. The Minister will be aware that a cross-party group of Members has been infuriated by the poor communication from Post Office bosses on this process. I recognise that today's announcement states that the Post Office will move to a fully franchised network, but that still provides no guarantee about the range or quality of services that will be available, no guarantee on the definition of "nearby", no guarantee that there will not be a break in service and no guarantee that those post offices will not eventually be closed if the franchises do not work. Will the Minister please set out the next stages? Those will affect my constituents in St Albans and many constituents represented by Members here.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right to reflect the view of the whole House that there is still much more to do on compensation. We as the Government are very clear about that ourselves, and we are working at pace to try to step up even further the rate at which compensation payments are made. We think that, in just the first nine months of this Government, we have made significant progress, increasing by three and a half times the amount of compensation that has been paid out. But I completely accept that there is more to do.

We think that the launch of the Horizon shortfall scheme appeals process will help to address a number of cases in the HSS where sub-postmasters are concerned about the offers they have had. The hon. Lady asked me when letters would be going out. I set out the broad timescale in my statement, and I simply say to her again—shortly. We want to get this up and running as quickly as we can.

The hon. Lady asked me whether new legislation would be required to implement the commitments on tax that I set out. No, it will not be required. On the issue of the duty of candour, I do not have anything to add to what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said. However, the hon. Lady's question is an opportunity to underline that we expect a number of significant issues to arise from Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry, and we as the Government—and, I am sure, the whole House—will want to reflect on the conclusions and recommendations that he comes up with.

The hon. Lady mentioned the issues about the decision to franchise the remaining directly managed branches. As I set out in my statement, I have heard the concerns from across the House—they were particularly significant on the Labour Benches, but I recognise those from the Opposition side as well—about the impact of losing post office services in the communities where those directly managed parties are. That is why we have made it clear to the Post Office that franchised post office services have to remain in those communities.

We expect the Post Office to work from the starting point of those services being what is called a mains franchise—a franchise that, as well as providing the more traditional post office services such as stamps and parcels, will also provide Government services such as passports and driving licences: the equivalent of what is available in those branches at the moment. I expect that, in the first instance, those franchised services will continue

to operate in exactly the same place where they do at the moment, before decisions are taken about where they should be located in the slightly longer term.

The hon. Lady asked me what guarantee there is that services will continue to be provided in that space. She will know that access criteria have already been published that commit the Government to provide 11,500 post offices. The decision on directly managed branches does not change those criteria, and the Post Office is committed to continuing to provide a service in those communities. I would also expect the Post Office to talk to local stakeholders, including Members of this House, about the continued operation of post office services in their communities.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): Salford precinct's busy Crown post office is a vital lifeline for residents and businesses alike, especially for those who collect their pensions and benefits in person. Put simply, closing it in favour of a franchise would cause local economic and social devastation, especially if services are reduced and staff are let go. It would also put that service at the whim of the franchisee, which, as we know from the recent case of WH Smith, causes great uncertainty and insecurity. What is the Minister doing to guarantee that Salford retains all its existing post office services and staff in this geographical location, and what alternatives has he considered or will he consider in favour of shelving franchising?

Gareth Thomas: I know that my hon. Friend has always been a great champion of Salford. Like other Members, she has made it very clear to me how significant the post office is in her community. The vast majority of post office branches across the country are already franchised. Both main and local franchises are often open longer than directly managed branches.

My hon. Friend asked what guarantees there are. As I have set out, we have made it clear to the Post Office that we want every directly managed branch to ensure that there is a main franchised operation in those communities. I recognise that there will be concern while that change takes place, but if she or any other Members have concerns about aspects of that transition as it moves forward in their constituencies, I will obviously be very happy to meet them to discuss those.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): As a member of the Business and Trade Committee, I should remind the House that in March we recommended that the Government should listen harder to our recommendations. I am glad that that seems to have been taken on board, but I am slightly concerned that a lot of back patting seems to be going on, particularly about Fujitsu. Does the Minister not agree with me that he should be telling Fujitsu what to do, not asking it? This Government seem overly deferential to lawyers. He is in charge of this. Can he not get the pace moving, because lawyers are getting their money—their fees—but postmasters are not getting their money at the rate they should?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to want progress on Fujitsu, which is one of the reasons why I have made it clear to Fujitsu that an interim payment would be a very welcome and significant step forward. We have said that we think it is important that we hear the view of Sir Wyn Williams, who has

been looking in detail at the responsibility of both Fujitsu and senior leaders in the Post Office during this scandal. We need to recognise that there is a process, but we are absolutely clear about our responsibility to move the negotiations forward.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for all the work he is doing to redress the injustice of the Horizon scandal. Can he confirm that the Communication Workers Union, as well as the National Federation of SubPostmasters, has been involved in decision making? I have lobbied him very hard about my post office in Cricklewood, so he will know that we want to and must maintain those services going forward. I think a lot of the problems stem from the separation of the Royal Mail and the Post Office following privatisation, so would he consider discussing the possibility of a joint venture again?

Gareth Thomas: I know from the conversations I have had with my hon. Friend just how much she and her constituents value the post office in Cricklewood. As I have set out, our starting point is that a mains franchise offering the same services as currently enjoyed by the residents of Cricklewood will be provided. I hope her constituents will not see any significant disruption going forward, but I am very happy to have a conversation with her about that.

I have had many conversations since coming into this role with the leadership of the Communication Workers Union, who have been very direct in their views about directly managed branches. On the question of their having a view and a say in the future of the Post Office, as I have made clear we are determined to publish a Green Paper, which will allow all those who are interested, including the CWU, to give us their vision of the future of the Post Office and view about the various questions about its future.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the Minister acknowledge that among the horrific impacts of the Horizon scandal is the massive brand damage to Post Office Ltd and its management among not only the sub-postmasters who are currently employed, but the potential workforce of the future?

Our communities in the lakes in Hawkshead, Staveley and Grasmere are currently without an operating post office and have lost those services. Will the Minister give attention to and push Post Office Ltd to provide a package that not just encourages people to remain within the Post Office, but attracts new people, acknowledging that it will take more effort than normal to attract people into the sector? On the issue of franchise services, our post office in Kendal shares space with the Royal Mail, and any change of site for our post office could threaten both. Is he cognisant of that, and will he do something about it?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman rightly underlines the significance of the Post Office, in particular in rural communities, and the challenge on occasion of finding sub-postmasters to run franchise post offices in those areas. I hope the uplift in postmaster remuneration that came just before Christmas will help to address that particular challenge.

We have made clear to the Post Office leadership that a fundamental change in its culture is needed to place sub-postmasters at the heart of the operation going forward, which they accept. They have therefore set up a consultative council to ensure that sub-postmasters have direct input into the future direction of the Post Office. They are also doing more, through a postmaster panel, to bring in postmasters to understand the different processes used and to rebuild confidence in how Post Office management handles some of the bigger challenges that the company faces.

I will happily consider any request or point of concern that the hon. Gentleman raises about Kendal. If he is not satisfied with progress in addressing those points, he is very welcome to get in contact with me further down the line.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I am very proud of the local campaign I have been involved in alongside councillors and residents to save Chester-le-Street post office. Although it is disappointing that we are losing the post office in its current form, I am relieved that the services have been saved. I recognise that the market for traditional post office services has been in decline for some years. Does the Minister share my disappointment that Post Office management did not have the commercial imagination to find new business streams utilising their brand and network of prominent high street locations?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend for his campaign. I recognise just how much the Chester-le-Street post office is valued by his constituents, as he has made clear to me a number of times in his representations.

On the commercial future of the Post Office, it is absolutely true that postal services in this country—as indeed in a number of other countries—are facing significant pressures, and it is therefore imperative that Post Office management here in the UK look at what they can do to capitalise on new opportunities, particularly in terms of banking. The Post Office chairman and chief executive, Nigel Railton and Neil Brocklehurst, completely get this point, and we are actively talking to them about what more we can do. I very much hope we will hear positive news on banking framework 4, which I hope will be a significant step forward in this regard. However, there is more that can be done in this space.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Third-party litigation funding played a key and controversial role at the start of this crisis. Following recent Supreme Court judgments, that access to justice that postmasters had at the start is under threat. What discussions is the Minister having with his colleagues about how third-party litigation funding worked in this situation and what needs to improve as it moves forward?

Gareth Thomas: The right hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me; I have been very focused on the efforts to increase compensation for the victims of the Horizon scandal, which has been the immediate challenge facing the Government in this policy area. It was something we heard loud and clear in opposition and we wanted to see progress on it. As I alluded to earlier, I suspect that the recommendations in Sir Wyn Williams' inquiry will range quite widely, and if it touches on the particular issue that the right hon. Gentleman has raised, we will

[Gareth Thomas]

look at that extremely carefully. More generally, I suspect that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice will be interested in his question.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the update on the redress scheme for victims of the Horizon scandal. I also thank him for listening to my campaign to save the Kings Square post office in Gloucester and for maintaining so many vital services for Gloucester residents with today's announcement that they will be franchised and continued. Will he meet me to discuss the merits of the new franchise staying in its current location? Kings Square has a fantastic future, with the opening of the university's new City campus later this year and the Forum, a new office, hotel and leisure facility, which will be fantastic. It would be great for the new franchise to be an important part of that future.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continued representation of his constituents' interests. He has made a number of very clear representations to me on the importance of the Gloucester post office, and I would be very happy to meet him to discuss its future as it transitions to a franchise-run operation. I should make it clear that the Post Office very much wants these franchises to be in key locations that are important for our communities, because that is obviously where the commercial income will come from, so it will be keen to meet with stakeholders such as Members of this House and other local stakeholders. If my hon. Friend would like to meet me to discuss this issue further, I would be very happy to do so.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Where a post office branch that is currently directly managed is not staying in its current premises, will there be a proper formal scheme of community engagement to give the community some control over ensuring that what is provided in its place will be at least as good? Communities simply do not trust the Post Office at the moment to make that judgment for itself.

Gareth Thomas: The right hon. Gentleman makes a completely fair point that the Post Office suffers from a significant lack of trust, for all the reasons we know. I completely understand why he would want to press the particular point that his community should be involved in discussions about their post office services going forward. As I alluded to earlier, I would expect the Post Office to engage with local stakeholders, including the right hon. Gentleman as the local Member of Parliament. If at any point he is concerned about those discussions, he is very welcome to get in contact with me, and I will happily meet him.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My constituents are served by Crown post offices in Brixton and East Dulwich, both just outside my constituency boundary and both in areas that have seen the near complete withdrawal of high street bank branches, leaving residents and businesses dependent on the post offices for banking services, as well as for the wide range of other services that they provide. The Minister knows that the big difference between Crown and franchised post offices is that no one in the public sector has any

say in the public interest over whether a franchised post office remains open, or indeed whether a franchisee can be secured. What assurance can my hon. Friend give that post office franchises opened in place of Crown post offices will remain open for the long term?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise the significance that the two post offices have to my hon. Friend's constituents, and I recognise, too, that there will be concern in her constituency about the long-term future of those post offices. Although she is not the constituency Member of Parliament for the area, I will ensure that she is consulted about the future of those post offices. I recognise that, particularly in urban areas such as the ones that she and I represent, people outside the immediate constituency are reliant on those post offices. As I have said, a post office will want to ensure that, in the long term, it is located at the heart of the commercial activity in a community, because its future income depends on that. However, given what has been said about the lack of trust in the Post Office, it is important that there are conversations with local stakeholders, including Members of this House. Moreover, given the points that she has made, I will make sure she is included in conversations about those two particular post offices.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): More than 4,000 residents have signed my cross-party petition opposing the closure of the Bexhill Crown branch. It is fair to say that this whole situation has been made worse, because the Minister has allowed the Post Office to put the cart before the horse, with the decision taken on closures ahead of a clear guarantee on what will come next for all of our constituents. I notice that in his answers, the Minister has talked about "should", "expectations" and "starting points", but those are not cast-iron guarantees. Can he give a cast-iron guarantee that he will veto any replacement of the Crown service in Bexhill if it does not provide exactly the same services as the current branch is providing?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise from the meetings that I had with the hon. Member and also with a Bexhill Labour councillor how strong the feeling is about the threat to the post office in Bexhill. I have made it clear that the Post Office should replace the directly managed branch with a mains franchise. That is what I expect it to do. I also expect there to be a consultation with local stakeholders in Bexhill, including with him as the Member of Parliament. If he has concerns about that process, he is welcome to get in contact with me.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank the Minister for meeting me to discuss the directly managed branch on Kensington high street in my constituency of Kensington and Bayswater. More than 1,000 residents joined my campaign to save the services at the branch. Today's news is welcome for them, but can the Minister give us some reassurance on when the transition will take place from the current system to a franchise model, and what guarantees he has on continuing service levels?

Gareth Thomas: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. I recognise that he has campaigned and made representations to me on this issue, as he has set out. As I have said to other Members today, he and other local stakeholders should expect to be involved in discussions

about the future of post office services in Kensington and the transition to a franchise. We have the expectation—the Post Office has accepted this expectation—that it will be a mains service, as opposed to a local franchise, which provides Government services such as passports, driving licences and so on. I cannot give him an exact timeframe for when those discussions will begin, but the Post Office has already begun to have conversations with staff and potential franchisees. I would expect them to start getting in contact with Members of Parliament over the next few months.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Tony Hibberd, a former sub-postmaster from Colyton in east Devon, is 84 years old. Four years since he submitted his claim, and 14 years after his wrongful dismissal, there has still been no meaningful progress towards a fair and final settlement that reflects the loss to Tony's reputation. Following the statement from the Dispatch Box on 18 December, I wrote to the Minister about Tony's case and the reply that I received referred to an offer made to Tony in December, but no such offer had been received. The Minister refers to a new Horizon shortfall appeal scheme with a turnaround time of two months; but again, I say that Tony is 84 years old. Will the Minister urgently review Tony's case to ensure that he finally receives the compensation that he deserves?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Member will understand that I do not have the details about Tony's case to hand, but he has asked me to review the way that the case has been handled. I am happy to do that. I am keen that complex cases are resolved fairly and as quickly as possible. I recognise that many sub-postmasters have been waiting a long time for compensation. We have made progress, but I recognise that there is more to do. I will happily look at Tony's case after this and write to the hon. Member.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his update on the progress to redress the victims of the Horizon scandal as well as the commitment to invest in new technology. In light of the sudden closure of a post office in Coalville in my constituency, what reassurance can the Minister give to current and prospective new postmasters that the Horizon system, which is still being used in post offices, is now fit for purpose?

Gareth Thomas: We are clear that we need to replace the Horizon system. As the whole House would expect, the Post Office is not taking any criminal action when there are shortfalls. There are processes for resolving issues around shortfalls in the Horizon system. Indeed, I referenced the postmaster panel and the way in which the Post Office management is working with sub-postmasters to help them to understand how shortfalls in the system are being dealt with going forward, so I hope that, slowly, we are taking the first steps to rebuild that trust.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am sure the Minister remembers that, on 18 December, I raised the case of Donna from Mid Dorset and North Poole, who was bankrupted for a quarter of a million pounds due to the Horizon scandal. The bankruptcy was cancelled, but not before most of the interim settlement was deducted by the Post Office receiver. I was therefore

shocked to receive a reply from the Minister in which he confirmed that the GLO approach is to deduct interim payments regardless "of what the claimant did with the money". Apparently, the only option is for legal representatives to undergo a protracted appeal, incurring more costs and delays, ensuring that the lawyers get their pay day before the postmasters. Will the Minister reflect on this policy, which is punishing victims again and again, so that Donna gets the redress that she deserves?

Gareth Thomas: I ask the hon. Lady to forgive me for not having the details of that particular case in front of me. As she has asked me to look again at that case, I will happily do so and write back to her.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for giving me his time over these past few months to discuss the Morley directly managed branch with him. Over 3,300 people signed my petition to keep Morley post office open, so it is definitely welcome that the post office will be retained. That is caveated by the fact that it will be a franchise, and there are questions about its location. I was also delighted to help secure a banking hub for our community, but the services provided by a banking hub do not overlap with those provided by a post office. What guarantees can the Minister give my constituents that the new Morley post office will offer all the services that they enjoy from the current one?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise that my hon. Friend has been campaigning hard to save Morley post office; he has certainly made clear representations to me about it. The starting point for discussions about the future of postal services, in Morley as elsewhere, is that post offices will be replaced by a main post office offering Government services as well as traditional post office services. If he has particular concerns about the way the transition is happening, he is welcome to get back in contact with me.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and commitment to addressing these issues. The Post Office Horizon scheme was deeply flawed from the outset, and we cannot trust Horizon to provide evidence for postmasters or postmistresses when the entire scandal is based on Horizon's unreliability. Does the Minister not agree that we have no option other than to trust the people, not the computer, and that we must do the right thing by the people who have been vilified?

Gareth Thomas: I absolutely pay tribute to the journalists and campaigners who exposed the Post Office scandal, and who continue to campaign for those who have not yet received redress. I had the privilege of meeting a number of sub-postmasters who were very badly affected by the scandal, and those conversations will stay with me for a very long time, and I suspect that the same is true for other Members who have had similar conversations. They are powerful, motivating conversations that will help this to get sorted out.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I put on record my complete sympathy and solidarity with the victims of the Horizon scandal, which is one of the biggest injustices in modern British history. I was extremely concerned in November to hear

[Chris Murray]

that Edinburgh City Crown post office, based in the Waverley station complex—the centre of Scotland’s capital—was to close. I have been campaigning hard to ensure that residents, commuters and businesses see no diminution in services, and for fair treatment for post office staff. Can the Minister confirm that, thanks to this Government, a franchise post office will be established in the area, meaning continuation of service for local residents? When does he expect that transition to take place, and will he ensure that both MPs and Members of the Scottish Parliament are consulted on where the post office will be?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise the point that my hon. Friend makes about Edinburgh. He will remember conversations we have had about the future of the post office, in which he made very clear to me the significance of a continued post office service for that community. As I say, we will make sure that conversations take place between local stakeholders, including him as the constituency representative in this House and his Scottish Parliament colleagues representing his community. Colleagues in Wales such as my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones) have made similar representations to me, and are also very concerned to make sure that they have conversations about the location of their post offices.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): For some, the post office is a lifeline. I understand the changing role of the post office in this difficult and changing market, but given the closure of several banks on the high street of Cosham in my constituency, the recently proposed closure of the post office has caused huge concern. First, I thank the Minister for constantly meeting me and listening to me. I also thank my constituents who shared and signed the petition, and who got in touch about the need to save our post office, for showing its value. I am pleased to see that the Government and the Post Office have been listening to them. Today’s announcement of a franchise model will allow Cosham post office to remain open. What will the Minister and the Post Office do to ensure that local voices continue to be heard in the franchising process? Can they ensure that Cosham post office retains all existing services and stays on the high street? Will he also continue to meet me to discuss this issue?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the number of bank branch closures. Over 9,500 bank branches closed under the Conservatives, who did next to nothing to ensure that they were replaced by any sort of alternative service. The post office is often the last opportunity for people to access banking services on many high streets. That is one of the reasons why we remain committed to having 11,500 post offices, and to the access criteria, which will help ensure that every community in the UK, including the people served by the Cosham post office, has access to post office services. I will of course continue to meet my hon. Friend, if that is what she requires.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his positive engagement on this; I have discussed with him on a number of occasions the situation at Leighton Buzzard post office. Can he

confirm that a Leighton Buzzard post office will remain in the high street area, and what can he tell residents about the opening hours that the branch will have?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend has pushed me repeatedly on the future of the Leighton Buzzard post office. We are very clear that we want post offices to be located on or very close to high streets, so that they can best serve local people. I can give the commitment that my hon. Friend will be consulted by the Post Office and other stakeholders in the Leighton Buzzard community about how it will operate going forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dr Ben Coleman.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): It is just Ben Coleman, Madam Deputy Speaker, but thank you for the honorific. I am very grateful to the Minister for his statement, and for the further measures he is taking to support the shamefully treated victims of the Horizon scandal. I also thank him for saving our beloved post office on the King’s Road in Chelsea, after meeting me to discuss it. The news will be warmly welcomed by residents in Chelsea, 1,000 of whom signed the petition to save that post office. Can I ask him to ensure that the King’s Road branch, when it is franchised, provides no less a service than it does now? Ideally, it would provide an even fuller service, if possible. That is what happened to the franchise branch on the North End Road in Fulham, which I campaigned with residents to save, and which is now open seven days a week, from 7 in the morning till 9 in the evening.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend made clear to me the significance of the King’s Road post office to his constituents, and I am pleased that there will continue to be a post office service there. I have experience of a directly managed post office closing and a franchise opening up—in this case, in a WHSmith—and afterwards the service was open for longer. I hope his constituents enjoy the same experience. If he has particular concerns about the way services are to be delivered, I will happily meet him again.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I know that none of these issues are of his making, so I am grateful to him. Edinburgh South West and Edinburgh South share 18 victims of the Horizon scandal, and I am sure that they very much welcome what the Minister has said. I want to talk about the directly managed branch in my constituency, in Wester Hailes. That is one of the most deprived parts of Scotland, so any loss in service there will be acutely felt. I know from campaign work I have done, along with Councillor Stephen Jenkinson, that the post office is used by people well beyond Wester Hailes, so it is important that we take any threat to it really seriously. The situation is made all the worse by the fact that the Bank of Scotland branch right across from it is closing next month. I am slightly concerned that what is described as a “new deal” for the Post Office might be a bad deal for Wester Hailes. For it to be a good deal, the consultation has to be right. It has to be meaningful and tailored to the people of Wester Hailes. Can the Minister reassure us that this will be a meaningful consultation that will reach into Wester Hailes and understand the needs of the community?

Gareth Thomas: I know from conversations I have had with my hon. Friend the significance of the post office to his community. I very much hope that his experience, the experience of his community, and that of local stakeholders such as the councillor he has been working with, will be positive when the Post Office sits down with him and talks through the transition. If he has concerns about how those conversations are going, I remain happy to meet him to discuss them.

Armed Forces Covenant

DEFENCE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Defence Committee. Mr Calvin Bailey will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. They should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee member, and not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

3.10 pm

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I am proud to present the Defence Committee's fourth report of this Parliament, which is evidence of how hard the Committee has been working on behalf of Parliament and the British people in these highly volatile and uncertain times. I thank the Committee, the staff—in particular George James—and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for his leadership.

I am pleased to share the armed forces covenant report. As the House knows, the covenant is our society's commitment to the armed forces community—a commitment to recognising and rewarding their service, and ensuring that they are not disadvantaged in civilian life as a result of that service. The Government said in their manifesto that they would strengthen the covenant by putting it “fully into law”.

Our report does two things: it looks at the covenant today to examine how well it is living up to society's commitment to the armed forces; and it looks at how the Government should make that commitment stronger when they bring forward legislation. We heard that they plan to do so through the Armed Forces Bill next year.

We decided that the best way to understand how well the covenant is working was to ask the people it is designed to help, so we invited serving personnel, their families and veterans to share their experiences with us. We are hugely grateful to everyone who took the time to write to us. Their powerful contributions helped us to get to the truth on where the covenant is succeeding and where it is falling short. We are so grateful to the Secretary of State for giving his permission to serving personnel to send us their stories, as well as to the organisations who provided evidence directly to our inquiry.

The evidence painted a mixed picture of how the covenant is working today. We heard some positive stories, including from an individual who said that citing the covenant to their local NHS trust helped them get a timely mental health assessment for their child; but unfortunately such stories were in the minority. Most of the stories we received came from people who had expected the covenant to help them but found that it was ineffective or, worse, disregarded. One person who was on a waiting list for NHS treatment was told that their position on the list would transfer when they moved from Scotland to the south of England on

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

service, but after they moved, they found themselves at the back of the queue. When they raised that with the trust, they were told that the trust

“didn’t recognise and therefore follow the armed forces covenant.”

We heard many stories like that. It is hardly surprising that those people viewed the covenant as “a gimmick”, with “no real substance”, or as something that

“looks good on public bodies’ websites but in practice means nothing at all.”

The Government are therefore right to recognise that the covenant needs to improve. Their proposal is to extend its scope, so that more areas of central Government are subjected to it. We welcome that, and we recommend that the covenant be applied to all Government Departments. With that, we expect to see Departments paying better attention to the needs of the forces community when they make policy, and we expect to see the covenant applied to areas of life that the existing duty does not cover, and areas in which the forces community experiences disadvantages, such as employment, social care, welfare and immigration, in particular for non-UK passport holders.

However, we are clear that legislating is only part of the solution. Our evidence shows that one of the biggest issues is that the covenant is not consistently applied, either because people are not aware of it, because it is not well understood, or because it is not given a high enough priority. That is why we heard that the armed forces community’s experience of the covenant varies massively depending on where they live.

If the law is not consistently applied, amending the statute book will make little difference. That is why our report says that the Government need a proper plan for implementing the covenant, in tandem with introducing new legislation. That needs commitment from all Government Departments, and we should not underestimate the scale of the commitment necessary. Getting this right is as important as updating the law, if not more so.

The armed forces covenant is a noble proposition, but sadly we do not always live up to it as a society. We want to get to a place where our service personnel and our veterans can be in no doubt that when they deal with their local council, doctor or employer, the covenant will support them. New legislation will help, but it is not a silver bullet. We also need to embed the covenant more deeply in our institutions, and particularly across Government and in wider society.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There are no interventions during the statement.

Mr Bailey: As we say in our report, the covenant gives us all a duty to our servicemen and women. We must take it as seriously as they have taken their duty to us. I commend the report to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I welcome the report and congratulate all members of the Committee and the witnesses who played their part in the inquiry. Overall, may I extend the Opposition’s best wishes to

our veterans, to our armed services, and to our serving men and women, who deserve our respect and utmost gratitude every day?

I thank the hon. Gentleman for outlining the contents of his report. As he will know, we sat on the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill Committee together. What role does he think the Armed Forces Commissioner could play in upholding the armed forces covenant? Could they have an independent role in assessing how Government Departments do? If that is not the right mechanism, do he or his Committee have a view on some independent scrutiny to assess whether the Government and all Departments are adhering to the covenant? Have they looked at how that could be upheld?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his points. I join him in thanking our servicemen and women for their service and recognising their sacrifices. On the role of the Armed Forces Commissioner, the report states in part 3 that there have been no recognisable measures of success. The Minister and his Department will have to take that on and bring forward some answers. It is probably within that framework that the Armed Forces Commissioner will have some role. However, it is a critical failing of our application of the armed forces covenant that success is not measured, so it is not monitored almost anywhere.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for representing the Defence Committee. Labour’s commitment to fully enshrine the armed forces covenant in law is a vital step in recognising the sacrifices made by our service members and their families. However, our report examines some significant gaps in coverage. In particular, I highlight the treatment of non-UK personnel and their families. Unlike other routes, the immigration status given to serving and recently discharged personnel does not allow them to work or access social security. Will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Ministry of Defence to resolve this issue with the Home Office well in advance of the covenant’s expansion?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important point. She does a great job in representing the home of the British Army and raises the issues consistently, both with the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces community and on the Defence Committee—indeed, she did so throughout the inquiry.

My hon. Friend’s point is powerfully made because it supports what the forces’ families federations brought forward in their evidence. They pointed out that:

“There is no other immigration route in which someone legally in the UK isn’t allowed to work or claim benefits whilst their application is being decided.”

That is a massive travesty and a failure, and an example of the armed forces facing a unique disadvantage. It is exactly the sort of anomaly that an updated covenant should attempt to address.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I want to put on the record my thanks to the hon. and gallant Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) for bringing the report to the Chamber today. The Government must urgently reconsider the proposed changes to the application of inheritance tax on certain armed forces death-in-service payments. The Forces Pension Society has described that as

“a direct breach of the Armed Forces Covenant”,

warning that it will have a “corrosive” impact on serving personnel and undermine trust in Government. Does the hon. Member agree with that, and what steps does he think the Government need to take to rectify the situation as quickly as possible?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and for raising a valid and valuable point that the Government must take forward and consider. It was not part of the Armed Forces Act 2021, but it is the type of thing that other Government Departments should be looking at. A series of questions about that have gone to the Department to see whether it is something that could be tackled. I know that the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is here on the Front Bench, is working on that.

We must remember, however, that there is a difference between death in service and death while serving. There is an important distinction there, because to not recognise that can create a whole load of complexities that people who have served will understand probably more uniquely than others.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for bringing this important report to us today and for the Committee’s work. North Lincolnshire council has established a physical armed forces hub dedicated to providing comprehensive support to all members of the armed forces community, offering assistance on health and housing. Doncaster city council has the veteran’s innovation fund, which provides funds of up to £300 to help with barriers that impact individuals’ wellbeing.

That is all amazing, but if our veterans do not know about it in the first place, it cannot help them. They deserve our respect and they deserve our support, particularly when they come out fighting for each and every one of us. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we go into the Easter recess, there is a need for us to make a priority of promoting the armed forces covenant in every one of our constituencies?

Mr Bailey: I am aware of the work that my hon. Friend is doing to support the armed forces community in Lincolnshire, particularly in Donny, which was an old and well-loved RAF station. Bringing back jobs to the community that will provide opportunities for veterans is very important. I agree with him that we all need to go out and champion the armed forces covenant because it impacts us all: if we do not get it right, we will adversely impact recruitment and retention and therefore our armed forces’ ability to serve us.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Does the hon. and gallant Member think that our Northern Ireland veterans, and specifically our former special forces members, are under attack from the very state that they served? Does he think that they deserve protection under the armed forces covenant?

Mr Bailey: As the hon. and gallant Member knows, this matter was not raised—correction, he indeed raised the issue and received a response from the Minister about how our veterans are being handled and the complexities involved. I do not agree that they are

under attack. I believe in justice and the rule of law and that those have been equally applied. The Government’s approach is valid and honest, and it will do right by our veterans in the end.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend, and indeed all members of the Defence Committee, for an invaluable report. During his contribution, he mentioned one example of a soldier moving cross-border and that causing problems with NHS appointments. Does the Committee recognise that soldiers and veterans can be disadvantaged by difference in policy between the nations of the UK? How do we think the Government can best go about addressing those problems?

Mr Bailey: I concur with my hon. Friend and am sure that other examples of that will be brought forward. The difference in applications across England are quite stark, but when we extend into Scotland, they can be marked and almost unjust. The only place in the world where our service personnel are applied a differential rate of taxation is in Scotland; it is in Scotland that our service personnel have different access to provision of family support, in particular childcare; and it is only when our service personnel are posted to Scotland that they receive differential treatment in terms of their education. The report highlights that and I think it will be quite a challenge for the devolved Government to say that they are they are actively meeting the armed forces covenant until those things are addressed.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Each branch of our UK armed forces faces challenges in maintaining personnel strength, with each below target and experiencing a net loss in trained personnel. Will the hon. and gallant Member share what impact the Committee felt the covenant is having on retention? How does the Committee see the covenant dovetailing with the recommendations of the Haythornthwaite review on armed forces incentivisation?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for her powerful and incisive question. The armed forces continuous attitude survey consistently shows that the armed forces feel as though the covenant is not applied. Two figures that just fall out of the report are that about 31% of our service personnel feel as though the covenant is not being applied to them in terms of the NHS, and about 40% feel the same in terms of education. The net upshot of those failings is the continual erosion of the feeling among service families and service personnel that they are being supported by the state and broader society. One in three people who enter the military do so as a result of meeting someone in the military. If we apply those figures to that number of people, we must expect that they are not passing on a good story. That will continue to erode people’s ability to join the services, which is why this is so important.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I ask that the final few questions and answers be a bit shorter.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his statement on behalf of the Select Committee. I read the report this morning, and some of it makes for quite shameful reading. I want

[*Dr Scott Arthur*]

to touch on the childcare issue again. Someone serving in the military who has younger pre-school children is better off in England, but if they have older pre-school children they are better off in Scotland. This issue was raised with me directly when I recently met 3rd Battalion the Rifles, who are based in my constituency. Captain Shaun Swift was very clear that this caused friction for movement and made it harder for spouses to maintain jobs. Is this issue being raised directly with the Scottish Government, and can we encourage the UK and Scottish Governments to work together to address this issue?

Mr Bailey: In short, yes, the covenant is going into law. The report shows the stark contrast between governance in the UK and in Scotland.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Only last week, I spoke to a serving constituent who highlighted the issues he had had regarding the selective application of the armed forces covenant by universities. There are universities that have signed the covenant but offer no additional dispensation regarding study breaks for service personnel who are undertaking a course but are subsequently deployed. Deployments are often for 26 weeks, not including pre-deployment training or post-tour leave, whereas the maximum study break is around 16 weeks, in two terms of eight weeks. This may lead to the service person dropping out of the course and the forfeiture of their enhanced learning credits, through no fault of their own. Can I ask the Select Committee member, or indeed the Minister, to take this into account in order to facilitate the resettlement that service personnel depend on?

Mr Bailey: I will. As someone who was impacted thus myself, this is something I am aware of, and I will take it back to the Defence Committee for a response.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As the MP for Portsmouth North and for the families and friends of those who currently serve and have served, I understand the sacrifices that they are making. The Committee will know that one of the main reasons for service personnel leaving the armed forces is the impact on their families. Does my hon. Friend agree with me and with the Naval Children's Charity that the opportunity for children to receive priority in-year school admissions to secure a school place and the timely transfer of education and healthcare plans when relocating between local authorities would be welcome additions to the armed forces covenant?

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend is a great champion for the Royal Navy community in her constituency, and she raises an apposite question that goes to the heart of an area where the armed forces covenant has been overlooked, which is education. I am sure that the Minister for Veterans and People will take this on as part of his deliberations.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): One of the report's recommendations is that the covenant should be applied consistently across the United Kingdom. The hon. and gallant Member will be aware of my party's submission, which pointed out that Op Fortitude, which is designed to support homeless ex-service personnel, is effectively non-existent in Northern Ireland and that veterans in Northern Ireland face barriers in accessing specialised healthcare services such as the veterans' orthopaedic service at the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt orthopaedic hospital. Is he confident that, should there be a plan to implement the covenant and legislate for it, it will cover all parts of the United Kingdom equally? Will he and the Committee continually review that situation?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for raising that incisive point. The covenant must be consistently applied across the UK, and I think that is going to be a big challenge to the Government and to the regional Governments. It will take a review, and that is something that the Defence Committee has agreed to do once the armed forces Bill is being considered and is under way.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I commend the Defence Committee for talking to the families of service personnel as well as directly to soldiers, sailors and airmen. If I think back to the people with whom I served, they tended to be phlegmatic about making the ultimate sacrifice, but they cared a great deal about the satisfaction of their immediate family—their spouses, their partners and their children. Could the hon. Member talk a little bit more about what the Committee learned from the engagement it had with the families of service personnel about the armed forces covenant?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. and gallant Member for his question, which focuses on what the Committee learned about armed forces families and their service. What strikes me is the amount of unseen trauma the families suffer as a result of their movements. There are some very upsetting tales of how people have been forced to move around the country and not received adequate support from other Government Departments that would allow them to have a normal existence, or an existence that would be considered normal to anyone that is not in the military. It is those things that we need to go after, and it is those things that the armed forces covenant should protect. I would like to thank him for his service as well.

Paul Holmes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to correct the record. When I asked my question, I did not refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which indicates that I am a trustee of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I apologise for not doing so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point order. The record will now reflect that fact.

Energy (Social Tariff)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.35 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require energy companies to provide social tariffs for low income customers; and for connected purposes.

Last week, we saw people's energy bills go up by another 6%, as Ofgem raised the energy price cap again, meaning that typical households now face bills of not far off £2,000 a year. My argument for a social tariff is born out of a career spent grappling with Britain's energy market, including in my work with the current Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero in the old Department of Energy and Climate Change, where we saw, through the global financial crisis, the need to better protect consumers from volatile energy prices. Watching him trying to convince energy companies to lower their prices as the country faced spiralling costs and economic chaos convinced me that a social tariff was the least a Labour Government could and should do to protect the most vulnerable.

Much has changed since then. There has been significant success in shifting to cleaner power, as a result of a political consensus—held across this House until recently—on the need to decarbonise our energy system to tackle climate change. This Labour Government's mission to achieve clean power by 2030 is part of our long-term solution to bring energy bills down for good. People see increasingly that there are further benefits to such a shift: greater energy security from generating our own energy rather than being exposed to the whims of petrostates and dodgy regimes, as well as a reduction in the costs of generating that power. Some 96% of newly installed solar and wind capacity has a lower generation cost than natural gas. However, consumers are not feeling the benefits of cheaper costs as much as they could, partly because our energy prices are set by global oil and gas prices.

As an MP, the reality of fuel poverty is frequently rammed home to me on the doorstep, where concerns are raised about the rising costs of energy and the pressure that they put on household budgets, especially among those on low incomes. I remind the House that East Thanet is not a leafy, affluent community of the kind that many people associate with the south-east. It is a coastal community with high levels of deprivation, much low-paid and insecure work, many elderly residents, many families with a disabled member, and many cold, old and draughty homes. In Thanet, a quarter of all working-age adults claim universal credit, and over 40% of people claim at least one form of benefit from the Department for Work and Pensions. These are the people who suffer most from increasing energy bills, and who often have to choose between heating and eating.

A social tariff that supports the most vulnerable with their energy bills and prevents them from falling into fuel poverty would protect them from some of the failures of the current energy market, and shield them as that market is reformed to make the most of leaving fossil fuels behind. The energy market needs to change so that the efforts the Government are making to

decarbonise our energy system truly deliver benefits for consumers. The reform of retail prices will need to be part of that.

As a member of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee, I have heard witnesses' growing calls for such change. The vast majority of homes are heated by gas, while electricity is much more expensive. The costs of shifting to cleaner power have been loaded on to electricity bills, creating a disincentive for many to choose to shift to electric heat. We artificially make electricity more expensive, which makes it impossible for some to move to clean power. It is those who cannot pay who are least prepared.

Rapid change has always been associated with upheaval and risk. A social tariff, working as part of the welfare state, can support people as we make these changes. This is the right thing to do from not only a fuel poverty perspective but a decarbonisation one. A modern welfare state has done this before, and it can do it again. The Labour party is the party that created the welfare state, and on these Benches, we understand why having a strong social safety net is vital, but energy is an area where the safety net has a gaping hole in it. That is why a targeted social tariff is needed—so that we can provide vital support for those in the greatest need.

There is also an increasingly chronic problem with consumer energy debt. People owe more than £2 billion in energy bill debt, and that figure has doubled in the past three years alone. Those in debt then become stuck in a cycle where they face an increase in energy bills while also trying to pay off the debt they have built up. That is not sustainable for those consumers or even the energy retailers, which have to deal with the fallout from fuel poverty debt.

The warm home discount is the most prominent current scheme to help with this issue, but it is simply not sufficient for the scale of the challenge. It has not scaled with retail prices—as energy bills have increased by hundreds of pounds, the warm home discount has increased by only £10 since its introduction. The discount is also limited to households receiving means-tested benefits, meaning that many families living in fuel poverty miss out on this vital support. A social tariff should build on the warm home discount but not replace it.

The purpose of the Bill is to enshrine in law the principle that a social tariff should be provided by all energy companies, to ensure there is no supplier lottery for those who need support. It should be additional to existing and planned support, it should be targeted, and it should be sufficient enough to reduce costs to an affordable level.

National Energy Action has argued that we need to aim a social tariff at people on low incomes, people with disabilities, carers, households with low energy efficiency, off-gas grid homes and households with prepayment meters. There are far too many complaints by energy companies that they cannot identify the people who need this support. These categories tackle that problem, because we already have the data: we know who is in receipt of universal credit, disability benefits and carer's allowance; we know those on prepayment meters and the homes with poor energy ratings. These are people who face huge financial pressures and who are at the forefront of the cost of living crisis. These are the people who are most at risk of fuel poverty, and, crucially, we can find these people, so that those who need the support get it.

[Ms Polly Billington]

This Government have rightly established a child poverty taskforce to tackle the scar on our society of children growing up poor. A social tariff can be part of a wider approach to tackling this moral outrage by ensuring that the families who are most in need have to worry less about their energy bills. Children who grow up in households that struggle to pay their energy bills are more likely to struggle at school and more likely to end up struggling in life.

However, simply protecting people from a failing energy retail market is not sufficient. We should be developing a package of measures that prioritises shifting the most vulnerable on to the cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy that we are generating ourselves. There is always a risk that the case for such market interventions is made simply by talking about protecting people from the worst extremes of the market, but it is also important to say that such a measure increases economic security and is therefore good for economic growth. It puts money in people's pockets. Money they are spending on excessive energy costs is money they are not spending in their local economies. With this relief, they can be part of the economic revival of the places in which they live. This is not a new idea; social tariffs are already working in many other countries. For example, Spain has a tariff that provides a 35% discount for vulnerable customers and a 50% discount for severely vulnerable customers.

I have spent a lot of my career working on how energy can be generated, supplied and consumed in a way that does not cost a packet or the planet. For far too long, energy companies have urged consumers to "engage" with the energy market. That, in my view, has always been based on a failure to understand that for most people, energy is a means to an end. It is not exciting, and it can be stressful, especially for those who are struggling. We should be in the business of reducing that stress, so that people can spend their time and energy doing things that are more interesting and fulfilling. The very least we can do for those who already struggle to do exactly that because of limited means is to protect them from the market. That is why a social tariff should be part of our plan for change and our national mission to transform this country for the better.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Ms Polly Billington, Yuan Yang, Torcuil Crichton, Andrew Pakes, Pippa Heylings, Luke Murphy, Wera Hobhouse and Mike Reader present the Bill.

Ms Polly Billington accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April, and to be printed (Bill 220).

Backbench Business

Blair Mayne: Posthumous Victoria Cross

3.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of awarding a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee very much for the opportunity to secure this debate, as well as Members who have taken time before the recess to come and make a contribution. I am truly thankful for the recognition of the importance of this debate in this Chamber. This is not merely about a Newtownards boy and his exploits, although I will tell of those; this is about how we as a House honour our veteran heroes and ensure that that honour is properly recorded.

At a time when veterans can feel that their service is a thing of shame, the importance of recognition goes to every service personnel member throughout the country. I know that that means so much to so many in Newtownards and my home town of Strangford, and I am thankful that this debate has been deemed worthy of being held here in the greatest seat of democracy. I am pleased to see the Minister for Veterans and People in his place, honourable and gallant Member that he is, and I thank him for coming along. I am also pleased to see the shadow Minister and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson in their places.

I am no writer like Damien Lewis, whose work on Blair Mayne and the foundation of the Special Air Service is unparalleled. However, allow this Ballywalter boy to retell the stories that I heard the old men in the town rhyme off in my youth, as a crowd of us listened in awe about how one of us could achieve so much. Imagine being an eight, nine or 10-year-old, with all these old soldiers from the second world war telling all these great stories, and always having wanted be a Royal Marine commando, as I did as a wee boy—I never achieved that, by the way; the Minister for Veterans and People did. I managed to get to the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Artillery. That was not second best, by the way, but it was not as good as what I wanted as an eight-year-old.

We listened to the stories of those soldiers, and I ask Members, briefly, to listen to a scene of what happened. The air is filled with the screams of the dying and the stench of the dead. You are gasping for breath as your lungs take in gulps of gunpowder-tinged air. You are lying in a ditch. The enemy is firing so often without break that the rat-tat-tat of bullets merges together. You know that each searing breath may well be your last. The officer you look to for direction is dead. Deep in your heart you believe that it will take a miracle to lift you from this scene of hell.

Suddenly, you hear something different: the roaring of an engine, a jeep. With your last vestige of energy you lift your head, and with stinging eyes you make out the form of a jeep cutting through the madness and mayhem. The man on board fires at the enemy like an avenging angel. He slows the jeep down at the ditch, and on his way past he calls, "I'll pick you up on

the way back.” Nothing flowery—no grand words, just a promise that perhaps it is not time for you to go just yet.

With a hammering heart, you watch as the man in the jeep forces the enemy to retreat, despite the fact that the enemy holds all the advantages of position, men and firepower. As the enemy retreats, the jeep turns round. This time it stops. The avenging angel jumps to the ground amid a hail of bullets and holds out his hand. Shaking, you grasp that hand as you are bundled in with your 11 colleagues and driven wildly to safety. As you look to see what form your angel takes, you see this crazy Ulster man—we are not all crazy, by the way, but we are all very brave, although I wouldn't be as brave as this man. It is Paddy Mayne, and everything falls into place in just that one second. He is a man known for bravery and courage, and for leading his men to victory—a man who is, and in your eyes and the eyes of your surviving family will forever remain, a hero of epic fame.

That is a true story about Lieutenant Colonel Blair Mayne's actions, as seen by one of the men who was saved by Paddy, as he was affectionately known. The story does not take into account that before Mayne and Lieutenant Scott had driven the jeep into oncoming enemy fire, Mayne had summed up the situation. That was what he could do: he could lead from the front, as a leader of soldiers, with courage and determination. He was a man who was born for that time.

Ever a man of initiative and action, Paddy entered the first house that formed the enemy defences. After checking to ensure that the enemy was dead, he moved out into the open and fired into the next house, taking out those behind the enemy fire, before moving in to ensure that none of the enemy remained. Paddy Blair Mayne was a colossus of a man who stood tall, commanded his men and inspired bravery and loyalty.

After ensuring a clean sweep, he turned his attention to how best to save the trapped point men of the squadron. He knew that the enemy was well ensconced in the forest, with no way to surround them, and he departed on what seemed like a suicide mission to rescue those men. Not only did Paddy manage to rescue his colleagues, but he forced a retreat from the enemy and helped the allies to advance at a time when they were held up.

It has been said that a level-one award, such as the Victoria Cross, is given only when the chance of death is 50% or more. A report from Brigadier Calvert, dated June 1945, said:

“There can only be one explanation why Colonel Mayne was not killed by what had already proved deadly and concentrated fire: the sheer audacity and daring which he showed in driving his jeep across a field of fire momentarily bewildering the enemy.”

He continued:

“Colonel Mayne from the time he arrived dominated the scene.”

That is the man he was: he was there and he had no fear.

“His cheerfulness, resolution and unsurpassed courage in this action was an inspiration to us all”.

That is an account from the soldiers who watched that colossus of a man jump out and rescue them, and win the day for the allies in their advance in Germany. Undoubtedly, it seemed a suicidal mission to rescue his

comrades and ensure that the enemy retreated further, but Colonel Mayne's mission was a complete success. In the words of Brigadier Calvert:

“Not only did he save the lives of the wounded but he also completely defeated and destroyed the enemy.”

Lieutenant Colonel Mayne's story is the stuff of which legends are made—legends that we know to be true. When we were boys in Newtownards and Ballywalter many years ago, we looked to be that person. It is the stuff of which many of us dreamed as young boys and acted out in our gardens. Blair Mayne was certainly a hero of mine as a young child, many years ago. His actions were those of a man who put others first, and who went above and beyond the call of duty.

There is absolutely no doubt that his actions on that day were heroic, and worthy of recognition and commendation. That is why Brigadier Calvert recommended that Mayne be awarded the highest award, the Victoria Cross. Mayne was informed that he was to be granted that well-deserved accolade, and he informed his mother accordingly, which made her even more proud. Who is more proud of anyone than their mum? Mums think that whatever their children do is brilliant—my mum is the same. I hope that is true, by the way.

I have told that war story because it is a factual, historical account. The BBC's “SAS: Rogue Heroes” dramatisation about a founding member of a covert special raiding squadron—a hero many times over, reputed to have single-handedly destroyed 130 enemy planes and commended for the highest military award—is a global success. However, six months after he was recommended for the award, a terrible mistake happened. That mistake stripped Blair Mayne of his hard-won honour and much of his self-esteem.

The award of the Victoria Cross by the 1931 royal warrant is bestowed upon those who display acts of conspicuous gallantry and for a “signal act of valour” in the presence of the enemy. Paddy Mayne had more than attained that standard, but the mistake lies with the word “signal”, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as

“an event or statement that provides the impulse or occasion for something to happen.”

In other words, a “signal” event is not a planned event.

Mayne certainly qualified for the award, but the word “signal” was misread as “single”. It was a clerical error and we are very clearly putting forward that viewpoint. Mayne had been accompanied in the jeep by Lieutenant Scott, who provided covering fire. Therefore, Mayne had not acted single-handedly, which meant that he was deemed to be ineligible for the award. That change has been queried on a number of levels over the years, and yet it appears that that alteration resulted in Mayne being stripped of the award. Instead, he was given a third bar to his Distinguished Service Order.

I have seen the evidence that Lieutenant Colonel Blair Mayne was supposed to get the Victoria Cross. On his citation, “VC” was marked, but stroked out for the commendation. That is important evidence. A team of historians has been working hard on sourcing those documents, which I made available to the Minister this morning—although, to be fair, I think he had them beforehand, so he now has two copies. I put on the record my thanks to Damien Lewis, to Patric McGonigal, who is the grandson of one of the SAS originals, and to David Robinson among so many other local historians invested in this issue.

[Jim Shannon]

Brigadier Calvert recommended that Mayne should be awarded the VC for his actions in rescuing his men. He submitted signed statements from three officers who witnessed those actions: Lieutenant Scott, Lieutenant Locket and Lieutenant Surrey-Dane. Calvert referred to the difficulty of assessing the military significance of Mayne's actions in relation to the overall thrust of the Canadian division:

"I enclose a citation for the VC for Paddy Mayne. I have gone into this thoroughly with his officers and I think it was an outstanding piece of work. One almost expects these things from Paddy. The main point is, however, as to how much it affected the battle."

Simonds agreed with him. Major General Vokes also wrote in support of the citation; in his opinion, Mayne's spirited leadership and dash were a most important contribution to the success of the operation. He said:

"I observed the very marked respect and regard in which he was held by his officers and men. In my opinion this officer is worthy of the highest award for gallantry and leadership."

I am not sure whether the TV programme "SAS: Rogue Heroes" really portrayed Blair Mayne in the way that it should have—he never used bad language, for instance—but he was portrayed as a leader of men. Nobody can be in any doubt that he was a man who led his soldiers, showed leadership and gave confidence and encouragement to those around him.

The citation was signed by Brigadier Calvert, Major General Vokes, Lieutenant General Simonds, General Crerar—the commander of the 1st Canadian Army—and Field Marshal Montgomery of the 21st Army Group. The documentation that I have clearly outlines that officials overseeing the matter misinterpreted the VC rules as needing a "single act of valour", whereas they in fact need a "signal act of valour". The difference is in that wording. We are not here to throw aspersions: we are here to outline the system and how it works and how clerical error led to this happening. That means that the denial was based on a procedural error or an error of understanding, and that wrongdoing needs to be readdressed properly. One historian has noted it was clear that "VC" had been marked out because of that clerical error.

It is important to note that I do not ask the Ministry of Defence or His Majesty's Government to overturn the entire apple cart on "no retrospective reconsiderations": we are simply asking for an error to be corrected in this specific and singular case. We are all aware of other posthumous VCs being granted. For instance, Private Richard Norden was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia for his bravery during the Vietnam war, specifically for his actions during the battle of Fire Support Base Coral in 1968. The basis is that an error occurred that can be corrected.

We are not the only people who cannot understand why the medal was not awarded. King George VI asked how it was that the Victoria Cross "eluded" Paddy and inquired why the award was downgraded. When the King asked Winston Churchill to explain the demerit, he is said to have been shocked and saddened by the glaring omission. Inquiries were also made by several officers who could not understand what had happened. They did not have the access that we now have to the files, which clearly show the intent and the redirection.

In short, while a "signal act of valour" was originally specified, a "single act of valour" never was. That clerical error is the reason and the thrust behind what we are asking for. By the time of world war two, the VC would be awarded

"for most conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy".

What a man! What a hero and a courageous person, with bravery such as many will never witness. As a wee boy, that is just what I wished to be. All that was confirmed by the witnesses involved in reporting on Blair's actions at Oldenburg. Furthermore, the VC can also be awarded posthumously. Those are the three reasons I give: the word "single", the fact that the VC would be awarded for "conspicuous bravery", which was never in doubt, and the fact that the Victoria Cross can be awarded posthumously.

There are no other recorded reasons why the recommendation to award a VC was not actioned. Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth's uncle, Major General Sir Robert Laycock, was at the time a serving officer in the forces. He wrote a letter in which he stated that Blair Mayne deserved a Victoria Cross—he earned it with his bravery—and would have received one had the proper authorities known their job. I say that very respectfully; I always do that. As a consequence, Blair Mayne did not receive the greatest honour that this country can bestow. No matter how much being awarded the highest French accolade meant, being given and then stripped of his British honour haunted Mayne for the rest of his life.

The memory of Blair Mayne lives on, and not just through the BBC series. Many in my town argue that while he was rough, he would never have cursed in front of a lady, and his comrades did not fear him—instead, they revered him. His memory is cherished in the hearts of Ards people, and there is a statue of him in Newtownards town centre. His image adorns walls that once boasted murals depicting paramilitary paraphernalia. Blair Mayne's history—his service in uniform, his bravery and his conviction—are on the walls of Newtownards, including many of its community centres. When the council decided to build a new leisure centre, it was named the Blair Mayne leisure centre, because his sporting prowess is a matter of pride to us all. When a coffee shop opened a couple of years ago in Newtownards town centre, it was called Colonel Paddy's, because we all revere him—by the way, its coffee is excellent. I live on coffee and fried eggs. His legacy is important to the people of our wee town.

Members may be aware that rule 40.12 of the civil procedure rules explicitly permits fixing clerical mistakes in judgments or orders, or errors arising from any accidental slip or omission, as long as the intent of the original decision holds. That is really important—it is the thrust of the debate. The original decision was to allow the VC, and the law allows for slips of the pen to be corrected. Letting an error stand, as in this case, perpetuates an injustice, especially if the mistake skewed the outcome, which it has.

I am very conscious of the time limit that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and others have asked me to conform to, so I will conclude. It is said that King George VI asked Paddy Mayne how it was that he had not received a Victoria Cross, and he answered in a

manner that sums up this courageous and honourable man: “I served to my best my Lord, my King and my Queen, and none can take that honour away from me.” Today in this House, we have the chance to restore what was his. It is time that the memory of a man who lived for his colleagues and his country was restored to its full glory through the restitution of the Victoria Cross.

4.1 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), both for securing this debate and for opening it in the way that he has. Well done! I know that this is an incredibly important subject to him, and during his retelling of Paddy’s activities in war, I could almost see the “Commando” comic from my childhood before me.

I do not intend to speak for too long; this will be really just a long intervention. When the hon. Member for Strangford asked me to support this debate, I did not really know who Paddy Mayne was. While the hon. Member is a lovely guy, his politics can sometimes be a little bit dodgy, so rather than saying yes on the spot, I decided to do some homework. I could see quite quickly that the case was strong, and I felt bad for even having to research it. When I got home that week, I spoke to my son, who quietly pointed out that we had watched the TV programme about Paddy Mayne together, and that he had also bought me a book about Paddy Mayne for Christmas. I have still not read it—do not tell him.

The week after that, I visited Redford barracks in Edinburgh South West. I met a serviceman there from Northern Ireland, and I took the opportunity to ask him what he thought. He was offended that I even had to ask him about it, because he felt the case was so strong. While I do not speak for him, he was a little bit upset about the way in which Paddy was depicted in the second series of “SAS: Rogue Heroes”, and made the point about the language specifically. I have asked residents in my constituency what they thought about today’s debate and what the trajectory should be, and overwhelmingly, people got back to me saying that the case was strong. There was a real feeling that Paddy was overlooked because he was sometimes forthright in his opinions, because he sometimes challenged authority—which is not always a good thing in the forces, I guess—and above all, because his face sometimes did not fit. One of my constituents said to me that Paddy deserves the Victoria Cross, and if he wins it, that will be a victory for all the people who were overlooked because they went to the wrong school or came from the wrong background, and had that counted against them.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend about the need to do research. The podcast “We Have Ways of Making You Talk” gives a much better introduction to Paddy Mayne. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at the rules of recognition for those serving in the special forces, and ensure that some of the difficulties that will arise in publicly recognising those very brave troops are taken into account?

Dr Arthur: I will try to listen to that podcast on the train home this evening. The issue about those in the special forces often comes up, but I have absolute trust

in them to follow the rules of engagement and the rules of war at all times, and I respect them and all our armed forces for the work they do.

To conclude, we are not here to demand that Paddy gets a VC, or to demand that he gets it on behalf of all others who have perhaps been overlooked—particularly not this year, the 80th anniversary of the second world war. We are saying that it is time to look at the issue with fresh eyes. That should be done through a formal process—not here in this House, but by people who understand the matter much better than us—to ensure that a fair decision is reached. The hon. Member for Strangford has been clear about what that fair decision should be.

4.5 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I rise to support the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his call for a posthumous VC for Blair Mayne. We are speaking about a man whose courage and leadership helped shape one of the best fighting forces in the world. Although the name of Lieutenant Colonel Blair “Paddy” Mayne of the SAS is etched into military history, one honour that he did not get is the Victoria Cross, and today’s debate is an opportunity to look at the circumstances and potentially correct that.

Mayne, as the hon. Member said, was a soldier of rare calibre. As one of the founding members of the SAS, he led countless raids deep behind enemy lines in north Africa and Europe, often at great personal risk. He led from the front, destroying enemy aircraft, supply lines and infrastructure, often with nothing more than a small group of men and his sheer willpower. His character and courage are legendary, but those have, as has already been mentioned, been coloured and to an extent misrepresented in the recent BBC series through use of artistic licence.

While we consider the merits of awarding Blair Mayne a posthumous VC, I want the House to reflect on the citations from his Distinguished Service Order awards. He was first awarded it on 24 February 1942 for his leadership during a raid on the Tamet airfield in Libya. The citation said:

“The task set was of the most hazardous nature, and it was due to this officer’s courage and leadership that success was achieved.”

The first bar to the DSO was awarded on 21 October 1943, in recognition of his actions during Operation Husky in Sicily. The citation said:

“In both these operations it was Major Mayne’s courage, determination and superb leadership which proved the key to success.”

The second bar to his DSO was awarded on 29 March 1945 for his command of the 1st SAS Regiment in France, which co-ordinated operations with the French Resistance. The citation said:

“It was entirely due to Lt. Col. Mayne’s fine leadership and example, and due to his utter disregard of danger that the unit was able to achieve such striking success.”

As was vividly recounted by the hon. Member for Strangford, Mayne was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his actions in Germany in April 1945, where he rescued wounded men and eliminated enemy positions under heavy fire. Although the recommendation was downgraded—the subject of this debate—it did result in the third bar to his DSO. That citation said that

[Robin Swann]

“Lt. Col. Mayne was in full view of the enemy and exposed to fire from small arms, machine guns, sniper rifles and Panzerfausts...He then seized a Bren gun and magazines and single handedly fired burst after burst into a second house, killing or wounding the enemy there”.

If that does not meet the standard for the Victoria Cross, we need to seriously ask what does.

Some say that it is too late and we cannot rewrite history. This is not about rewriting history, but righting a wrong. Awarding Blair Mayne the VC posthumously is not just about a medal. It is about honouring a man whose valour was undeniable, whose actions inspired those around him, and whose legacy lives on. Let us act today, not for glory, but for justice, and for Paddy Mayne.

4.9 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Let first draw Members’ attention to my membership of the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain.

I am delighted to have been called to speak in this debate about the merits of awarding a posthumous Victoria Cross to Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair Mayne, best known as Paddy Mayne. I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) feels passionately about this issue, and he spoke about it very eloquently. I am a member of the Backbench Business Committee, which hears applications from Back Benchers for debates on all kind of topics, and I have to say that this application caught my particular attention.

I was a television screenwriter before I was proudly elected to this place, and I am a huge fan of the hit television drama “SAS: Rogue Heroes”, created and written by Steven Knight. It is a vivid retelling of the story of the formation and achievements of Britain’s Special Air Service, which was formed by David Stirling as the ultimate military disrupter. In the second world war, the SAS changed the nature of the fight against the Nazis in Africa and beyond. The drama is among the best illustrations of why the United Kingdom is a powerhouse of the creative industries. The writer, cast and crew of “SAS: Rogue Heroes”, working for the production company Kudos, created a hit show that captured the irreverence, humour and bravery of the SAS, and retold the story of those brave men for a new generation.

I am sure that as I make this speech, bots will be crawling over Steven’s fantastic script to train artificial intelligence models, just as they have crawled over my scripts and those of thousands, indeed millions, of other screenwriters. They will be stealing copyrighted material, hard written and hard won by real humans, scraping it from under our noses, without permission, to make money for their AI companies. If only we had the AI equivalent of “SAS: Rogue Heroes” and the likes of Paddy Mayne to protect us! We will just have to rely on something that is a little more tame but still has teeth, and that is good legislation.

Paddy Mayne is unforgettably played in the series by Jack O’Connell, who brings the character to vivid life. The producer of the show, Stephen Smallwood, told me that shooting in the Sahara desert in July at 50° made O’Connell and the other actors think that they were just as hardcore as the SAS—until they were reminded that

they had an air-conditioned hotel and a cold beer to return to that night. The conditions in which Paddy Mayne and his colleagues operated were truly beyond anything that we can imagine now. The raids that Paddy led in Libya were followed by legendary outings in Italy and Sicily, before he demonstrated outstanding courage by rescuing wounded men trapped in a Nazi ambush, clearing a machine-gun position and clearing a path for the allied advance. That is truly the stuff of legend. That outstanding bravery earned him a citation for a Victoria Cross, but it was downgraded to a Distinguished Service Order—his fourth—which has caused puzzlement ever since.

Although Lieutenant Colonel Mayne was one of the very few recipients of a rare third bar to the DSO, my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford is not alone in thinking that that is not enough, and that he should be posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. I understand, however, that it is a key tenet of the British honours and awards system that such honours are not granted retrospectively, so that decisions made by peers and commanders at the time are respected. How and why the citation was overturned may never be fully understood, but let me say to the hon. Member for Strangford that although the pen strokes of a bureaucrat may be lost in the mists of time, Paddy Mayne’s legacy lives on in the democracy and the values that we now take for granted, but which were won by the sacrifices of Mayne’s fallen colleagues and the wider armed forces. His legacy lives on in the celebrations next month, when we will mark the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe, VE Day, and then in August, when we will mark the 80th anniversary of victory in Japan, VJ Day, commemorating the end of the second world war.

I am sure that if he were alive today, Paddy Mayne would be looking to us in this place to do right by the men and women who serve and risk their lives for this country. I am proud to be part of a Government who are committed to strengthening support for our veterans and armed forces community by putting the armed forces covenant fully into law and ensuring that veterans have secure homes.

Millions of people around the world have now learned about Paddy Mayne’s courage and leadership through the TV show. Seventy years after his untimely death, Paddy Mayne has officially passed into legend, and his phenomenal bravery will live on forever in the motto of the SAS: “Who dares wins.”

4.15 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I rise to speak about a man whose name is etched into the very DNA of the British special forces—a man of exceptional courage, legendary leadership and unrelenting service to this country: Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair Mayne, affectionately known as Paddy Mayne. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. There is no better man to take this issue forward and to try to right the wrong that was done to Paddy Blair Mayne.

Mighty men have come from Newtownards, in the form of Paddy Blair Mayne and my hon. Friend. In Northern Ireland, we talk about rough-cut diamonds, and Paddy Blair Mayne was just that. He was certainly not perfect—none of us are—but when it comes to his service, he certainly led from the front and was a mighty

man. He was one of the founding members of the Special Air Service, and helped to build it into the elite force that we know and revere today. His leadership during world war two changed the course of modern warfare. He was a warrior in the truest sense: fearless, inventive and utterly devoted to his men.

Mayne was awarded the Distinguished Service Order not once, but four times—an honour that is almost unheard of. He was a man who led from the front, and who raided behind enemy lines with such ferocity and tactical genius that even his enemies respected him. He destroyed over 100 aircraft in daring missions across north Africa. He risked everything time and again—not for medals or recognition, but because it was his duty. However, despite the eyewitness accounts of unimaginable bravery under fire, and the legacy that he left behind in the SAS and British military history, he was denied the Victoria Cross, and this wrong has never been made right. It is a lingering and grave injustice.

The Victoria Cross is the highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy. It is meant to honour “the most conspicuous bravery” or “a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice”.

Paddy Mayne was the very embodiment of those words. However, this is not just about righting a wrong from the past; it is about recognising what he gave and what he gave up. He led from the front while others hesitated. He put his own life on the line so that his men could return home, and his example has inspired generations of servicemen and women.

This is a matter not of sentiment, but of principle. It is time that this country honoured Paddy Mayne not just with words, statues or stories, but with the medal that he so clearly earned. I urge the Minister to reconsider this case with the seriousness and urgency it deserves. Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Mayne is a national hero. He gave his all, and now his country must give him the long-overdue recognition he deserves: the Victoria Cross.

4.18 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing today’s debate.

The award of the Victoria Cross has an extraordinary impact on individuals and their families, friends and communities. I will give an example of my own from the town of Hatfield Woodhouse, where we are proud to have produced Corporal John William Harper VC. Corporal Harper served in the 4th Battalion of the British Army’s York and Lancaster Regiment during the second world war, and on 29 September 1944 he led his section in an assault over open ground against a fortified position. He led from the front, and repeatedly moved forward alone to establish the way forward before exposing his own comrades to danger. Unfortunately, Corporal Harper was fatally wounded in the assault, but his actions secured the success of the attack.

Hatfield remembers Corporal Harper by maintaining a twinning arrangement with the town of Merksplas in Belgium, where his gallantry took place. Memorials to him can be seen at the local St Lawrence church and at the site of the war graves, and local children still learn about “Harper VC” at schools in Merksplas and Donny today. Even in the last few years, a new extension to the

Hatfield area was named Harpers Heath in his honour, showing that the memory is still important to the people of the town.

This is important as part of today’s debate because, as time moves on and new generations are born, the story of the Victoria Cross and the legends who receive it means we never forget their gallantry, and we never forget the gallantry of all the people who have served us. That is why this award of a Victoria Cross could make all the difference in recognising a hero such as Blair Mayne, who sacrificed so much for others, but also for the pride it brings to the community. Regardless of what the Minister says, I am so pleased that the hon. Member for Strangford, whom I call my friend, has been able to raise this today, and Blair Mayne’s efforts will be recognised in the Chamber and remembered forever.

4.21 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I congratulate my neighbour the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate—we could almost smell the cordite in his opening remarks.

My first encounter with the Special Air Service was when, just as we were getting to the good bit, the John Wayne film on TV was interrupted, and it was over to Kate Adie as men in bug-eyed respirators ended the Iranian embassy siege on 5 May 1980, amid the thunder of flashbangs and the staccato rattle of small arms fire. As a journalist, I later met John “Mac” McAleese, who really was the man on the balcony, not—I hate to break it to Members—that bloke down the pub mumbling about the colour of the boathouse at Hereford, as Walter Mitty characters do. I also became friends with Colonel Clive Fairweather, second in command of the regiment. Sadly, both men are no longer with us, but in life one thing was obvious: neither was a reckless psychopath. They were hard men—yes, of course, for theirs is a lethal business—but rather more planning and preparation goes into tier 1 special forces than novels and TV would have us believe.

Controversy reigns over television’s brilliant “SAS: Rogue Heroes” and Blair “Paddy” Mayne’s depiction, but it is nothing new. There were all sorts of claims about the book “Bravo Two Zero” when it emerged after the first Gulf war. Was it fact or fantasy? Peter “Billy Rat” Ratcliffe, former regimental sergeant major of 22 SAS, told me, “Life in the regiment is not really about garrotting 200 sentries, you know.” “But you do know how to garrote a sentry, don’t you?” I asked. In his Salford accent, he told me, “Oh, yeah, but I’d rather shoot you from a mile away—less chance of being compromised.” That was uncompromising, but careful, thoughtful and cunning too.

As such, these men are surely the inheritors of the spirit of Blair Mayne. For certain, he could be a wild man, especially in drink—there is a cottage on the Isle of Arran pockmarked yet by rounds fired from his service revolver after a surfeit of whisky—but it fell to Mayne to protect and indeed nurture the nascent SAS when its founder, Sir David Stirling, was a prisoner of war in Italy and the infamous Colditz. If Mayne were as unhinged as he is portrayed, he would not have been able to apply the quiet discipline needed to forge a

[John Cooper]

bunch of rogues into an effective and elite fighting force. It strikes me that the only recklessness Blair Mayne displayed was for his own safety, never that of his men—his “Blades”, as SAS troopers are known.

Concerning us today is the action at Oldenburg on 9 April 1945, but let me be clear that this is not football-style VAR for gallantry medals; we are not reopening cases by the dozen, just this oddity. We may never know what precisely happened there almost 80 years ago to the day. We do know that Mayne was recommended for the VC, and his audacity was the only thing said to have kept him alive. We may also never learn what made the authorities downgrade that VC. Was it professional jealousy? Special forces face that today: the sobriquet “the Hereford hooligans” is unfairly appended to the SAS in many a mess, and SF officers who ought to be generals somehow do not make the cut.

Mayne’s hand shaped the SAS, and the regiment has in turn guided special forces around the globe. US Major Charles “Blisters” Beckwith raised the Delta Force—he promised it “Will get you a medal, or a body bag. Maybe both”—after time spent with the SAS. Mayne’s legacy is secure, and there is no doubting his courage.

We are not here to critique “SAS: Rogue Heroes”—it is fun and it has a great soundtrack and great acting, although the accents are as sketchy as the history. Instead, we should coolly examine the real Major Mayne and ask why the VC was approved by all who mattered but rescinded in murky circumstances.

I am a student of military history, having undertaken a distance learning MA with the excellent University of Birmingham. One of the first lessons learned was that history is not fixed—it is not preserved in aspic—but shifts and changes as new details and perspectives open up. Look at the so-called *château* generals—men who in life were highly rated by their troops, only later to be accused of being donkeys leading lions. Aside from the few who think that “Blackadder Goes Forth” is a documentary, that trope is happily being revisited. We should have courage enough today to look again at the Mayne case, too. Eighty years on, we can sense something odd about the lack of a VC—“signal”, rather than “single”, perhaps?

The military is split in two into ratcatchers and regulators, and we need both. We need regulators with their rulebooks and procedures in times of peace, and we need maverick ratcatchers in times of war. Mayne was a fine ratcatcher, and regulators then and now should not stand between him and this country’s premier gallantry medal.

4.26 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I begin by simply acknowledging the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for tabling an early-day motion and securing today’s important debate. The hon. Gentleman has supported so many new starters in this House since we joined Parliament, so it is a pleasure to support him in his advocacy of this important cause today.

As we have heard from Members across the House, with his courage and bravery, Robert Blair “Paddy” Mayne stands alongside the greatest soldiers of our

reckoning, past or present, and the heroism that he demonstrated during the second world war is rightly celebrated.

However, I want to take a moment to shine a light on a lesser-known but remarkable chapter of his life: the work he did with the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey. This chapter reflects his unwavering dedication to service and duty, but it also holds a special resonance for me personally. As a recovering academic with a strong interest in the UK’s overseas territories, an observer of the 2013 Falklands referendum, and a former Shackleton scholar, I have had the privilege of visiting the Falkland Islands on numerous occasions, most recently in 2023. During those visits, I have seen for myself the pristine wilderness and unparalleled beauty of the island’s wildlife, but above all the unwavering strength of the people who call the Falklands home.

In the aftermath of the second world war, one might have expected Robert Blair Mayne, having given so much in battles and skirmishes, to have sought the comfort of home, family and a well-earned rest, but that was not the direction he chose. Instead of stepping away from public service, he delayed his return to civilian life and joined the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, a precursor to what is now the British Antarctic Survey. The organisation, which began life as a naval operation in 1943 under the codename Operation Tabarin, had an important strategic purpose. While its official mission had been to monitor enemy shipping, its true goal was to counter Argentine and Chilean territorial claims in the Antarctic and assert British sovereignty by establishing manned bases in the region. When the war ended, the operation transitioned into the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey.

In late 1945, three former SAS members, including Lieutenant Colonel Blair Mayne, joined the expedition. Led by Naval Surgeon Commander Bingham, with Mayne appointed second in command, this was no ceremonial visit to the southern hemisphere. Blair Mayne fully embraced the challenges of the mission: he was active on board the ship, on the ground and on the ice, participating in the full scope of the expedition, leading dog teams, surveying wildlife and camping in some of the harshest, most isolated conditions imaginable. Mayne’s journals and photographs offer a rare glimpse into the lives and work of British explorers, surveyors and scientists in the southern hemisphere and Antarctica during the immediate post-war period, revealing not only the isolation of the vast icy landscapes, but the camaraderie he shared with his comrades—a recurrence of the same camaraderie he demonstrated during his active service in Europe and north Africa.

It was only a recurring back injury, one sustained during his wartime service, that forced Mayne’s early return to the Falklands for medical treatment. Nothing could be done to ease the condition or the pain from which he suffered. From Port Stanley, Mayne was transported back to England and thence to Northern Ireland in the spring of 1946. The injury that cut short his Antarctic service would trouble him for the rest of his life. Still in his 30s and resettled in Northern Ireland, Mayne, a former British and Irish Lion, was said to live with such profound and chronic pain that he was unable even to spectate rugby matches from the terraces at Ravenhill.

For 80 years, Mayne's supporters have remained acutely aware of the injustice that denied the Victoria Cross to this extraordinary man and undisputed national hero. Blair Mayne's legacy is not only of valour in battle, but of unparalleled leadership, courage and sacrifice under the severest of conditions. Colonel David Stirling, who himself knew something of courage and leadership, noted of Mayne that

"he had a marvellous battle nostril. He could really sense precisely what he had to do in a situation. It wasn't sheer courage, it was sheer technique."

Today's debate is not about rewriting history; it concerns the righting of a historic wrong—one that was evident at the time of its making in 1945 and one that has become only clearer with the passage of time and the application of a clear-eyed historical lens. On the 80th anniversary of Mayne's recommendation for the Victoria Cross and in the 70th anniversary year of Mayne's untimely death in 1955, there could be no better or more appropriate moment for His Majesty's Government to take up the cause and finally award Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair Mayne the Victoria Cross—a recognition earned in 1945, which is now 80 years overdue, but we hope not for much longer.

4.31 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, so forgive me for not being as eloquent as other contributors.

It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton). He mentioned David Stirling, and it would be remiss of me not to mention, particularly while wearing this tie, that David Stirling was, of course, a Scots Guard—my own regiment, in which I spent 25 years.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. For something that is 80 years too late, it is timely. He had me, to be perfectly honest, when he said that the King was confused and disappointed that Mayne had not been awarded the Victoria Cross. He had me when he said that Winston Churchill was equally confused, discombobulated and disappointed.

It was the mention of Churchill that put me in mind of a particular Churchill quote about medals:

"A medal glitters, but it also casts a shadow."

That has been going round my head as I have listened to hon. Members, so much so that I went and found the whole quotation. It was from a speech given in this place on 22 March 1944. I quote:

"The object of giving medals, stars and ribbons"—

I will not do an impression by the way—

"is to give pride and pleasure to those who have deserved them. At the same time a distinction is something which everybody does not possess. If all have it it is of less value... A medal glitters, but it also casts a shadow."—[*Official Report*, 22 March 1944; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

The way to get rid of shadows is to shine a light. I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Strangford is shining a full beam light on the case of Paddy Mayne today.

I invite the Minister to continue to shine that light with a review of this case in the cold light of day, such that the Ministry of Defence can reconsider and award Blair Paddy Mayne the Victoria Cross he so richly deserves.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.33 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. On 8 May, this House, together with the whole country, will celebrate the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe. This important milestone provides us with a renewed opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices and struggle of that greatest generation, who fought to protect Britain and preserve our freedom and democracy in the face of fascism and tyranny.

It is our duty in this House and in our communities across the UK to recognise and celebrate the contributions made by our incredible service personnel to the security, defence and prosperity of this country. That must include reflecting on the service of all current military personnel who protect us today, the living veterans who have finished their time in the armed forces, and the servicemen and women from previous generations who are no longer with us.

They are, all of them, bound together by a thread of service and sacrifice for this country. We must continually renew our gratitude and remembrance of that service. Therefore I welcome today's incredibly valuable debate. It shines a spotlight on the gallantry and heroism of one of the UK's most decorated servicemen, Blair Paddy Mayne, whose proposed recognition with a posthumous Victoria Cross I warmly support.

As the premier operational gallantry award, it is worth while reminding ourselves of its requirements. It is awarded for

"most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy".

It is clear that Blair Mayne personified the highest standards of bravery in the face of the enemy and across his career in the Special Air Service, and on that basis merits the award of a Victoria Cross.

Blair Mayne was one of the first leaders of the SAS following its formation in 1941. It was designed with the intention of conducting guerrilla warfare against the axis powers, which were at that time on their march across Europe, Africa and Asia. The SAS's role in the second world war was unconventional but crucial. Its work to disrupt operations behind enemy lines, particularly through its use of small-scale raids, intelligence gathering and support for networks of resistance groups against the fascist occupiers, was vital in undermining the axis's political and military strength.

As part of the then regiment, Mayne showed extraordinary valour and heroism while carrying out dangerous and daring raids in north Africa, Italy and France, harassing Nazi and fascist supply lines. Indeed, in November 1941 Mayne led one of the first SAS missions considered to be a major success—an attack on a Libyan airfield, which saw dozens of enemy aircraft destroyed. In January 1943, following the capture of Colonel David Stirling, Mayne took over the command of the SAS, going on to lead his men in campaigns in Sicily and Italy, before the SAS took part in the D-day landings. These are just a few examples of the conspicuous bravery displayed by Mayne in his leadership of the SAS.

[*Monica Harding*]

It is important to remember too that for Mayne and all the members of this elite regiment, being apprehended by the Nazis from 1942 onwards would likely have meant their summary execution at the hands of their captors. Consistently operating under such conditions requires, without doubt, exceptional bravery. Mayne is already one of our most decorated veterans. He was one of only eight people during the second world war to be awarded the Distinguished Service Order on four occasions—at the time the second highest gallantry award behind the Victoria Cross. This serves as an important testament to the consistency of his bravery, leadership and resolve, often in the face of odds stacked against him.

It is only right and fair that we honour that courage today through the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross. Indeed, the award of a Victoria Cross would honour not only Mayne but in many ways the role of our special forces writ large, both historically and to this day.

For many people, their knowledge and understanding of the SAS will have been informed by the BBC's dramatisation of the regiment's founding in "SAS: Rogue Heroes", which Members have already extolled. The series has had an important impact, highlighting the enormous contribution of the SAS in securing the freedom we celebrate today and protecting it still. It has also highlighted the important work of the BBC in bringing stories such as these to the public's attention, impressing on all of us the sacrifices and courage of our armed forces.

There are now only a few living veterans of that greatest generation who can recall their stories and remind us of the price that they and so many others paid to defend our way of life. Just last month we said goodbye to another Paddy, Group Captain John "Paddy" Hemingway, who was the last surviving pilot of the battle of Britain and who, as part of the RAF, defeated the Luftwaffe and defended our country from invasion. We have a responsibility to champion their voices and their deeds, and to continue to recognise acts of outstanding valour and heroism in our armed forces. That is why I warmly support the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne, the decoration that King George VI said had "so strangely eluded him" but is within our gift to correct.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

4.40 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Like everybody in the Chamber, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate on the final day before Easter. We have really enjoyed listening to the stories he shared as well as those shared by many others across the Chamber. Although I have never wanted to be a commando, I have many of them as constituents who I call friends, and there are many hon. and gallant Members across the House who are also my friends. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I will refer to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission during my speech.

I thought that I would start my remarks by mentioning the one Victoria Cross that I had a direct interaction with—albeit a posthumous one—while I worked for the war graves commission. In 2020, an Australian ordinary seaman—the great thing about the Victoria Cross is that it knows no record of rank; it is open to everybody—was awarded that posthumous VC by the late Queen. What was lovely about it was that when the naval memorial was undergoing a renovation a year later, the initials VC were added after the name. To be able to watch the lettering being created and soldered into place was particularly moving. That is another example of a posthumous award that has been given.

What was striking about the comments made by the hon. Members for Strangford, for South Antrim (Robin Swann) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) was the repetition of the word "leadership". Anybody in the Chamber who is like me would have been thinking, "Gosh, this man was a brilliant example of some of the things that we need to show as politicians." I felt quite inspired listening to the things that Paddy Mayne did. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, he was a leader of men, he was born for that time, he dominated the scene and none of the enemy remained. We do not want to be too political, but perhaps those are some great mantras for us as we head into the local elections. He defeated and destroyed the enemy, indeed. However, we are here to talk about him.

I particularly enjoyed the more modern references to screenwriting and to our journalistic colleagues from the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), as well as the link to the Falkland Islands made by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton). It is particularly important to understand what Paddy Mayne did after he left the SAS. We also heard reference to Corporal John Harper VC and that reminder of Winston Churchill's words—and indeed the King's words—from my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp).

May I take this opportunity to place on the record my and His Majesty's official Opposition's unwavering support for our special forces as they exist today? They continue to play a vital role for our country. While we will always respect the requirement for operational secrecy, I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House sleep soundly knowing that we have such a highly trained and brave set of soldiers protecting the nation.

It is a real honour to speak in the debate, representing as I do a constituency that is home not just to many veterans but to many serving personnel, some of whom I know take part in the most daring and dangerous missions. The life story of Robert Blair Mayne, or Paddy Mayne, is, as we have heard, by all accounts exciting, brave and just a little controversial. He operated in some of the most unforgiving locations in the world—for example, north Africa and the Normandy landings—highlighting the vital work of the new elite commando force, the Special Air Service, that came into being during the second world war, of which Blair Paddy Mayne was such an important member.

It is in no doubt that Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Mayne served gallantly and with distinction. That is something that his military record clearly highlights, having received his Distinguished Service Order and

three bars—even if one of those is the whole point of the debate—as well as Officer of the Legion of Honour from France and the Croix de Guerre from Belgium. However, evidence may now exist to suggest that that third DSO bar should indeed have been a VC all along. I know how important securing the appropriate level of honour for Paddy Mayne and others is to many today: those who are still alive and served at that time and those who fight on their behalf. Indeed, I have spent hours with one of my constituents, Ivor Foster, who believes deeply that his service as part of Bomber Command should be recognised with a distinct medal rather than with a clasp on the 1939-45 star. Even though I do not entirely agree with him, to this day he will not apply for the clasp, such is his desire to be recognised for his work. In contrast, it seems that reopening Paddy Mayne's case may indeed be in order.

That specific case aside, our overarching position as a party is that we continue to support the independent medallic recognition process. It is an independent honours and awards committee's job to decide the nature of gallantry awards; in the case of the Victoria Cross, it rightly remains in the gift of the sovereign. Equally, I remain reluctant about the process becoming politicised or there being a precedent towards either overlooking history or second-guessing it. Hon. Members will be unsurprised that, having worked for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, I am particularly interested in the historical facts that we need to ensure that we follow.

Having spent six years working for the commission across the south-west, I want to touch on one story that I think is helpful to what we are discussing this afternoon. Anyone familiar with the iconic CWGC headstones may be aware that many have a small inscription at the bottom—always worth a look if hon. Members are ever in a cemetery. It is known as the personal inscription. Unfortunately, I did not think to write any examples down in my speech, but there is a brilliant website where they can be found. The inscriptions were instituted as a way for families to personalise a headstone. Interestingly, they came about after much debate in this place about the uniformity of the headstones decided on at the end of the first world war and the lack of choice for families in how their loved one was to be commemorated. That is definitely a story for another day, but I recommend a deep dive into *Hansard* if hon. Members are at all interested.

As the work of the commission has continued over the decades, in some cases headstones have had to be replaced due to wear and tear. With that often comes contact with the descendants of the casualty, who by definition generally did not know the person and often did not know their relatives either. The commission has therefore set in place a policy for what to do when modern-day relatives wish to add a personal inscription to a replacement headstone. Essentially, they are not allowed to add one if there was none or change what was put there at the point of the original installation. The decision was reached that there was a reason why the family at the time chose not to inscribe or, indeed, chose the form of words that have been there for decades, and because the commission does not have records of why an inscription was added or not, adding or changing it, in the commission's belief, would alter the integrity of the commemoration.

I share that story as I believe it has some bearing on how posthumous gallantry awards are considered. It is my view that something that significant must reflect historical fact. Television shows such as “SAS: Rogue Heroes”, as we have heard much about this afternoon, and indeed the latest must-see “Adolescence”—albeit on a very different topic—do so much to bring untold stories to the fore and get the country talking about issues that have previously not been discussed. Even though such stories can promote debate, the policy and decisions made around the issues they raise must be evidence-based and consistent and must not set an unhelpful precedent. However, in this case, it seems that compelling new evidence is coming to light that prompts a rethink.

At its core, this debate is about an individual soldier—a Northern Irish soldier from Newtownards who stepped up when his nation needed him. I mention his birthplace because I am sure it will not go unnoticed by those in the Chamber that while we stand here today celebrating the heroic actions of one SAS veteran, many veterans of that service are currently living in fear of vexatious legal action.

Most recently, the Clonoe verdict has shone a spotlight on our Northern Ireland veterans again, and I take this opportunity to place on the record my thanks to the Minister for Veterans and People for his support for a judicial review of the Clonoe inquest. Protecting our veterans is something that I hope carries unanimous support and I know the Minister is a passionate advocate for veterans' affairs. I hope that his experience and judgment are already being sought by his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office; perhaps he may advise them to reconsider their plans to repeal the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023.

As already mentioned, this debate also provides another opportunity to discuss our country's record on veterans' affairs. The previous Conservative Government set a new standard for supporting veterans with the creation of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, a Veterans Minister around the Cabinet table, the introduction of veteran ID cards and Op COURAGE to support mental health services for veterans, no doubt many of whom would have been the colleagues of Paddy Mayne had that service existed back then.

Our backing of those who stand up and serve is a matter of public record, and I welcome Labour's commitment to much of that work. However, before I conclude, I want to highlight just one issue relating to these second world war veterans that the Government might like to give some attention to. As we approach the 80th anniversaries of VE day and VJ day, it is vital that we keep in mind the fewer than 70,000 veterans of world war two who survived, unlike some of the colleagues of Paddy Mayne, and who are still alive. As we know, these men and women are likely to be fast approaching, or indeed to have reached, the incredible age of 100.

That brings me back to my constituent, Ivor Foster. Just a few weeks ago, I visited Ivor at his care home as he remains exercised about the cost of his social care. Having lived to the ripe old age of 99 years and eight months, he is spending £5,000 a month to live in a local care home. There are a range of reasons for that, but I believe that ahead of 8 May, Ivor's case highlights that we are fortunate enough to be living in the midst of men and women who, as in the case of Ivor, not only lived

[Rebecca Smith]

through the war but took part in active combat, fortunately survived and then contributed to society afterwards. I gently ask the Minister, in a slightly cheeky way, what consideration has been given to how we will acknowledge and show our gratitude to those fewer than 70,000 individuals who are still alive, as we mark the anniversary of the liberation that they and Paddy Mayne fought for.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, given both my constituency links to our commando forces as the home of Royal Marines 42 Commando and my previous career with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I am a passionate advocate for veterans' affairs, so it has been an honour to stand at this Dispatch Box and debate such an important topic. Cases such as this rightly cause a debate, and I am pleased that we have been able to have this conversation today, not least because it has given us another opportunity to express on the record the commitment and gratitude that we share across this House for the brave men and women who serve and have served our country in the armed forces.

We owe it to all serving personnel and veterans to ensure that gallantry medals and awards at all levels are presented where the evidence is irrefutable, to ensure that their intrinsic value is maintained. It seems that the story of Paddy Mayne may do just that, and I await the Minister's response with interest.

4.51 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this important debate to this place today. It is really important that we shine a light on this issue. I have the greatest respect for the sustained and passionate advocacy in support of a posthumous Victoria Cross for Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair Mayne. I would also like to fully associate myself with the powerful tribute the hon. Member has paid, as have many in the House today, to Lieutenant Colonel Mayne, who was without doubt one of the greatest heroes of the second world war. His legacy lives on in the spirit of the Special Air Service today, and his courage and accomplishments were rightly celebrated for our generation by the portrayal—slightly dramatised, perhaps—in the recent BBC drama “SAS: Rogue Heroes”.

It is particularly pertinent that Lieutenant Colonel Mayne was recognised for his bravery at the time. He is one of the very few recipients of the rare third bar to the Distinguished Service Order—I only have one; he had three—in recognition of his actions as commander of the 1st SAS Regiment during Operation Howard in April 1945. It should be remembered that this made him one of the Army's most highly decorated officers of that time. While it is possible to give gallantry awards posthumously, it is a key tenet of the British honours and awards system that they are not granted retrospectively. This ensures that awards are timely and clearly linked to specific actions or activities, and in particular that they are awarded within the context of the time.

As I have mentioned many times, specifically when talking about Northern Ireland and various inquests and inquiries, it is the responsibility of those investigations to understand the context of Northern Ireland at the

height of the troubles. It is also up to us, sitting in this warm place on these wonderful Benches, to understand the context in which the senior generals made those decisions around gallantry medals. For gallantry awards, as well as for civilian and military honours, the guiding principle is that they will not be considered more than five years after the incident in question.

It is worth recalling that all significant battles and operations that took place in the second world war were discussed in great detail in the context of medal recognition at the end of the war. It is worth noting that, out of all the years of war, it was only in 1945 that more Victoria Crosses were awarded posthumously than to those living. After years of war, many had seen conflict, courage and commitment to service, and while it is not necessarily fact, the bar—no pun intended—for VCs was statistically higher at the end of the war. It is worth noting that it was recommended in June 1946 that no further recommendations for gallantry awards should be considered after 1950.

From what we know, from the paperwork that exists about Lieutenant Colonel Mayne's recommendation for a Victoria Cross, there is lots of speculation that appropriate processes were not followed or that an administrative error took place. The evidence we have suggests that Lieutenant Colonel Mayne's citation passed through the correct chain of command and was properly considered by a succession of senior officers, all of whom had a lot of combat experience in leadership and in the field, and were experienced in the consideration of medallic recognition and gallantry awards after many years of hard fighting during the second world war.

I thought it might be worthwhile bringing forward some of that correspondence. Certain correspondence—held by the Canadian National Archives—from the Deputy Military Secretary to his counterpart in the first Canadian Army reveals some doubt about the VC in the discussion between members of the VC committee. It states that the VC committee considered it not quite clearly up to VC standard, and that it was not a single-handed act of heroism—that goes to the point about “single” or “signal”. In the letter, the Deputy Military Secretary also suggests the award of the third bar to the DSO. It cannot be known for certain whether that is the reason why the VC was amended to DSO in third bar form, but it is likely.

It is clear that, at some point in the process, it was considered more appropriate for Lieutenant Colonel Mayne to be awarded a third bar to his DSO, which is itself an exceptionally high honour. That decision was signed off by Field Marshal Montgomery, who had considerable combat experience throughout the whole of the conflict. We also know that it was not uncommon at the time for the recommended level of award to be changed as the citation went through the consideration process.

Today, the process remains relatively similar. I sat on many such honours and awards committees in my time in the military. Such committees, at unit, brigade and division levels, will rank awards against the context from their own particular perspectives. A unit may have 20 to deal with, a brigade 60 and a division 100. We do not necessarily know the totality of the picture at the time Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Mayne's citation was considered at each level. There may have been stiff competition across the military, particularly in the Army.

I fully respect all those who disagree with the decision made in relation to Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Mayne. However, I believe it credible to conclude that he was a war hero of the highest order while also concluding that, in some cases, it is not appropriate for officers, officials or Ministers working today, some 80 years later, to overrule the decisions made by senior officers at the time, who were steeped in wartime experience and had a contemporary appreciation of the brave actions of Lieutenant Colonel Mayne and, importantly, his peers.

Fantastic points have been made in this important debate. Winston Churchill casts a shadow over those who perhaps did not get a medal. For everybody who did get one, there are probably 100, if not 1,000, who did not get one but definitely deserved to. Interestingly, the Australian precedent was mentioned twice, including by the hon. Member for Strangford. However, Australia's separate honours system does not have any impact on UK policy. Australia not only bestowed one VC retrospectively for Vietnam, but, as was rightly mentioned, a second retrospective VC to Ordinary Seaman Edward Sheean, who was killed in 1942. That speaks to the VC having no boundaries across services or domains.

The remarks about the Falkland Islands were news to me. I am sure that Paddy Mayne enjoyed the isolation and camaraderie of a small team wandering around those pretty barren but amazing places. The Bomber Command medal highlights how divisive the medals and honours system can be. I am sure that those with military service can remember multiple conversations about who got awards and who did not.

As we talk about honouring those who served in the second world war, it is worth noting that many world war two veterans were up on the main screens of Piccadilly Circus today for thousands to see, honouring their service during that war.

Combat can bring the best and worst out of us. As I have said several times in the House, courage is a decision, not a reaction. It was clear to me that Lieutenant Colonel Mayne made multiple decisions that were deeply courageous rather than just reactions or habit—indeed, they probably became habit because he made them so often.

To conclude, I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for the opportunity he has given us all today to mark and lionise the incredible bravery, leadership and spirit demonstrated by Lieutenant Colonel Mayne some 80 years ago. Robert Blair Mayne was simply one of the greatest from our greatest generation—a man of audacity, ingenuity and fearsome courageousness, whose raids behind enemy lines and courage in rescuing injured comrades under fire is the stuff of military legend; a man whose spirit lives on in the “Who dares wins” motto of the SAS. The proud history of the SAS marks it out as one of the most battle-hardened and professional organisations of its time, and the very tip of the spear. Paddy Mayne is not only a hero within his regiment but a national hero, and he reminds me of the saying, “In times of peace, we must protect the mavericks.”

It is recognised that clerical mistakes in judgments or orders, or errors arising from any accidental slip or omission in language, can explicitly be fixed—and there is no time limit for doing so—as long as the intent of the original decision holds. As a Member of Parliament who has a mention in dispatches, a Military Cross and a DSO, I will take note of the new evidence that has been

highlighted, its context, and the exceptional circumstances of this debate, and I will ask the honours and awards committee to review the evidence and find a decision. Once the decision is found by that independent body, it will be finalised. That will provide an answer, once and for all, on how Paddy Mayne's service is recognised.

There was lots of mention today of looking at the evidence with fresh eyes in the context, and having a cool, calculated review of the historical facts. The honours and awards committee will do that, and we will present that evidence in the House. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for our debate. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair Mayne is a man whose spirit and legend will remain recognised in the annals of the mother of Parliaments in perpetuity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Jim Shannon to wind up the debate.

5.1 pm

Jim Shannon: I was not sure if I got the chance to wind up the debate, so thank you for giving me this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, I thank all Members for their contributions. I learned today, for instance, that Blair Mayne served in the Falklands—that was the first time I had heard that—and I look forward to sharing what the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) told us with some of the family.

I thank everyone for spending their Tuesday afternoon before recess in this Chamber to discuss awarding Blair Mayne a posthumous VC. I thank the hon. and gallant Minister for agreeing to review the matter; we are deeply indebted to him. The family back home and we in Newtownards and the constituency of Strangford, where that good son we are proud of came from, look forward to a successful conclusion of that review.

I wish every Member a very good recess. Rest yourselves—I know I will not, but that is by the way—and have a nice time, and come back here energised.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his inspiring Easter wind-up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of awarding a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for allowing me to make this point of order. We are about to retire for the Easter recess—indeed, the Adjournment debate is about to begin—but I am rather perturbed by the fact that the Order Paper no longer lists it as the Easter Adjournment debate, but instead as a general debate on “Matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment”. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been a Member of Parliament for 24 years, and the Easter Adjournment debate was always a significant occasion, marking the fact that Easter is the holiest time of year for Christians in this country. I look over to the other side of the Chamber and see the crest of Sir David Amess, who was here for every Easter Adjournment debate. Can I have an assurance that this is the Easter Adjournment debate, that we have not taken away the Christian character of this important occasion, and that that will be reflected in future Order Papers and in *Hansard*?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. The subjects for debate today, including the titles of the debates, were determined by the Backbench Business Committee. The debate titles are not a matter for the Chair; the hon. Member has the opportunity to take that up with the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who I suspect might be about to speak.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I assure you, and the whole House, that no discourtesy was intended whatsoever? We did not get notice of whether we would get time for a debate, and when that time would be, until quite late on. I take what my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has said. We will take that point back to the Committee and will ensure that we correct the matter for the future, and have Easter and Christmas recess debates. The summer recess debate we have already rechristened the Sir David Amess debate. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for that clarification. That brings us to the Backbench Business Committee debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming—I believe I might have the licence—Easter adjournment.

Easter Adjournment

5.5 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

The first quarter of this year has flown by, and it seems as though it was only yesterday that we were preparing for Christmas and the new year. I am pleased that the weather has finally indicated that spring has sprung, and with the clocks going forward, the days are getting longer, and everyone is a little chirpier. I apologise in advance because I have a bit of a cold, so I hope I do not develop a maldrop during this speech.

It has been a busy few months, both in Parliament and across my constituency. I have been speaking in the Chamber, hosting resident tours and events, visiting schools, preparing for local elections, piloting a Presentation Bill and chairing the Backbench Business Committee; and we have celebrated Lent, Ramadan, Navaratri, and Holi—but still no trophy for Tottenham Hotspur. Maybe if we played more like Bodrumspor, we would finally win something. That is an in-joke for my team. For colleagues it has been an exhausting time, and many of us may be feeling like a bit of a “wabbit” by the time we get to the vacation.

I am delighted that I have assumed the chairmanship of the Backbench Business Committee, following in the footsteps of the former Member for Gateshead, who stood down having served nine years as Chair of the Committee. It is encouraging that so many Members are keen to get in on this debate, and I hope to hear some topical and important issues being raised. However, if any colleague is applying for a Backbench Business debate, they will probably have to wait until the end of November or December before they will get a debate in the Chamber, because we have such a long waiting list. I thank the Leader of the House for making time to meet me to discuss the Committee and ensure that Back Benchers have adequate time to discuss matters that they wish to raise.

Let me mention Transport for London. Regular attendees of these debates will know that I regularly bang the drum for lifts in tube stations in my constituency. I am sorry to say that I am still banging the drum, and we still do not have any lifts. However, we recently had an excellent report from the Transport Committee on disabled access to public transport, and a subsequent statement in the House on that issue. It is clear from the report, and the experiences of my constituents, that we need a tighter definition of “step-free”, and that that may require a change in the law. My calls for a lift at Stanmore station are just, as are the calls of the many Members of this House who are campaigning to make their stations step-free. The station may be officially classified as step-free, but that is a very broad definition. At Stanmore station, to get from the gateline to the street, people have to either go up 71 stairs, or go up a ramp so steep that even Baroness Grey-Thompson could not manage it. They then have to wheel themselves through a car park with no pavement for nearly 400 yards. We think that we need legislative change. If that is what we need, we want it, as well as lifts at Canons Park and Queensbury stations. I note that a lift is being planned for Eastcote station, in my neighbouring constituency,

although that station gets far fewer passengers than Stanmore, according to the latest data. Clearly, Transport for London considers a lift at Stanmore to be inconsequential. I see no option but to make legislative changes to remove Stanmore's supposed step-free status, in order to get some movement from TfL.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on UK-Israel, I know that Members of the House are all conscious of the escalating situation in the middle east. There is a clear and present danger that if terrorists remain in Gaza, the conflict cannot have a long-term resolution, and that Hezbollah, Iran and extreme forces in the middle east could be dragged into a full-scale war with Israel, which none of us wants.

The events that have unfolded in the middle east since 7 October 2023 have been unbearable to witness. Israel suffered the worst terrorist attack in its history, at the hands of the Iranian-backed terrorists Hamas. Innocent civilians were brutally murdered and hundreds were taken hostage, including babies, children and the elderly. The hostages have been held in appalling conditions, and the accounts given by those who have been released have been distressing and harrowing.

As a direct consequence of the actions of Hamas on 7 October, and the use of civilian infrastructure to undertake terrorist actions, Palestinian civilians are facing a devastating humanitarian crisis in Gaza. My thoughts are with the families of those still held hostage, and every innocent life that has been lost or impacted by the conflict. I firmly support Israel's right to defend itself against security threats, but we must continue to press the Government to work with international partners to support a ceasefire in Gaza, to release all hostages, to provide aid, and to work towards a lasting and sustainable end to the conflict. In the longer term, I continue to support a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, with both nations, and the wider region, living side by side in peace and security.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for obliging me with all these debates over the year. There are a couple more coming up, which will keep us busy in a few weeks' time. On the future of Gaza and Israel, I support the two-state solution as the way forward, but does the hon. Gentleman share my view that peace can happen only if Hamas are not there? Hamas are trying to restrict freedom and liberty. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that they cannot be part of a future in which everyone can be at peace?

Bob Blackman: I thank the Backbench Business Committee season ticket holder for his intervention, but I assure him that it will not get him any favours in his applications for further debates. I was saddened to hear that on Sunday night, Hamas yet again fired 10 rockets into Israel in an attempt to cause further harm and destruction, despite the civilians of Gaza being in desperate need of a ceasefire. If that does not show that they are a terrorist organisation, I do not know what would. They are focused solely on the destruction of not only Israel, but their own people. It is an outrage that they are still in position. With Passover coming, I pray that we can reach a true settlement, restore peace in the region, and ensure that no more life is lost in the war against terrorism.

Having just celebrated the Persian new year, Nowruz, we need a free and democratic Iran. In Iran, people continue to be suppressed by the undemocratic regime, and are silenced and imprisoned for showing any opposition to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The regime is becoming increasingly brutal, with at least 230 people executed in Iran during the first three months of this year—double the number of people who were executed in the same period last year. The IRGC is a threat to global prosperity and security. It continues to fund external militia groups across the middle east. It is particularly concerning that Iran, Russia and China have been engaged in talks about their nuclear programmes. I hope that President Trump's firm approach to their actions will make them think twice before causing further disruption in the area. Once again, I urge the Government to turn their promise into action and to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety as a terrorist organisation.

I am the chairman of the APPG on ending homelessness. We face a rising cost of living, increasing unemployment and, more recently, rises in council tax. Many more people are being forced to live in poverty, and are struggling to afford their rent. Rents have risen by 9% this year, taking them out of reach, and forcing many people into temporary accommodation—or, worse, on to the streets, where they have to sleep rough. In Harrow East alone, according to a recent report from Crisis, a mere 1.9% of housing is deemed to be affordable. That is unsustainable and exerts considerable pressure on local authorities.

In more positive news, I am pleased that my third private Member's Bill, on homelessness and tackling rough sleeping, recently passed its Second Reading unopposed. The Homelessness Prevention Bill focuses on using prevention at the core of solving the rough sleeping problem, as it is often too late, much harder and much more expensive to help people once they are already on the streets. The Bill would increase the effectiveness of the current duty on local housing authorities in England to take reasonable steps to help an applicant threatened with homelessness to secure accommodation so that it does not cease to be available to them. I look forward to the next steps in securing Government support to achieve Royal Assent.

I am also pleased that we soared through the Third Reading of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill. I welcome the Government's ambition to inherit the goals of the previous Conservative Administration to eradicate smoking from society and tackle youth vaping. I hope that the other place will be just as favourable to ensure that we can swiftly protect future generations from this harm. I look forward to working on the Bill further, scrutinising it and ensuring that all appropriate amendments are adopted so that we can achieve a smoke-free society in our lifetimes. I pay particular tribute to my friends at Action on Smoking and Health, who have been tireless in providing briefings and meetings and hosting events for colleagues and myself.

In the first quarter alone, I visited nine schools in my constituency, with many more in the pipeline over the next term. I find it enriching and important to engage with tomorrow's generation, as many MPs will, and to hear the views and ideas of students on improving the way in which the country is run. I am constantly astounded by the very high level of education in Harrow, the standards provided and the thoughtful questions I am posed by students of all ages.

[Bob Blackman]

Every visit has been extremely valuable in different ways. Some of my most notable visits include a visit to Shaftesbury high school, which is a special educational needs school. When we think of people with disabilities and special needs, it is important that we focus not on what they cannot do, but on what they can do. At Shaftesbury high school, they have created a coffee hut on site where students learn the skills to be a barista. Having tasted one of their brews, I can confirm that they will give Starbucks a run for its money.

I look forward to another SEND school, which was newly approved by the previous Administration, being created in Harrow. We have the land, the opportunity and the support of the headteachers; we now need Government support to make it happen. Another notable visit—mostly for my staff, who were watching me—was to Glebe primary school, where we had the Holi festival. I was literally covered in colourful powder by the students. It was a particularly joyous occasion, celebrating spring, new life and love.

While the Easter recess provides a well-deserved break for all Members and their staff, I will be hosting one of my three annual work experience programmes. I will be welcoming 19 eager and willing students to my constituency, teaching them what it is like to be an MP and how they can get involved in politics. Over the years, I have welcomed hundreds of young people on to the programme, with many going on to work either in my office or elsewhere on the parliamentary estate. It is a great way to engage with constituents and the younger generation, inspiring them to get involved and learn more about parliamentary processes.

As I come to the end of my remarks, I pay tribute to our great friend Sir David Amess, who so loved participating in these debates. May he rest in peace and remain in our thoughts. I wish everyone a very happy Easter and Passover. I hope that everyone can enjoy some rest and a well-deserved break, enjoying good food, chocolate and good company with loved ones.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With a birthday contribution, I call Alan Strickland.

5.18 pm

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Now that I know I get to go first, I might have birthdays more often.

It is a real pleasure to speak in this Easter Adjournment debate. In doing so, I pay tribute to the memory of our late colleague Sir David Amess. I was not a Member of the House at the time, but I hear that the number of community organisations that Sir David managed to cram into his speeches was the stuff of legend. I am unlikely to match that, but I wish to talk about three organisations in my constituency that make a particular contribution.

I start with Spennymoor Town football club. Players, fans, club staff and everyone else in Spennymoor are celebrating the club's fantastic win against Rochdale at the weekend. Winning that game means they will play in the FA trophy final, which will be held in May at Wembley stadium—that is absolutely incredible. I am really proud of what the club have achieved, and it was brilliant to see them play recently in another fantastic match, so I congratulate everyone involved.

I am also hugely grateful to Spennymoor Town football club for the contribution it makes to the community. Since being founded as Spennymoor United in 1904, the club has been at the heart of the town's life. Its community meals programme supports 100 residents a week; it engages 300 young people in Tudhoe, Cassop, Fishburn and Spennymoor through its youth work; and it is widening participation through its disability football scheme so that more people can take part in the sport. I thank the club for that work, congratulate it on its win, and pay particular tribute to chairman Brad Groves, manager Graeme Lee, and managing director Ian Geldard. Spennymoor Town FC is a reminder of what many football clubs used to be, and what all could and should be: organisations that unite communities, support local people and invest in the next generation of players.

Next, I pay tribute to everyone involved in running Coxhoe village hall and thank them for the wide range of activities they provide. It is a village hall like no other—a thriving community hub used by people of all ages, running a community pantry to feed local families and organising makers' markets to sell local produce, as well as fitness classes, hearing loss support groups and many other great activities. I was pleased recently to be invited to its beer festival, for which volunteer Nick Young handmade a bar that held 40 different draught ales and ciders. I felt that it was my public duty to sample the available produce, and I am pleased to report to the House that, from my hazy memory of the evening, all the beer was excellent.

Sticking to the liquid refreshment theme, Coxhoe village hall also hosts the craft group Pimm's and Needles, but there is no need to worry about either of those groups getting out of hand, because it also hosts rehearsals of Durham police's male voice choir. While many villages have seen a loss of shops, pubs and other facilities, the incredible team of volunteers at that hall reminds us that it is still possible to have thriving anchor institutions at the heart of our communities.

Finally, I would like to recognise Friends of the Stockton and Darlington Railway for the leadership it has shown. Since 2013, its volunteers have led the campaign to ensure that the bicentenary of the world's first public passenger railway is properly marked. I am really proud that 2025 marks 200 years since Locomotion No. 1 was placed on the tracks of what is now Heighington station in my constituency. That crucial moment was the birth of the passenger rail network, to which all rail around the globe can trace its beginnings. The friends group has championed the cause of the railway, encouraging investment in local museums and the establishment of a heritage trail, and has helped shape the international festival to mark the anniversary that we kicked off recently. I place on record my thanks to its chair, Niall Hammond, for leading that incredible work.

Celebrating this anniversary is not just of local interest; our nation's defining contribution to the creation of the railways is something that I hope Members from across this House will join us in the north-east in recognising this year. It is a matter of particular pride that my home town is not only the birthplace of the railways, but central to their future, with modern battery-powered trains rolling off the production lines at the Hitachi plant, which I was delighted to welcome the Transport Secretary back to last week.

In closing, I thank everyone involved with Spennymoor Town football club, Coxhoe village hall and Friends of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. It is community organisations such as these that make my constituency and our country the thriving places of pride and opportunity they are today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With an immediate five-minute time limit, I call Rebecca Paul.

5.23 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am pleased to rise today and speak in my first Easter Adjournment debate. I also pay tribute to Sir David Amess, whom unfortunately I never had the pleasure of meeting.

Today I wish to speak about neighbourhood policing and tackling town centre crime—we were due to debate that important topic yesterday, so I thought I would take the opportunity to raise it today. It is particularly relevant to Redhill in my constituency, which has been suffering from increased levels of antisocial behaviour and crime in recent years. Redhill is an amazing town that is the cultural epicentre of our local area. It has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, with new developments such as The Rise, which includes The Light cinema. As a result, I am pleased to say that more people from further afield are visiting and enjoying all that Redhill has to offer. That is a positive thing for our local economy, but at the same time we have seen an increase in antisocial behaviour.

To address the real issues faced, the Safer Redhill initiative was established. That is a partnership between Surrey police, the office of the police and crime commissioner, Reigate and Banstead borough council and East Surrey YMCA to cut crime and foster pride in the town. The project adopts the College of Policing's "Clear, hold, build" framework, which is a three-stage approach where offenders are cleared from the area, and then partners work together to put in place interventions to keep it that way.

From drug operations at Redhill train station to plain-clothes officers out at night looking for suspicious behaviour, huge amounts have been achieved as part of the Safer Redhill initiative. There have been 155 arrests, with a combined prison time of 25 years for local offenders, 86 drug seizures—including 10 kg of suspected cocaine—£89,000 of cash recovered and weapons taken off the streets. I take this opportunity to thank Surrey police, especially Jon Vale, the borough commander, and Lisa Townsend, the police and crime commissioner, for ensuring that Redhill got the additional police focus it needed at the right time.

However, making Redhill safer is not all about police action; it is also about prevention, and that is where East Surrey YMCA has come in. With its qualified youth workers, it has been supporting local young people at risk of offending or becoming NEET—not in education, employment or training—by giving them the support they need and helping them to thrive and flourish. With their Y bus, the YMCA has been getting out and about in Redhill to engage with the young people, and I thank it for the important part it has played in making Redhill safer and ensuring a more positive future for the next generation.

Safer Redhill is an inspiring example of what can be achieved by the police, the local council and the charity sector working hand in hand, with all partners bringing different skills and expertise to the table, but with the same ultimate goal. I thank and pay tribute to everyone involved. It is wonderful to see the local community starting to feel safer in the town centre and businesses feeling more confident about their future in Redhill.

However, there is still much to do, and I will speak briefly on some of the other challenges faced in Redhill town centre. The first is pavement parking. Redhill has a fantastic pedestrianised shopping area, but some people mistake it for a car park and even use it as a cut-through. That behaviour by motorists is disrespectful and downright dangerous. There used to be physical bollards in place to prevent access by cars, and those need to be fixed, as that would go a long way towards addressing the issue. But we in this place also have a role to play. We must ensure that unnecessary and antisocial pavement parking, as in the case of Redhill town centre, is tackled and routinely enforced. That type of parking affects wheelchair users, people with visual impairments and those with pushchairs, making it difficult for them to get around safely. Redhill residents have been raising this issue for years, and we must tackle it.

Currently, it is not a criminal offence for a car to park on the pavement, which is to ensure that traffic continues to flow on narrow roads where pavement parking is the only option, but it is an offence if the vehicle creates an unnecessary obstruction. The problem here is what constitutes an unnecessary obstruction, and that ambiguity makes it incredibly difficult for the police to successfully prosecute offenders. As a consequence of the low success rate, we see few instances of the police enforcing it. I therefore urge Government Ministers to look at how we can make it clearer which types of pavement parking are prohibited and which are not, so that effective enforcement can be deployed by the police or even the local authority, creating the necessary deterrent effect.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to talk for so long about the wonderful town of Redhill and the huge amount of work that has been put into making it safer. I will now bring my remarks to a close so that others may contribute.

5.28 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this Easter Adjournment debate. For a moment there, I thought that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), was trying to cancel Easter, which worried me. He would not just have been haunted by David Amess, believe me.

I will talk briefly about gambling, the Gambling Act 2005 and how it is not fit for purpose. I am sick and tired of the number of gambling establishments popping up in my constituency. Every time a shop closes, a gambling establishment tries to put in a betting shop.

The Gambling Act 2005 is not fit for the modern age. Under the "aim to permit" provision, councils must permit licences. I have had so many arguments with Brent council that it has led an amazing campaign, joined by 40 other councils around the country, calling on the Government to reform the Act so that we can protect our high streets. This is Brent's six-point plan

[Dawn Butler]

for change: reform the “aim to permit” policy, categorise gambling premises, consider household debt in planning, introduce a statutory levy, ban gambling advertising, and halt liberalisation of adult gaming centres.

Fixed-odds betting terminals are more addictive than heroin, and for every person who is addicted to gambling, at least seven others are also affected. There are 81 licensed premises in Brent, and my constituency contains more gambling establishments than supermarkets and schools, which is ridiculous.

I hope that the “English Devolution White Paper: Power and partnership” will enable us to reset the relationship between central and local government and ensure that local authorities can listen to local residents, including those in Brent East, so that when we say we need no more gambling establishments on our high streets, they will no longer be allowed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I want to get everyone in, so I am imposing an immediate four-minute time limit.

5.31 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Dorset is burning. Just before midnight last Wednesday, the sky outside my home glowed a deep orange. Upton heath, a precious stretch of lowland habitat, was ablaze, in the middle of the ground-nesting bird season. A few hours later, just miles away, Canford heath, one of our largest and most precious sites of special scientific interest, was also going up in smoke, and days before that, Moors Valley country park and forest, just outside my constituency, had also caught fire. These are not isolated incidents; they are frighteningly normal.

Fire crews from Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight worked through the night, and we owe them all a debt of gratitude, but more than 70 football pitches’ worth of rare habitat was nevertheless lost in that one fire. It was not even the first time this year. Upton heath burned back in February; in March part of RSPB Arne was torched, and Canford heath went up in smoke as well. Dorset Wildlife Trust rushed to rescue reptiles and assess the devastation to the nests of nightjars, woodlarks and Dartford warblers. Even when their nests and eggs survive, their insect food source is gone. Nature organisations have established that it will take at least five years for Upton heath to recover from this one incident. Dorset is one of the few areas in the country where nature is actually making a comeback—partly thanks to the Dorset Heaths Partnership—but how long can we keep winning this battle if the fires keep coming?

So what is causing the fires? Let me be clear: it is us. Almost every one of these fires, from Upton heath to Wareham forest, was caused by human activity—a carelessly dropped cigarette, illegal campfires or, worse, deliberate arson. As climate change makes our landscapes hotter and drier, we are living in a perfect storm. Fires are more frequent, more intense, and harder to contain.

I know the fire service well. My dad, Ray Walls, served with the London Fire Brigade throughout his career, and I have been a member of the Dorset and

Wiltshire fire authority. I have seen what the fire crews do—heroes running towards danger as we run away—but I have also seen how underfunded they are. Last year, we lost fire appliances in Poole and Wareham, with further threats to Wimborne and Bere Regis. This is about response times, when family homes are at risk or someone is stuck in a flood.

Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue has received a real-terms cut in Government funding, and the Fire Brigades Union has said that fire funding is now lower than it was a decade ago. A band D household in Dorset pays just £1.76 a week for its fire service through council tax, but local services have no flexibility to raise more if they want to. We need proper investment. We need drones for wildfire detection; we need equipment for flood rescues and for bariatric patients; we need fire crews not just to respond, but to educate, prevent, and prepare. They are doing a great job, attending schools such as Broadstone middle school, where last month, a fire crew explained the dangers to young children, but they are stretched to capacity. I therefore call on the Government to rethink fire service funding so that it is sustainable for the future.

Let us look at the cause of so many accidental fires: disposable barbecues. They seem harmless, but they have been the spark behind countless wildfires—over 1,000 in London in just a year. Local authorities can and do impose public spaces protection orders, and Dorset is consulting on one, but if petrol stations and supermarkets keep selling barbecues, people will keep buying them. Disposable barbecues not only cause fires; they get left behind on beaches, burn unsuspecting feet and create litter. It is time we considered a ban. As we head into the Easter recess, I encourage people to enjoy Dorset. It is a jewel of the UK, filled with chocolate-box towns, stunning beaches and plenty of Easter egg hunts at Farmer Palmer’s and Kingston Lacy—but please leave your barbecue at home.

I will end by putting on record my thanks to all members of the emergency services and the volunteers who work alongside them, including the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Dorset community first responders and Corfe Mullen’s Firewise volunteers.

5.35 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): May I join other Members in paying tribute to Sir David Amess? He was a monumental figure in British politics and internationally.

Banks continue to do well, despite the challenges that ordinary households continue to face. We have had the disappointing news that NatWest is planning to close 53 bank branches this year. Nine of those are in Greater Manchester, and one of them is in my constituency. These branch closures will undoubtedly cause uncertainty for staff, and they will have an adverse and disproportionate impact on people with low incomes, older people, disabled people and people with a lower level of literacy, who rely on bank branches. After NatWest Group was rescued in 2008 by a £45 billion Government bail-out, I believe that it has a duty of care to British taxpayers and should continue to provide vital community services.

I have recently visited several excellent secondary schools in my constituency, including Reddish Vale high school, Priestnall school in the Heaton, and Reddish Hall school. It was great to see that the staff, students and

teachers are so ambitious about the future, but the funding that our local authority receives could go further. Stockport has one of the lowest-funded school systems in England, and it has a higher proportion of children with education, health and care plans than the national average. My local authority is part of the f40 group of local authorities, some of which are the lowest funded. On average, the lowest-funded authority for SEND receives approximately £950 per pupil, with the highest funded receiving £3,250 per pupil. In Stockport, the figure is approximately £1,100 per pupil. I want to see a reallocation of funding for Stockport, and obviously I want to see more funding allocated to children in Stockport.

Sky made a major announcement a few days ago, and I have been doing some work with my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel). Sky announced that it was planning to close three contact centres in Sheffield, Leeds and Stockport, putting 2,000 jobs at risk, including 545 in Stockport. I have been contacted by a large number of Sky employees who are distressed by the news, and families are worried about their future. Several employees have told me that before they found out from their employer that the plan was in place, several media outlets, including Sky News, ran the story. That is simply not acceptable. My hon. Friends and I have had a meeting with Sky, and we are looking forward to engaging with staff. The loss of these jobs in Leeds, Sheffield and Stockport is a hammer blow to our towns.

Sadly, on new year's day, we had some flooding in my constituency. The Meadow Mill was affected, and I recently had a very productive meeting with the Environment Agency. I pay tribute to the emergency service workers and council staff who helped residents on the day of the flood, but I want to see the Government invest more in flood defences, particularly in my constituency, to support residents and businesses. A number of residents have contacted me about the flooding, and it has had a negative impact on quite a new development.

I finish by wishing you a happy Easter, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also take this opportunity to wish the cleaners who clean our offices on the parliamentary estate, our police officers, our catering staff, everyone who works here and, of course, Members' staff a very happy Easter.

5.39 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I rise to talk about South West Water and Pennon Group. I speak today for anyone in Devon and Cornwall who has ever had to walk past a polluted stream, stay out of the sea when visiting a beach, or stare at a water bill and wonder, "How did we end up here?" South West Water, like its parent company, Pennon, has become a byword in the south-west for failure, aloofness and even arrogance. In 2024, the company dumped sewage into our rivers and seas for over 540,000 hours. These spills are supposed to happen only in exceptional circumstances; in reality, this has been regarded as a licence to pollute.

If that were not enough, South West Water is now trying to flush out our constituents' wallets, issuing bill rises of over 50% in some cases. I should say that Ofwat ruled last December that bills can rise by 36% on average over five years, before inflation. However, that 36% rise is permitted on average bills, and many bills for residents in Devon have risen by much more.

Stuart Thompson, who lives near Aylesbeare, has found that, even though he is not connected to South West Water's sewerage system, his annual bill is now £761, even though last year it was just £486. That is a jump of over 56%. Stuart is a cancer patient, and his immune system is weakened from treatment. To protect himself, he boils his water before drinking it, because he is conscious that South West Water had an outbreak of the *Cryptosporidium* parasite last year. One can understand his caution, given his weakened immunity.

When Stuart tried to ring South West Water, he found himself 178th in the queue, and that is not a one-off. Graham Long, who lives in the Blackdown hills near Honiton, also tried ringing South West Water. Like Stuart, Graham found on the first occasion that he was 106th in the queue. On another occasion he was 94th, when he tried at a quieter time he was 87th, and on a day that was quieter still he was 74th in the queue. That is absolutely crazy from a water company hiking people's bills in some instances by 56%.

Louise Thompson from Sidmouth contacted me in disbelief about her instalments. She did get through to South West Water, and when she raised her concern about her higher bill, she was offered a reduction to £49 a month, rather than the £70.32 for which she had been billed. However, she worked out that this was because the instalments would be spread over 12 months rather than 10, so it was a cloak for no bill reduction whatsoever. Yet, since privatisation, this company has paid out more than £4.5 billion in shareholder dividends.

South West Water is proposing to spend £3.2 billion on infrastructure improvements, but the crying shame is that it has failed to invest in its infrastructure in years gone by. This week, we have learned that the PR side of the business is going to be joined by none other than the former MP for East Devon, Simon Jupp. He is going to speak for South West Water, having attacked it while he was a Member of Parliament.

5.43 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this Easter recess debate, to pay tribute to Sir David and to bring to the attention of the House a movement that has been spreading across cities and communities all over the world. I speak, of course, of yarn bombing.

Yarn bombing is an urban art form that involves decorating objects in public places with knitted or crocheted yarn. [*Interruption.*] The vandalism! It is a way of transforming everyday places into something colourful, creative and alive, and it has taken my constituency of Carlisle by storm in the last 18 months. The term "bombing" comes from traditional graffiti culture, where street artists would leave their mark in public places. However, unlike spray paint, yarn bombing is softer, as it is about creating a sense of warmth and whimsy in an often difficult and challenging world. At a time when we are all too often disconnected from one another by screens and technology, yarn bombing brings a sense of connection. It is an invitation to stop, notice and engage, and it can be playful, light-hearted and fun.

In Carlisle, that light-hearted fun started with three ladies who began meeting in their local community centre. The following weeks and months saw the group grow in number. Their first project, in May last year,

[Ms Julie Minns]

was the yarn bombing of Mayor's Drive in Bitts Park, in the centre of Carlisle, for an attraction as part of Carlisle Matters's Show and Tell event, which was attended by more than 4,500 members of the public.

Next, The Lanes shopping centre, in the city centre, asked the yarn bombers whether they would crochet a large-scale poppy display to celebrate Remembrance Sunday. The resulting publicity, including that generated by our brilliant community radio station CRFM, prompted an outpouring of support, leaving Carlisle Matters with far more poppies than the shopping centre could possibly display—and so it was that the steps of the old town hall and the ancient market cross came to be yarn bombed. The yarn bombers are currently working their fingers to the bone creating yarn bunting and flowers in bright colours to decorate the pedestrianised area of our city centre when it reopens after a multi-million pound transformation in a few months' time.

However, yarn bombing is about more than beautiful crocheted creations; it is a genuinely inclusive community activity. One elderly lady told Carlisle Matters that her husband had recently passed away, but that yarn bombing had given her a purpose again. Even I, who cannot successfully sew on a button, have dabbled—and, may I say, have successfully produced a pom-pom. Next time you pass a tree wrapped in brightly coloured yarn or a lamp post draped in knitted flowers, Madam Deputy Speaker, take a moment to appreciate the creativity, the effort and the message behind it.

Finally, on the subject of meaning and message, I will take a moment to celebrate and thank our church leaders during this busy period of Lent and as they approach the celebration and hope of Easter. I give special thanks to the Bishop of Penrith, Robert Saner-Haigh, who, for more than 18 months now, has also been acting diocesan bishop of the diocese of Carlisle, and for whom Easter will therefore be doubly busy. I conclude by conveying my good wishes to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and all parliamentary staff for a joyful Easter.

5.47 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I will focus my remarks on Wylfa and this Government's approach towards nuclear energy. Ynys Môn has a long history associated with clean nuclear power, with two Magnox reactors constructed at Wylfa in the 1960s and coming online in 1971. By 2015, both reactors had reached the end of their operating life and were shut down. Despite promises of a new nuclear project at Wylfa, communities on Ynys Môn have been left waiting and waiting, with RWE and E.ON pulling out of developing a new project at Wylfa in 2012, followed by Hitachi in 2018.

The Prime Minister has recently said that the world has changed, and that

“It's not the job of governments to sit back and hope for the best, or simply manage the moment.”

In that spirit, I ask the Government to look seriously at developing the site at Wylfa. It would provide a reliable, clean source of power that could last for up to 80 years, strengthening our energy security at a time when the world is becoming more uncertain. It is estimated that a large reactor project would create 10,000 jobs during

construction in north Wales and 900 long-term jobs during operation—this is in an area of Wales with some of the lowest wages. If the Government are serious about generating growth, they must surely see that developing a site at Wylfa is a no-brainer.

The Government have changed their approach to the planning system for nuclear projects. While I recognise the Government's aim of changing the planning system to make it easier for more sites to host nuclear power, that should not come at the expense of progressing with development at Wylfa. The removal of the preferred site, including Wylfa, in the Government's nuclear planning policy will likely lead to confusion for developers about where they should prioritise their investments. I urge the Government to reinstate Wylfa as a preferred site in the national policy statement for nuclear energy generation.

We also have little clarity from the Government about the role of Great British Energy in supporting nuclear energy at Wylfa. I had tabled an amendment to the Great British Energy Bill to ensure that nuclear development would be at the heart of GBE, but that was rejected by the Government.

As the head of Rolls-Royce has said, the UK Government run the risk of ensuring that critical supply chains to support the development of small nuclear reactors will be built elsewhere if they fail to select the companies to build them by the end of June. The Government say that they will announce plans for the small modular reactors soon, but when exactly will that be? The people of Ynys Môn have had their futures put on hold for too long by successive Westminster Governments. This Government need to make a decision on Wylfa and to do so quickly.

5.50 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this Easter Adjournment debate, and I wish everyone a happy Easter and a restful break.

I rise to speak about the British Coal staff superannuation scheme and the need for the scheme's investment reserve to be returned to its investors as soon as possible. In Cannock Chase, we are rightly proud of our rich mining heritage. That legacy has shaped our communities with generations of hard-working men and women who dedicated their lives to the industry that defined our area for seven centuries.

Following privatisation, many British Coal employees were part of either the mineworkers' pension scheme or the British Coal staff superannuation scheme. I commend the Government for delivering the long-overdue justice for MPS members in the first Labour Budget for 15 years, transferring the £1.5 billion investment reserve. I have spoken to some of the 1,400 MPS members in my constituency since the Government kept their manifesto promise, and they are very grateful for the 32% boost to their pension. However, that has led to members of the BCSSS calling for similar action to be taken on their pension scheme. There are 530 members and dependents of the BCSSS in my constituency, who, like their MPS counterparts, do not receive substantial pensions. Also like the MPS, the BCSSS has returned billions to the Treasury—more than enough to guarantee the scheme for its life. Surplus sharing was ended after an agreement between the trustees and the Government of the day and since then all surpluses are due to go to the Treasury.

However, the fundamentals are the same with a substantial investment reserve, which could boost members' pensions and dependents' incomes.

Very sadly, this is an urgent matter. Last year, more than 2,400 members of the BCSSS passed away, so it is not hard to see why so many members fear that they will not be able to see this money in their lifetimes. These pensioners dedicated their working lives to powering our country, and it is vital that they receive the thanks that such a demanding and important role requires.

This is a particular passion of those of us representing coalfield constituents, where the vast majority of the 45,000 BCSSS members live. I wish to pay tribute to many hon. Members for their steadfast campaigning on this matter. We know that, just as it has for the MPS, a return of the BCSSS investment reserve would provide a welcome boost for businesses in our communities, which have been hammered harder than most in recent years. I hope that, in the very near future, we can secure an agreement with the BCSSS trustees, who also deserve credit for their work on this and for fostering a transparent and positive relationship with the members that they serve. Transferring the final £2.3 billion payment from the reserve will ensure fairer pensions for everyone who contributed to the coal industry, whether that be underground, in the offices or in the canteens.

It is also worth flagging the gender inequality angle because, unlike the MPS, a large proportion of BCSSS members are women as it was the default pension scheme for clerical and catering staff, who do not always get the recognition that they deserve for the huge contribution they made to such a critical industry. Reflecting the shameful reality faced by women for decades, many were paid significantly less than their male colleagues and now they are campaigning hard for some restitution for that historic injustice with the return of their scheme's investment reserve.

I fully understand that the issue is not as simple as duplicating what has been done for the MPS, given that the schemes were set up differently, and I pay tribute to the work of the Minister of State for Industry, who has confirmed that BCSSS proposals will be considered. Having raised this matter today, I hope that an agreement can be reached in a timely manner. Given that we are losing an average of six BCSSS members every day, the sooner we can get this done, the more members of our community can see and feel justice.

5.54 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this Easter Adjournment debate. I would like to highlight an issue that continues to fill my inbox and, I am sure, the inboxes of colleagues across the House: dentistry.

I hear from residents on an almost-daily basis about the challenges they face in accessing NHS dentistry. I hear stories of people who have been on a waiting list for years but still have not seen an NHS dentist, and people who are in pain but are unable to access treatment. I hear about pensioners being quoted thousands of pounds for a few fillings, and pensioners questioning why NHS dental treatment is not available to them despite their having paid national insurance contributions for most of their lives. I hear of children who need braces that their parents cannot afford, and children with special educational needs who need support with oral hygiene.

Unfortunately, there is very little reassurance that I can give. Nine months after the general election, we are still waiting for meaningful progress to be made on this issue, despite Labour's manifesto promise to tackle the immediate crisis. Statistics from last month show that 98.6% of people in the south-west who tried to make an NHS dental appointment in the last 28 days were unsuccessful. In Devon, there are simply not enough NHS dentists. No practices in my constituency are taking on new NHS patients. One practice was taken over by a new owner last June and still only has one dentist despite inheriting the patient list of three dentists.

The Government's promise to roll out 700,000 extra urgent dental appointments is welcome, but it is not a simple solution. NHS Devon is being asked to provide 25,000 more urgent care appointments than last year. While we agree that those appointments are much needed, it will be a huge challenge for the integrated care board to deliver. NHS Devon has already increased the minimum unit of dental activity rate beyond the nationally mandated uplift figure and invested £276,000 into the golden hello scheme to attract dentists to the area. However, it tells me that clear feedback from providers shows that the current remuneration is not sufficient to sustain baseline activity, let alone incentivise additional activity.

There are concerns over the impact on routine dental activity and preventive care because of the higher rate being paid for urgent care appointments. One local dentist told me that the lack of NHS workers is down to not just money but the environment they work in. Private dentists can give more dedicated attention to patients, have to deal with less red tape and might experience a better work-life balance. However, the vast majority of NHS dentists are self-employed, so even those carrying out NHS work are at risk of litigation. If the risks are the same but the rewards are less, why would a dentist choose to carry out NHS work rather than private work? We need to look at how we can change the system to make NHS work more attractive.

I have written to the Minister for Care asking what consideration has been given to allowing ICBs to use discretion when providing funding to projects that fall outside of contractual regulations, but I am yet to receive a response. I have also asked what plans are in place to allow ICBs to modify underperforming contracts, as I understand that the current system does not allow them to make changes. With an underspend of around £12 million in Devon, flexibility to change contracts is key. I am yet to receive a response on that either.

Private dental care is unaffordable for many people. The cost of living crisis, coupled with recent welfare cuts under this Government, is only worsening outcomes. If we do not act now, the situation will continue to worsen and the implications will be even more widespread. Oral health is crucial, and oral health for children is even more important. We cannot wait any longer for this situation to be resolved.

5.58 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I hope that in future when it gets to Easter recess you will be able to fly away with me to Doncaster Sheffield airport once it is reopened.

[Lee Pitcher]

For now, let me shine a light on some of the amazing work being done within my community, starting with sports. I am really lucky to have some amazing football clubs that inspire young children in my local area. We have Rossington football club, Epworth Colts, Bawtry juniors, Dunscroft Warriors, Hayfield football club, Club Thorne Colliery and Finningley Harriers junior club. They all provide opportunities for children to develop their skills and build lifelong friendships.

It is not just football clubs that we have. In Thorne, we have the Thornensians Rugby Union football club, which has long been a pillar for the local sporting community. It was founded in 1939, but the club did not play its first game until 1945 due to the war. Reg Clayton, its founding member, was there for the very first match. At 100 years old, he is still a supporter today. It is a club built on heritage and heart, and every Sunday it proudly hosts over 100 boys and girls playing rugby, nurturing the next generation and keeping the community spirit alive. I am sure that Reg is very proud.

On the Isle of Axholme, we are home to a cricket league that dates back to 1936, when West Butterwick took home the trophy. That heritage still lives on in the clubs that take to the field every summer, week in, week out, supported by the volunteers, to whom I pay homage.

Across our communities, we are fortunate to have remarkable individuals and organisations working tirelessly to support those in need. Local hero Vera Owen—she was also our midwife, as I tell my young children—is one of them. Week in, week out, she collects surplus food from supermarkets for the food bank and leads on fundraising efforts, all without asking for recognition. Today, we are giving her that recognition. Similarly, Mary Macmillan at Doncaster food bank runs a campaign to provide basic facilities such as showers, affordable laundry services and cooking amenities, not just for those facing homelessness—that is really important to me because, as you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was homeless for a period as a child—but for families in temporary accommodation and the wider vulnerable community.

I will take a moment to recognise the tireless work of our local councillors. In Thorne and Moorends, Mark Houlbrook, Susan Durant and Joe Blackham have delivered real results for the community. They fought to keep Thorne South station open after the pandemic, and they offer lots of wonderful local services for our residents; they have also been doing work on the Thorne leisure centre. In Rossington, Bawtry and Austerfield, Ken Guest, Bob Anderson and Rachael Blake have shown what committed, community-focused representation looks like. Over the last four years, they have secured vital road safety measures, including a zebra crossing at Bawtry and a pelican crossing at Rossington, and have made sure that it is affordable for everybody to swim with a £1 swim scheme.

Finally, our Hatfield councillors Glynis Smith and Linda Curran have worked with real dedication to support our local people and strengthen community life. They have backed a range of grassroots initiatives and are making a real difference, including through their support for the Hatfield library, which has been run by brilliant volunteers like Sue Lowndes for over a decade. Children's events are held there every school

holiday, free of charge. They have also helped to fund Dunscroft Together, which runs a youth club, a safe and welcoming place for young people. They have also hosted celebrations for Dunsville community centre's 50th anniversary. Lots goes on there, including the Mark Guest Taekwondo school.

Overall, I want to thank those incredible community champions for everything they do, day in, day out. Their dedication, compassion and tireless efforts remind us just how special our constituency is, and how strong we are when we come together to support one another. Have a very happy Easter.

6.2 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in a debate that pays tribute to the memory of Sir David Amess. Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), I want to raise an issue that is absolutely filling my email inbox: the collapse of NHS dentistry in Taunton and Wellington, and across Somerset—indeed, across the whole country.

In 2022, when I first did a survey on access to NHS dentists in Taunton and Wellington, over half the respondents reported that they were unable to access an NHS dentist. Since then, things have got worse and worse. In the months since the general election last year, I have received hundreds of emails about the issue. It feels like a tidal wave of distress. People are struggling with pain, facing unaffordable bills for private treatment, or simply giving up on dental care altogether.

The Government's announcement of 700,000 extra dental appointments is of course welcome, but as the British Dental Association has pointed out, that amounts to no more than about two extra appointments per NHS dentist per month—and that is only when there is an NHS dentist. In dental deserts like Somerset and my constituency, there are barely any NHS dentists left, so that announcement will not have the effect that we would all like. That is particularly so because the Government's figures are a real underestimate of the position in Taunton and Wellington. In February, the Government said that one in four people were unable to see an NHS dentist, but as I said, the survey that I carried out in 2022 showed that just over one in two in my constituency could not access NHS dentists, and I am sure that the proportion who cannot access an NHS dentist has only increased.

Today I launched a new survey of constituents, schools and local dental practices to expose the real cost. As a result of the collapse in dental services, people—children and eligible adults—are paying for what should be free treatment. The survey was launched at about two o'clock this afternoon, and I am grateful for the fact that we are allowed mobiles in the Chamber, because I was told at the beginning of the debate that there were 50 responses to the survey, but during it, there have been another 16. The issue has clearly hit a nerve, and it really affects people in my constituency. One constituent told me that he had to spend more than £1,000 to get treatment for his child's dental needs. Treatment for all children should be free on the NHS, but they are not getting it. The entitlement means nothing if there is no NHS dentist to go to.

Too many in our area face the choice of paying up or living in pain. Bills often run into hundreds of pounds, which people can ill afford, given the effects of recent months on the cost of living. This is not just about teeth;

it is about people's dignity, their health, and the way they feel about their lives and themselves. I urge the Government not to underestimate the scale of the problem, particularly in areas such as Somerset. We need urgent reform and urgent action. The broken dental contract really needs to be renegotiated, and we need a proper incentive to bring dentists back into the NHS. I hope the Government will look closely at the evidence that my constituents are sending in, and will work with me and others to make the situation better. With that, as we look forward to eating lots of chocolate and being in need of a great many more dental appointments, I wish all my colleagues across the House, and the staff, security and police officers who look after us so well, a very happy Easter.

6.6 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): With Easter approaching, thoughts often turn to eggs. My favourites are Cadbury Creme Eggs or possibly Smarties ones, but the eggs that I want to talk about this afternoon are those that chickens produce, and which are sold in our supermarkets.

Although the majority of whole eggs sold in UK supermarkets are now from cage-free environments, shockingly, one in five hens still spends its life cramped in a cage. When battery cages were banned, in many places, so-called enriched cages were introduced to replace them. I have to say, however, that the word "enriched" is a bit of a misnomer. Yes, they are slightly better than the traditional battery cage—for example, they have to have a perch—but I think "enriched" makes it sound a bit like they are on a yoga retreat or something. The marketing people absolutely earned their wages that day. The reality is absolutely nothing of the sort. "Confinement cages" might be a better description; they are smaller than a piece of A4 paper and have minimal room for birds to spread their wings. They restrict natural behaviour; hens cannot properly dust-bathe or forage, and are all subject to frustration and stress.

I welcome the £22-million fund from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to transition to higher welfare standards for hens. However, I also worry about low-welfare imports that undercut our UK farmers, especially of powdered and liquid eggs, which are often found in products such as a quiche or a hot cross bun at this time of year, and which often come from countries with lower animal welfare standards.

Turning back to shell eggs, if hon. Members buy a dozen eggs and plan to tuck into a soft-boiled egg this Easter, I urge them to check where the eggs come from. They all have a code printed on their shell, and the first character will tell them where they are from. If the character is a three, it means that the bird was caged. Anyone can choose to vote with their feet, support our hen heroes, and make an eggs-traordinary difference.

Sticking briefly with the Easter theme, as the Easter getaway approaches, I want to give a shout-out to the UK coach sector, which is often the unsung hero of holiday travel. Every year, 23 million people travel by coach to visit attractions, attend events and explore our regions. Coach passengers spend £8.3 billion annually in local economies, supporting hotels, restaurants and tourism attractions. Given the climate emergency, it is important to note that a single coach can remove up to 50 cars from the road, cutting congestion and emissions.

I hope that Ministers in the Department for Transport will consider some of the things that the coach industry is asking for, such as being able to use bus lanes by default, more robust data from transport authorities on the coach sector, more drop-off, pick-up and parking facilities, and allowing the coach sector funding similar to the zero emission bus regional area funding we have had for the bus sector. It is, after all, a cracking industry.

I would like to say, in my remaining 30 seconds, that I think this will be a particularly good Easter, because the clocks have already changed, so we have plenty of daylight to celebrate it in. I end by wishing you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all hon. Members a very happy Easter.

6.10 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is great to speak in this Easter debate, and I would like to use this opportunity to thank a handful of fantastic organisations from across the constituency. It is really difficult to pick out a few from across Keighley, Ilkley, Silsden and the Worth Valley, an area that I am incredibly proud to represent.

I start with Joze school of dance. It is a fantastic dance organisation based in Ilkley, delivering performing arts training to young people. It has been going for 20 years, and I was lucky enough to watch its 20th anniversary performance last weekend. I want to say a huge thank you to Jo, who has dedicated 20 years of her life to providing a great deal of confidence to young people from not only Ilkley but the wider area, enabling young people to become much better at dancing, singing and choreography. There are two individuals I want to give a big shout-out to: Masie Swann, who was recognised as being a star performer, and Blythe Dale, who was winner of the "Heart of Joze school of dance" award last weekend.

Moving on to sports, I want to give huge congratulations to Silsden Association Football Club, who were this month crowned champions of the Northern Counties East premier football league after beating Pickering Town 2-1. This is an incredible achievement in what is the Cobbydalers' 120th anniversary year, and it means that for the first time a local club from our part of West Yorkshire will be playing just three divisions below the Football League—a remarkable feat. I confess that I cannot be a Cobbydaler because I am definitely still an off comed 'un when it comes to living in Silsden, but the whole town is incredibly proud. I wish to put on record my great thanks for the amount of effort that the team is putting into not only raising the profile of Silsden but supporting the many young people across Silsden.

I put on record a huge thank you to Keighley Albion, who have also made waves this year by reaching the National Conference League after a long absence of over 20 years. This is one of our famous rugby league teams. I know how much of a fan you are of rugby league, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I hope that you will join me in wishing Keighley Albion all the best in the months ahead. I also look forward to working with them in the forthcoming months to secure better sports facilities, because they have grown so much by supporting 450 children from across Keighley and the wider area. I want to work with them as strongly as I can to get a better sports facility for them and all the young people that they support across Keighley.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving a passionate speech about his constituency, and is demonstrating yet again why he is such a powerful champion for Keighley and Ilkley. Does he agree that the volunteers who run these groups are an important part of our community, and that the skills that they teach young people stay with them for the rest of their life?

Robbie Moore: Absolutely. That is why it is so important that all Members across the House support grassroots sporting organisations and the sporting facilities at their heart. They drive confidence in our young people, whatever sport it may be.

I also put on record my thanks to the Ilkley business awards committee, which, every year without fail, puts on an excellent business awards in Ilkley, recognising all those businesses across the LS29 postcode that go above and beyond. Such events showcase the brilliant independent businesses across our area. I thank in particular Julia Forrester, who leads the Ilkley business awards committee, for the continued work that she and the other committee members do to put Ilkley on the map.

Having been rated the best place to live in the United Kingdom back in 2022, Ilkley was officially rated by *The Sunday Times* as still the best place to live in the whole of the north of England. It is a very proud place and I am lucky to represent it.

Finally, in my remaining 30 seconds, I would like to give a huge shout-out to my incredibly brave younger sister, Becky. After an 18-month battle with breast cancer, she had her last chemotherapy treatment today, and prospects are looking good.

On that note, I wish all Members across the House, and all House staff, who do a great deal to look after us all, a very happy Easter.

6.15 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the Easter Adjournment debate. The matter that I would like to raise before we adjourn is the importance of the devolution and local government reform being spearheaded by the Government.

Labour's plan to simplify structures, cut duplication, reduce waste and slash costs, while giving local leaders the tools they need to deliver growth for their areas, raising living standards in every part of the country in a way that is directly accountable to residents, is welcome and long overdue. To understand why devolution and reorganisation are desperately needed, we need look no further than Conservative-led Derbyshire county council. Almost every step of the way, that council has failed to deliver for my residents in High Peak.

Derbyshire Conservatives have all but taken the council to bankruptcy. On their watch, Derbyshire has the ignominy of having been dubbed the pothole capital of the UK by the RAC. Children with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families, have been shamefully let down. Derbyshire county council's damning Ofsted report found widespread and systemic failings. Older people in our communities have been left distraught by plans to close our care homes and day care centres. Indeed, Queens Court day centre in Buxton was closed last week with no notice.

With such a record, it is no wonder that, in the immediate aftermath of the Government's announcement for local government reform, the Derbyshire Conservatives tried to cancel the local elections and put in a proposal for a council covering the whole of Derbyshire and its 800,000 residents. I am glad that the proposal was rejected by the Government, and that the council's plans to cancel the local elections in May were refused. Derbyshire Conservatives can run from the voters, but they cannot hide.

I say that High Peak is unique because it sits in the middle of three regions with huge economic potential, but rather than being an asset to our area, that position means that we have all too often been overlooked. The call from the Government to reorganise should have been met with creative thinking, through the lens of what is best for our area. I have listened to students in Glossop who go to college in Greater Manchester, and their families; to commuters in New Mills who want better transport links; to older people in Buxton whose Derbyshire identity is what matters most to them; and to the people in Hope valley who look to Sheffield for jobs and healthcare.

I am backing Labour-led High Peak borough council's plan for a north Derbyshire unitary authority, and the plan of East Midlands Mayor Claire Ward for a peak partnership that brings together the combined authorities of Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire and the East Midlands, which is in the interests of High Peak. I hope that, as both proposals are developed over the coming months, they will help us to address the unique, varied and economic public service needs of all our communities, including the Hope valley line, Snake pass, the extension of the Bee network, and better and fairer access to Greater Manchester and South Yorkshire hospitals and further education.

In the proposals for a north Derbyshire unitary authority and for the peak partnership of three Labour mayors, we have the building blocks to make life better for the residents of High Peak, with more integrated transport, jobs and investment, and improved access to healthcare and education. The crux of that reorganisation speaks to the heart of the Government's mission to drive economic growth and deliver opportunities for all.

6.19 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As a regular participant in these end-of-term debates, I usually speak about three or four different subjects, but today I want to return to an issue that I have raised on a number of occasions in the House over the last few weeks: the future of the steelworks at Scunthorpe.

The Scunthorpe site is the equivalent of 1,133 Wembley football pitches. It extends well beyond the bounds of Scunthorpe, into my constituency, and employs hundreds of my constituents and many more beyond. I have spent all my life living in the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area. Sadly, Cleethorpes is no longer part of my constituency, but I have gained a ward in Grimsby as a result of last year's reorganisation.

I am old enough to have witnessed the decline of Grimsby following the loss of its core industry: deep-sea fishing. Members across the House will have had similar experiences with towns that have lost their core industry, be it shipbuilding or mining, and it is a massive change.

It affects the heritage, the culture and the health of the local community. The increased burden of chronic illnesses, lower life expectancy, reduced productivity, increased healthcare costs and lower community cohesion are some of the issues that arise when a town loses its core industry.

I appeal yet again to the Government to show a sense of urgency. There is a strong likelihood that the furnaces will shut down in a few weeks' time, because the owner, Jingye, has cancelled the order for raw materials. If that happens and the furnaces go cold, just reinstating those furnaces will cost £250 million. We do not want to get into that situation. I know the Government do not want Scunthorpe to lose the steelworks on their watch. It is vital for the nation's security, apart from anything else. Unless action is taken in the very near future, I am afraid 2,700 direct job losses could occur, and there would be thousands more in the supply chain.

John Lamont: Yet again, my hon. Friend is demonstrating what a powerful champion he is for his constituency. Does he share my concern that this is about more than just jobs, because if we lose the ability to produce our own steel, that is a national security concern?

Martin Vickers: Absolutely. I have spoken with a number of people involved in the military, and they are very concerned about the future. Do we, as a still significant manufacturing nation, want to lose the capacity to produce our own steel and become the only G7 country in that position?

North Lincolnshire council, ably led by Councillor Rob Waltham, who has been in China to meet the current owner of Scunthorpe steelworks, has put together contingency plans including the creation of an AI growth zone and a green growth zone. Those projects, if allowed to continue, could result in 10,000 new construction jobs and 1,200 new jobs on site and safeguard 4,000 in the supply chain. Moreover, the AI growth zone could lead to £15 billion in private business investment. Those are all vital to northern Lincolnshire, irrespective of what may happen to the steelworks.

The Humber region more widely is very significant for a whole host of energy projects involving hydrogen, sustainable aviation fuel, carbon capture and the like. It is vital for the Government to recognise that they must support these new projects, irrespective of whether there are job losses in the steel sector.

I close by urging the Government to show a real sense of urgency on this. As I said in my urgent question yesterday, the Government have to nationalise the industry, to give it breathing space, to attract new private sector investment and to keep the jobs of those thousands of people. Happy Easter to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all the staff and Members.

6.24 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): A few weeks ago my barber, Ev, sent me a DM. It was a video from three lads in Ilkeston in my constituency, and it was going viral. Owen, Harrison and Roy were talking about how life was for them as teenage boys in 2025. They talked about not having anything to do, about the youth clubs having shut down, and about getting in trouble with the police because they did not have anything to do. The boys talked about troubles at home. They had lost a mum, they talked about tough childhoods, and about

how they support each other through their lives. They talked about how they just wanted to see each other succeed, and the last line of the video from one of them was

“these will be my boys forever.”

Owen, Harrison and Roy reminded me of my own time growing up, and of my own boys. Throughout my time in school, and indeed well into my mid-20s, I took no interest in politics, because I felt it was not something I had a stake in. What I did care about, though, was the group of friends I grew up with. I first properly met my boys at a party when I was 16, at Joe's house in north Cardiff. I was sat awkwardly in a corner, too uncool to talk to anyone beyond the one or two people I came along with, and generally afraid of the significantly more socially adept groups of teenagers around me. As I got to know them, though, and as I became one of them, I felt that I had finally found a tribe—young men with shared interests in heavy music, in Skate 3, and in making fun of each other as often and as brutally as possible. As we grew, we did all the things that young men do: we one-upped each other, we drank, we argued—we were immortal.

One day, everything changed. On Wednesday 10 October 2018, Andrew sent a message to our group chat. It started:

“Boys, I think it's time you should know. Tom was involved in a very bad accident at work yesterday. He got trapped under a camper van. He's not doing so well, he's in intensive care currently after having surgery last night.”

Tom—Tomas Shackson—worked with his dad in their autobody business, and he had a terrible accident indeed. Later that week, Tom died of his injuries.

In many ways, Tom's death caused us all to reassess everything. We found ourselves facing our own mortality and the unexpected, irreplaceable loss of someone who we had called a brother for most of our lives up until that point. The way we interacted with each other changed, our interpersonal relationships deepened, and we suddenly had to be there for each other in ways that we hadn't even considered before. We started talking about our own happiness, and I felt that we collectively opened up about our own struggles, and things that our prior macho bravado had stopped us from sharing previously. To this day, I have a note pinned to my kitchen wall from Dan, which he sent me in the post after Tom's accident. It says:

“Here if you need anything, brother.”

None of the boys had ever even sent me any post before, but every time I see it, it reminds me that Dan, and all my boys, are indeed here for me, anytime I need them.

In the years since Tom's death, our once bravado-fuelled group has evolved. We learned to talk about our issues, and share and develop a new masculinity, based on mutual support and love for each other. I tell my friends I love them every time I see them, and we have grown to become well-rounded adults, with partners, wives, children and families that we know Tom would be very proud of. I give a special shout-out to Joe today, who this past weekend, after 15 years of graft, became a consultant hand surgeon. We are incredibly proud of him.

All of that is why I think it is so important for those of us who have been on such a journey to share our stories with boys, like Owen, Harrison and Roy, who are growing up today. With the rise of increasingly toxic

[Adam Thompson]

online culture, and with so much social media encouraging boys to take increasingly hateful stances, spreading vile misogyny and the lie that women and girls are somehow beneath them, it is incumbent on us all to share the positives that can be gained by opening up and being there for each other, as boys and as men, and letting each other know that we are here for one another, whenever we need it.

6.28 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I wish briefly to cover three things in this debate. First, the world as we know it has changed drastically in the nine months since the general election. To our constituents, those threats can sometimes feel abstract and distant, but we know that it is our constituents who will feel the pain in their pockets, and it is probably those who have the least who will be rocked most by the destruction and chaos we see all around us.

Some of those threats have meant that difficult decisions have had to be taken, including the reduction in overseas aid to fund necessary increases in defence spending over this Parliament and the next. I remain of the opinion that even those increases might not be enough to counter the new security threats that we face. If this period is to be remembered by history as one of instability and global shifts, let it also be remembered as a time when we endeavoured to build a new foundation that helped future generations to succeed and build a better world.

Our response to those threats must be to invest in our young people and their aspirations, opportunities and skills. Not only will necessary increases in defence spending support thousands of jobs, but as necessity is the mother of invention, the new conditions create an unmissable opportunity for investment in innovative engineering and high-tech skills that can be applied in other sectors. In my constituency, those opportunities are widespread, whether at the port of Rosyth, which is increasingly becoming a hub for renewables, or at the hoped for redevelopment of the Longannet generating station.

My second point follows from a consideration of that future: the imperative to invest in skills. We must invest in skills for the long term by working better with further education establishments, such as Fife college in my constituency, and building better links with businesses. Sadly, in Scotland that link with businesses is lacking, and a stalled skills agenda is failing our talented and ambitious young people. Businesses of all sizes in my constituency have told me that they are increasingly using, or considering using, City & Guilds or similar training modules in England, and not even bothering to have discussions with the Scottish Qualifications Authority, such is the long, laborious and bureaucratic process. The Scottish National party's abject failure on skills will have long-term implications for young people across the country.

If we are to make the future truly one for the next generation, we must support those young people to build that future. That firstly means stopping demonising young people, who have struggled with more once-in-a-lifetime crises by this stage of their lives than any other generation, from credit crunches and pandemics to political instability and uncertainty at home and around the world. They have seen services and support for them eradicated,

chances to get on the housing ladder vanish, and secure long-term employment become a pipe dream, and all while wealth sits with the generations of their parents and grandparents.

This Parliament must not continue the trend of giving only to the older generations. Without engaging and energising younger people, there will be no money left by the time people of my age hope to retire. Young people are not asking for mango sorbet and Malbec, but for respect and understanding, and that is what we should be giving them. Antisocial behaviour and crime are not the preserve of the young; alcohol and drug misuse is rising in people of older generations, not among younger people; and tolerance of others is much higher among younger people than among people my age and older, as everyone in this House will attest from our encounters on social media and our dealings with some constituents.

As we enter the recess, we should remember that we are still very much in the early stages of this Parliament, and yet we have already seen unprecedented turmoil and change that is shaping our future. While much of that might be outside the control of the Government, it is vital that our response is to enshrine in place the right foundations, built with confidence and commitment, for the future of young people and our country, because the two are indivisible. If we do not leave this place in a better condition for those who follow us, then all that we strive for is, after all, for naught.

6.32 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I associate myself with the warm words about Sir David Amess. It is a privilege to speak in my first Easter recess debate, although this is not my first time in this place—in fact, it is my 101st.

I want to say a huge thank you for the warm and welcome reception that I have received across my constituency. As MPs, visibility is vital if we are truly to represent the people who put us here, as well as those who did not. We need to understand the issues that our constituents face and the challenges that they need help with, and we can only do that when we are present. I welcome the way that my constituents have challenged me and interacted with me at my surgeries, coffee mornings and “pint with your MP” events. Since July, my team and I have helped over 2,000 people in Portsmouth.

As we approach Easter, one pressing issue that my constituents are about to face is a crunch in their household budgets, with a huge rise of nearly 50% in Southern Water bills, which are projected to rise on average by around £94 by 2030. That huge hike will hit everyone, but it will hit low-income households the hardest, and many distressed constituents have contacted me. Southern Water offers a social tariff, the “essentials tariff”, that gives a 45% reduction to eligible customers, but if bills are to rise by 50%, that reduction is effectively wiped out. Clean, safe water is not a luxury, yet Southern Water is asking people to pay more, while providing a less reliable service.

It is not just households that are affected, but businesses. For example, South Coast Wakepark in Hilsea, which is a great local business, has lost 88 consecutive trading days through poor water quality. In addition to the continued dumping of sewage into our seas and the repeated

flooding, that is affecting our businesses. We cannot accept a system in which customers are footing the bill for decades of under-investment while water company executives pocket millions in bonuses.

I call for an urgent expansion and deepening of social tariffs. We need clear and proactive help for those who are struggling to pay, easily accessible compensation schemes for businesses, and full transparency on how the increase in bills is being spent. We need a concrete plan to tackle sewage dumping, fix leaking infrastructure and reverse years of environmental neglect. Southern Water has one of the worst records on pollution in this country. My constituents are rightly asking why we should pay for more when we are getting so much less. The people of Portsmouth deserve so much more.

As I have said, every day I get to see amazing things and to meet amazing people, charities, businesses and individuals across my city, and I get to bring their stories, concerns, challenges and celebrations here to help to find solutions and improve our city. It remains extremely humbling and a huge privilege. As one of the final speakers today, I wish all those in this House and across my constituency a very happy Easter. I look forward to seeing many of them and my family during the next few weeks. I take this opportunity to wish Archie Whitfield the very best of luck. He is running to every single premier league ground and doing the London marathon the next day in memory of his dad, Dave Whitfield, to raise money for the Brain Charity. Finally, I give huge thanks to all the wonderful churches and the two cathedrals in my city, which will continue to serve our community during the Easter period.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

6.36 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in this Easter Adjournment debate. I always find that these end-of-term debates really enlighten me about fellow Members of the House, their constituencies and the issues that are important to their constituents.

Before I talk about something close to my own constituency and heart, I associate myself with the contribution of the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) and the thanks that she gave to Surrey police. My own borough team in Guildford has been fantastic, just as hers has been, in supporting our town centre by dealing with antisocial behaviour. I note the absolutely cracking contribution and egg-cellent Easter puns from the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer). I will stop there with the Easter puns and move on to my constituency.

I will use my time to highlight an issue in my constituency that has both national and local significance. I hope that action on the issue will not just resolve it in Guildford, but help to drive long-term change in the way we support charities and businesses during multi-year infrastructure projects.

Many Members will be aware of the extensive redevelopment works taking place at junction 10 of the M25, near the Royal Horticultural Society garden at Wisley. The redevelopment works started in November 2022 and were due to finish in summer 2025, but sadly it has been confirmed recently that that will not be the case; they will finish in approximately spring 2026.

That is four years of disruption for local residents and businesses. Ultimately, the project should improve the junction, but—it is a very big “but”—there have been serious consequences for RHS Wisley and our much-loved local café, Ockham Bites, alongside frustration and disruption for local residents in villages around the junction and everyone who has had to travel through it.

While the two places are very different in scale, both have seen a significant loss. Ockham Bites is losing £600 a day, and RHS Wisley predicts that by the end of the project it will have lost £11 million. These financial losses were highlighted in the early days of the project but dismissed on the basis that current legislation compensates only on the value of property, not for loss of business. For RHS Wisley, the loss has had far-reaching consequences. Plans for new arboretums have been delayed, funding for scientific research has been reduced and community outreach programmes have been scaled back. The impact goes beyond my constituency and the garden itself through to the communities around Guildford and other RHS sites across the country. They are being forced to consider cuts to training opportunities, with a projected 10% reduction in workplace student horticulturalist positions over the next two years.

I am sure that Members of the House will be very sad to hear all those things about RHS Wisley. I know that residents in my constituency, as well as people across the country, feel strongly about this issue. A petition that is currently live has 92,000 signatures, and that number keeps increasing. I pause to thank my colleague Baroness Benjamin, who has been highlighting this matter in the other place, for the answers she has gained from Members of the House of Lords on the issues surrounding the problem at RHS Wisley. Will the hon. Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen) encourage the Transport Secretary to respond to my request to meet me and representatives of RHS Wisley?

Returning to Ockham Bites and its fantastic cakes and tea, it has suffered big financial losses for a small business. There have also been problems with water, and all those things combined have forced the owner to make serious personal and professional adjustments, including relocating their home and dealing with heightened stress levels. These two businesses' stories are of very different scales, but they highlight a serious flaw in current legislation. We should not be leaving small businesses, charities and other organisations struggling financially and potentially failing due to multi-year infrastructure projects. Not only are those organisations the lifeblood of our communities; they are fundamental to our economic success. I hope that Ministers will agree to meet me and work to find a way to support those businesses, and commit to reviewing the legislation to ensure that their stories are not repeated and that future multi-year infrastructure projects are delivered without leaving key parts of our local economy and community behind.

I want to close on a positive note in this afternoon's fantastic debate by giving a cheeky little encouragement to everyone in the Chamber, if they have not yet experienced RHS Wisley or their local RHS garden, to please go and enjoy them during the Easter recess. I also echo my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) in encouraging Members and the public, when enjoying the great outdoors, to be fire safe. Finally, I hope that all Members of this House and all

[Zöe Franklin]

the staff, security and police have a restorative Easter, and I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for leading the debate.

6.41 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): It is an honour to respond to this debate on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition. Having spent just over a year and a half in the Government Whips Office before the election, during which time the longest speech I was able to make in this Chamber was probably to move that this House do now adjourn, today is a chance to catch up on lost time.

Several Members have paid kind tributes to our late and much-missed former colleague Sir David Amess, who of course always lit up these occasions with his wit, charm and good humour. As I say, he is hugely missed, and our thoughts continue to be with his family. In his absence, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, did a good job of opening the debate and running through a number of the issues that are dear to his constituents. He has furthered his reputation as a champion—a doughty champion, of course; if I do not add the “doughty”, it will not make the Google search—of local transport connections and step-free access at stations. Of course, he can always be relied on to give us a lift. My hon. Friend mentioned his experience at the Glebe school, where he was covered in powder. Having caught a little bit of the highlights of the new series of “Celebrity Big Brother”, I do not know whether they are currently making their services available to our former colleague from Lichfield.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East also alluded to his love of Tottenham Hotspur football club, although it was not clear whether that was a declaration of an interest, a confession or a plea in mitigation. In any event, what were the chances that he would be followed immediately by the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland), whose local team actually has won silverware—not just this century, but this season? The hon. Member spoke about the value of grassroots sports clubs to their communities, a view that I think is shared across the Chamber. He also spoke about his dedication to public duty in sampling local beer. Having been on the armed forces parliamentary scheme with him and visited a number of military bases, I know that that is a public duty that he takes most seriously, and not just when in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) spoke about the wonderful Safer Redhill initiative—a fantastic initiative from an excellent police and crime commissioner working together with the local charity sector and local organisations. The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) spoke about the negative impact that gambling establishments can have on town centres, which Members from all parts of the House will be able to identify with.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) told us that Dorset was burning, particularly at Upton heath. Whether it is through carelessness or arson, these fires cause enormous damage, as well as impacting on public services. I am a little more wary than she is about reaching for a ban, but clearly people

need to be accountable for their actions. The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) spoke about bank branch closures and fair funding for schools. As a newly Staffordshire Member of Parliament since the boundary changes, I know that a lot of my schools in South Staffordshire will be sympathetic with that issue.

The hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) spoke about yarn bombing, which is a fantastic phenomenon that we see in so many of our villages. It is not quite in my constituency, but I saw a knitted post box topper of George the station cat just outside Stourbridge Junction station as I was coming through at the weekend. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) is continuing the excellent work done by her predecessor to fight for the Wylfa nuclear power station. As she says, it should be a no-brainer, and it has to be a core part of our clean energy mix going forward. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) spoke about mineworkers' pensions, which are obviously an issue of concern for many in traditional mining areas such as Staffordshire.

An issue that probably goes even more widely across the country is NHS dental treatment, which the hon. Members for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) raised. As they said, with Easter coming up, things might be getting slightly worse, but routine and urgent dental care can be too hard to access in many parts of the country. This time last year, the previous Government announced a plan to try to do something about that, with £200 million of funding for 2.5 million more NHS dentist appointments, new patient payments and one-off payments to tackle dental blackspots. We need the Government to continue that work and to step up and make sure that all our constituents can receive the care they need.

The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) spoke about community sports clubs, but also the local heroes we are all so proud of in our own constituencies. What is the best part of being a Member of Parliament? I think it is the chance to meet some of these people whose work often goes unacknowledged and to make sure that they get, if not the recognition they deserve, at least an element of recognition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) made a fantastic contribution about the work done by local dance schools, which is important. For a lot of young people growing up, access to dance schools is not just for people who are joining the Royal Ballet. For boys and girls in every constituency, it helps with physical development as well as developing social skills. He also spoke of his own sports clubs, Silsden AFC and Keighley Albion rugby league football club.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) spoke passionately about the advantages of smaller, more localised unitary authorities over county-wide super councils. I hope the Government show the flexibility to move below their 500,000 threshold where appropriate. My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) spoke about the social as well as the economic impact when an area loses its core industry. We hope that the Government will show flexibility on net zero to support the workers of Scunthorpe.

I would like to refer to every speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, but sadly I do not have time to do so. Let me end by wishing you, and Members of the House and the House staff, a very blessed, happy and peaceful Easter recess.

6.49 pm

Gen Kitchen (Wellingborough and Rushden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate. I will try to do so very swiftly, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish you and all those listening a very happy Easter.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and thanking him and all the members of the Backbench Business Committee for the work that they do in bringing so many important issues to the notice of the House. Let me also pay tribute to the late Sir David Amess, whose plaque on the wall behind me is a reminder of his years of service to his Southend constituency, the House, and the traditions of this debate. While my time in the House did not coincide with his, my esteemed colleagues often share stories of his campaigns, and I have great admiration for the work that he did on animal welfare.

I thank all 20 of the Members who have spoken this afternoon about a range of subjects close to their hearts. I will do my best not to butcher the names of their constituencies, and to summarise their arguments. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East for his good-natured Easter puns, his busy parliamentary and constituency work, and his campaign for step-free access for Stanmore, his local underground station. Let me also say that we strongly support a sustained ceasefire and a two-state solution. I wish the hon. Gentleman well personally for Passover.

I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) a happy birthday. I thank him for telling us all about Spennymoor Town football club, and congratulate the team on its win and on being a top team for community work. His local community village hall is clearly something to which we should all aspire. I also congratulate the Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway on their bicentennial anniversary.

I was sorry to hear from the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) about the antisocial behaviour in Redhill. She and the Surrey police force are clearly doing a cracking job in cracking down on such behaviour, and she is also a champion for Safer Redhill and for the partnership work that she highlighted. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) spoke about gambling and its effects on families. Representatives of the organisation Gambling with Lives came to see me in my constituency of Wellingborough and Rushden to talk about the suicide of one of my constituents, so I know how hard families and others can take this.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) paid tribute to the fire crews who have worked tirelessly to tackle the blazes in her constituency. I was heartened to hear about the wildlife recovery organisations. I am glad to say that responsibility for the fire service has moved from the Home Office to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and I am sure that the hon. Lady will be doing a great deal more to question the Ministry about that. I was sad to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) that people will be denied access to cash as a result of the NatWest closure. I know that, as a local champion, he will be campaigning actively. However, I was delighted to hear about the schools that he has visited.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) is as delighted as I was to hear that the Water (Special Measures) Bill has received Royal Assent and is now an Act. As bills go up, Labour has legislated to ringfence investment in infrastructure, and when money is not spent we will force companies to give it back to customers. As for my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns), “yarn bombing” is not a term that I expected to hear in the Chamber today, but, like Carlisle, a town in my constituency called Irthlingborough has some of the best scenes and little models. My hon. Friend is welcome to visit it at any time so that we can compare them, but I am sad to say that I cannot crochet myself.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) is right to champion clean power and nuclear power. We have a clear clean power mission, and national infrastructure projects will be covered by the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which I hope she will scrutinise keenly. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), I welcome the £1.5 billion and 32% increase for the mineworkers’ pension scheme. I also pay tribute to those in the British Coal staff superannuation scheme who have passed away.

I can say to the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos)—who is my brother’s MP—that I too live in a dental desert, and I understand that rural communities are at a particular disadvantage. I will chase the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock) for a response.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher)—I hope I have said that correctly—spoke so fast that I was not able to write down all the clubs he mentioned, but I congratulate the 100-year-old rugby club and Vera Owen, who is definitely a community champion. I am sure that his support for the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will help those in housing crisis.

I was shocked to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) that one in five hens are still in cages, but I welcome the £22 million from DEFRA to improve hen welfare. The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) mentioned the Joze School of Dance, which I congratulate on its 20th anniversary. I also congratulate Maisie Swann and Blythe Dale. The business awards that the hon. Member spoke of—like my own, the NNBN—do wonders for independent businesses and small businesses, and I hope that his sister Becky has a bright future and a safe recovery.

I agree wholeheartedly with the impassioned speech by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) about local government. Wellingborough and Rushden shares many of the woes he described under a Tory unitary authority. I agree with the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) that steel is critical to secure the economy, and to a secure economy. We have committed £2.5 billion in our plan for steel, and the relevant Minister was at the Dispatch Box yesterday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) spoke about Owen, Roy and Harrison’s male friendship, and I pay tribute to them for their recent viral sensation. I also pay tribute to his friend Tomas Shackson. Friends like Dan and Joe are role

[Gen Kitchen]

models for young men everywhere, and I congratulate Joe on his achievement of becoming a consultant hand surgeon. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) about growing the skills agenda, particularly for Fife College, and about the SNP's abject failure on this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) represents the city that I was born in. It is impressive to hear how she has helped over 2,000 people in Portsmouth. I have touched on water previously, but I am sure that she welcomes the Water (Special Measures) Bill. I will give a special mention to Archie Whitfield for his fundraising efforts for the Brain Charity. I say to the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) that I will definitely chase the Secretary of State on her behalf.

As the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) knows, given that he is a fellow Whip, this is the first time I have spoken in the Chamber since last May, when I asked the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) about dentistry, an issue consistently raised in Wellingborough and Rushden. I had been elected only three months prior, and then I found myself out door-knocking again. A lot has changed since then, including the Members on this side of the Chamber, and the country has changed in the nine months that this Labour Government have been in power. Due to brevity, I will skip a lot of mentions of Wellingborough and Rushden, but I will try to get one or two more in.

A great Labour leader said:

“There is nothing in life which is inevitable. It's about the change you choose.”

Last year, the country chose to reject the narrative of inevitable decline and put its faith in Labour. There is still much more to be done, but we are delivering that change.

I express my gratitude to House staff, including the doorkeepers, cleaners, Clerks, catering, security, police, broadcasting, *Hansard*, visitor experience, our staff and constituency teams, and civil servants, who all come together to make this place function. Of course, my thanks go to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers. As we rise for Easter recess, I offer my best wishes to all here today and those listening at home. Have an enjoyable bank holiday weekend and—to those who celebrate—an excellent Easter, and lots of chocolate for everyone else.

6.58 pm

Bob Blackman: One of the beauties of these debates is that they allow Whips to speak in the Chamber, and I congratulate both Whips on their contributions. I thank all Members who have participated. I end by wishing a very happy Easter to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, all MPs, our staff, and the staff who do such a wonderful job at keeping us safe and doing all the work that is required. May they have a peaceful Easter and a good rest.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his wind-up. I add my thanks to all the House staff, including the Clerks, the doorkeepers and the security people who keep us safe.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Hospice Funding

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

7 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I start by wishing you a very happy Easter, Madam Deputy Speaker, and by thanking the Clerks, the Doorkeepers and the House staff who have drawn the short straw and have to be here for the Adjournment debate at the end of the day?

I am pleased to have secured this debate on hospice funding, a topic that I know is of concern to Members from across this House. Even on the last day of term, the subject still gives pause to so many. A hospice provides a beacon of hope to so many people in their darkest times. It provides the comfort and knowledge needed at a very difficult time, and without hospice support, many would be lost. That is why, across the country, we see volunteers giving up their time and their finances to support local hospices—because, primarily, many of them are charities, although they receive some funding from the NHS. Members from across this House, from every party, believe that hospices matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward. She is absolutely right to highlight the work of hospices, but also all those groups that raise money for hospices, so that they can do their work. For instance, the Elim church, which has a cancer group that holds a dinner or breakfast every month, recently gave £5,000 from a coffee morning, as well as its monthly offering. Again we see charitable organisations, particularly when they are supported by churches, making the difference in this nation. Does she agree that while they are admirable, we cannot expect coffee mornings and fun runs to raise the funding that the Government have an obligation to provide? Rather than seeking to end life, the Government must seek to ensure that people's last days in palliative care are dignified and pain-free. That will only come with fully funded end-of-life palliative care.

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and I pay tribute to all the volunteers who organise the fun runs, and to volunteers in my constituency, such as Sharon Williams, who does the Thames hospice walk in Denham village every year. These are the people who support our local hospices, and we should all pay tribute to them.

Hospices matter because each year they support 310,000 people and 92,000 family members. Hospices matter because they are vital holistic care services for people and their loved ones at the end of life. Hospices matter because they provide crucial end-of-life and overall healthcare, relieving the pressure on the NHS. They provide both community specialist and acute care. However, I suspect that the Minister and the Government already know this, and I am sure that they agree that hospices matter, so let me turn to why this debate matters.

The hospice sector is under enormous pressure, and it faces an unprecedented challenge. The sector is caught in the triple squeeze of increased demand, increased cost and uncertain funding. Only the Government have the power to change that squeeze. Only the Government

can eliminate the increased cost or create more certain funding. In this House, recent months have been consumed by a debate about assisted dying, while the real scandal of the lack of support for end-of-life care through hospices goes below the radar. It is estimated that the demand for palliative care in the UK will increase by 25% in the next 25 years, but as hospices face this increased demand, the Government have decided to saddle them with increased cost, and have failed to provide a long-term settlement.

Let me speak about the excellent Thames hospice that supports many families in my constituency and the constituencies of my neighbours. I would not be here today were it not for Baroness May of Maidenhead. As a long-term champion of Thames hospice, she asked me to have a word with the hospice, as it was so concerned about its funding, which I did, and that led to this debate. Again, Members of Parliament from both Houses continue to champion this important cause.

I recently met Dr Rachel de Caux, the chief executive officer of Thames Hospice. Like many other hospices, Thames hospice represents the very best of our communities: people who believe in providing quality of life at end of life, for everyone; passionate people who care, like the Thames hospice Denham support group, and the volunteers who make donations and support those who go into the hospice. Through their excellent work, they enable 80% of the people they support to receive dignified end-of-life care at home, and the rest to get specialised in-patient service. I visited the service recently, and when I visited the call centre, I was moved to see volunteers and staff working around the clock to help those who had just received a terminal diagnosis, or families who could not cope. They were going to people's homes and working all hours of the day and night to ensure that people had the pain support and palliative care that they needed, at home or in the centre.

Thames hospice, like many hospices, faces a critical moment. Less than one third of its income comes from the NHS. Like many hospices, it raises the rest through its charity shops, fundraising efforts and the generosity of private donors. The Chancellor's Budget was like a hammer blow to its finances, and it faces a deficit of up to £1 million, largely as a result of the Government's choices. The national insurance tax raid, from which this Government recently voted not to spare hospices, will add £300,000 to its costs for the next financial year, while changes to the national minimum wage will add another £200,000, both through the direct impact and the need to maintain pay differentials. Meeting the NHS pay settlement, which the hospice needs to do to keep clinical staff—but which, again, it needs to do without Government support—will add a further £100,000. Finally, Thames hospice's suppliers face the same cost pressures, and are passing those on to the hospice through higher prices.

I know the Minister will talk about the £1 million settlement of additional funding for hospices that was announced in December, but let us set out the detail of that money: it was for capital expenditure, and is welcomed, I am sure, by hospices, but it was not money for meeting operational cost pressures. It was also split across 170 hospices, so it became a drop in the ocean for individual hospices and their needs.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady join me in commending Compton Care hospice in my constituency? The hospice, which I visited recently, does great work raising funds, and it really welcomed the £100 million support provided by this Government. However, the hospice emphasised to me that if it was not there to provide social care, therapy and respite care for patients and their families, the NHS would need an extra 100 beds. Hospices provide invaluable services to our communities, which makes it so important for us to continue to support them as much as we can.

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the pressure that hospices take off the NHS. The wonderful work of the hospice the hon. Gentleman mentions is the reason the NHS can function in the way it does. The cost savings on palliative care—both in hospital and out-of-hospital care settings—are invaluable. The hospices in our constituencies are a model that already works, and they are trusted by the community. I think we should be funding that model, instead of allowing hospices to die on the vine because of a lack of funding and changes to the funding model. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. We should not just complain about this terrible new tax that is being applied to hospices, but point out to the Minister that the return on taxpayers' investment in what hospices spend on the dying is very great indeed. If a little bit of the big increase in funding that the NHS received was transferred to hospices, it would pay great dividends; it would save the need for much more costly care in the hospitals. The return is 300%, according to St Helena hospice, just outside my constituency, on whose behalf I am speaking this evening. I hope the Minister will address that point when he winds up.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That 300% cost benefit would be replicated across the country, in every hospice setting. A small amount of money given to hospices through the NHS funding model would be invaluable. We talk about palliative care and assisted dying, but why are we not having a debate about increasing hospice funding, and making that service part of the NHS? If hospice settings were part of the NHS, they would be exempt from the rise in national insurance contributions. That increase is devastating hospices right now. Many rely on volunteers or low-paid workers in charity shops. The money raised helps pay for the running of hospices. Although that is a wonderful model, hospices are not exempt from the NICs increase, as other NHS bodies are. Even changing the status of hospices to make them part of the NHS would go a very long way to making their financial model viable.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. I have steered the palliative care commission for the past six months, and the one thing that has become crystal clear in our minds is that the fundamental funding model is completely broken; it is not fit for purpose. Furthermore, we need more integration in the system. Hospices are involved in part of people's care; they do not provide the entirety of their care. Does she believe that the findings of the commission need to steer the future funding of the hospice sector?

Joy Morrissey: That is an excellent point. We should be led by the evidence, and also by what the commission finds. I wish to highlight the hon. Lady's long-term work championing out-of-hospital care provision—not just palliative care, but all adult social care. I can recall many a debate on this matter in which there were just one or two of us in the Chamber, and she was always one of them. She is a long-term champion of the vulnerable, of palliative care, and of those who desperately need better services. May I thank her for all that work? Madam Deputy Speaker, it is not often that you will see me reach across the House, but let us give credit where credit is due. There are Members from all parts of the House who have championed these causes over and over again, and it is only right and fair that I recognise them today.

There is a very real prospect of the hospice sector collapsing under the weight of the national insurance changes, and that would be unimaginable. These are institutions that are trusted in our communities and that we need to protect. They need additional funding from the NHS. The Government must act. I urge them to please reconsider the national insurance changes. Exempting hospices from the NICs increase, or helping to fund their operating costs, would make a material difference to their ability to survive. Our hospices matter, and I hope the Minister will hear that message loud and clear, and show us that the Government understand how vital they are.

7.13 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this important debate. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all those who work or volunteer in the hospice and palliative care sector for the care and support that they provide to patients, families and loved ones when they need it most.

This Government want a society in which every person receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to end of life. We are determined to shift more care out of hospitals and into the community, to ensure that patients and their families receive personalised care in the most appropriate setting. Palliative and end-of-life care services, including hospices, will have a vital role to play in that shift.

In England, integrated care boards are responsible for the commissioning of palliative and end-of-life care services to meet the needs of their local population. To support ICBs in this duty, NHS England has published statutory guidance and service specifications. Although the majority of palliative and end-of-life care is provided by NHS staff and services, we recognise the vital part that voluntary sector organisations, including hospices, play in providing support to people at the end of life, as well as to their loved ones.

Most hospices are charitable, independent organisations that receive some statutory funding for providing NHS services. The amount of funding that each charitable hospice receives varies, both within and between ICB areas. This variation is dependent on demand in that area and on the totality and type of palliative and end-of-life care provision from both NHS and non-NHS services, including charitable hospices within each ICB footprint.

This Government understand the financial pressures that hospices have been facing, which is why we have announced the biggest investment to hospices in England in a generation. We are ensuring that hospices in England can continue to deliver the highest quality end-of-life care possible for patients, and for their families and loved ones. We are supporting the hospice sector with a £100 million capital funding boost for adult and children's hospices, to ensure that they have the best possible physical environment for the care they give.

We are pleased to confirm that the Government have released the first £25 million tranche of the £100 million capital funding, with Hospice UK kindly allocating and distributing the money to hospices throughout England. An additional £75 million will be allocated in the coming weeks for use in the 2025-26 financial year. The £100 million capital funding will help hospices to provide the best end-of-life care to patients and their families in a supportive and dignified physical environment. Funding will help support hospices and will enable much-needed improvements, including refurbishments, the overhauling of IT systems and improvement of facilities for patients and visitors.

We are also providing £26 million in revenue funding to support children and young people's hospices. This is a continuation of the funding that, until recently, was known as the children and young people's hospice grant. ICBs will once again administer the funding to their respective children and young people's hospices on behalf of NHS England. This is in line with NHS devolution policies, and it promotes a more consistent national approach by supporting commissioners in prioritising the palliative and end-of-life care needs of their local population. I am pleased to confirm that NHS England has now communicated the details of the 2025-26 funding allocation and dissemination to individual hospices.

I do accept that there is unwarranted variation and inequality in access to, and quality of, palliative and end-of-life care in England, but we are working to reduce these variations. NHS England has published statutory guidance and service specifications to support commissioners in prioritising palliative and end-of-life care. It has also developed a palliative and end-of-life care dashboard, which brings together all relevant local data in one place. The dashboard helps commissioners to understand the palliative and end-of-life care needs of their local population, enabling ICBs to put plans in place to address and track the improvement of health inequalities and to ensure that funding is distributed fairly, based on prevalence.

NHS England has also published the ambitions framework, which sets out our vision to improve end-of-life care through partnership and collaborative action between organisations at a local level throughout England. Additionally, NHS England has developed an assurance system with specific steps and deadlines to ensure the timely dissemination of the £26 million revenue funding to children and young people's hospices, because we know that there were some quite significant problems last year with the transmission from NHS England through the ICBs to hospices. These steps include regular oversight sessions with ICBs, regions and hospices and giving ICBs a hard deadline within the first quarter of the financial year by which they are expected to disseminate the funding to hospices, including escalating to NHS England if any ICB is unable to meet the deadline.

If the deadline is missed, NHS England has put steps in place to ensure that all hospices receive the funding within the timescales outlined.

We, alongside key partners and NHS England, will continue to engage proactively with our stakeholders, including the voluntary sector and independent hospices on an ongoing basis to understand the issues they face. In fact, I recently visited Katharine House hospice in Stafford and heard from staff how important our record investment has been to them. More widely, in February I met key palliative and end of life care and hospice stakeholders in a roundtable format to discuss long-term sector sustainability in the context of our 10-year health plan.

I recognise the concerns that hon. Members have raised about funding and employer national insurance contributions. In July last year we inherited public finances in their worst state since the second world war, and we took the necessary decisions to fix the foundations in the public finances at the autumn Budget, enabling the spending review settlement of a £22.6 billion increase or uplift in resource spending for the Department of Health and Social Care from 2023-24 out-turn to 2025-26.

I gently point out to the Conservative party that while I believe it has welcomed that unprecedented settlement, to my knowledge it has been silent on its preferred means of generating that revenue. I gently say that Opposition Members cannot have it both ways. They cannot welcome the £22.6 billion on the one hand but, on the other hand, condemn the way in which the money is to be raised without coming up with their own plan and proposals for how they would raise those funds.

Rachael Maskell: We have to recognise that the hospice sector is in quite a difficult place financially. However, if there is good advance care planning, money currently spent in secondary care could be invested in the hospice sector and in more community provision. Surely that must be a first step that would not only get better clinical outcomes but be better for the whole of the palliative care pathway.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend speaks with tremendous and deep knowledge of the sector. I welcome the work that she is doing on the commission on palliative and end-of-life care, and we very much look forward to seeing the outcomes and results of that.

My hon. Friend is right that if we are to make the three big shifts at the heart of our 10-year plan—the shifts from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention, and from analogue to digital—the delivery of that will require a left shift in terms of both funding and reform. It is absolutely right that we take a hard-headed look at funding across our NHS and ensure that funding is going to where it is needed. She will know that the share that hospitals get of overall NHS funding has gone up dramatically since the early 2000s, to the detriment of primary care, community care and palliative care—all the things that happen outside hospital. That is something that we must address and shift upstream, because we will never solve the considerable challenges that our NHS is facing until we make that left shift.

I note that the funding announcement was warmly welcomed by the sector. Toby Porter, chief executive of Hospice UK, said:

“Today's announcement will be hugely welcomed by hospices, and those who rely on their services. Hospices not only provide vital care for patients and families, but also relieve pressure on

[Stephen Kinnock]

the NHS. This funding will allow hospices to continue to reach hundreds of thousands of people every year with high-quality, compassionate care. We look forward to working with the government to make sure everyone approaching the end of life gets the care and support they need, when and where they need it.”

I hope that the measures I have outlined in my response to the hon. Lady will go some way to reassuring all Members of this Government’s unwavering commitment to the sustainability of the hospice and wider palliative and end-of-life care sector.

Joy Morrissey: I thank the Minister for outlining what the Government are doing. Will he consider looking at the exemption to the national insurance increase for workers and at allocating more funding directly to hospices so that they can conduct the palliative care that is needed in the out-of-hospital care provision? Although the Government may want to give it to palliative care, there is no directive that does so at this time, aside from capital expenditure. Therefore, could more money be allocated to hospices for operational costs?

Stephen Kinnock: The definition of where employer national insurance will be levied is based on the Office for National Statistics’ definition of where it should be, and it is the same definition used by previous Governments. I do not think that point is up for debate.

Joy Morrissey: To clarify, the NHS and the staff within it are exempt from the changes. How is that part of the national statistical average, when everyone in healthcare who is under the NHS umbrella is exempt from the changes? All I am asking is for hospice care, which is out-of-hospital care provision and which technically falls within adult social care, to be incorporated into the exemptions already given to the NHS.

Stephen Kinnock: The exemption was given to 100% full-time workers within the NHS; in essence, hospitals. As regards GPs, dentists and care providers, ENICs are being levied on those other parts of the health and care sector. Every aspect of my portfolio is therefore seeing ENICs being levied.

Rachael Maskell: A suggestion to the Minister would be to integrate the staff working in hospices into the NHS payroll. It would be that simple to exempt them from those national insurance increases.

Stephen Kinnock: The decisions on ENICs and where they are being levied have been made. I think it was made very clear that the line was drawn where it was drawn. Any attempt to try to reverse engineer where that line should be drawn would not really be aligned with the policy decisions that were made at the Budget.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Was it the Government’s intention to put an additional tax on hospices? Is that exactly what the Government intended to do, or is that an unforeseen consequence?

Stephen Kinnock: I would not dare to speak from this Dispatch Box on behalf of the Chancellor, but I am absolutely clear that when she did the autumn Budget, she knew that she had to dig us out of a very deep hole indeed, and that required levying taxes that she had to levy. The line had to be drawn somewhere and that is where the line was drawn.

On the other questions asked by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield, the funding has gone through Hospice UK, so it is not direct funding in that sense. Hospice UK has kindly co-ordinated the process because it is extremely well informed about which hospices across the country have opportunities to upgrade their infrastructure, whether that be IT infrastructure, refurbishment or whatever it might be. It has reviewed those proposals, worked at tremendous pace and, as a result, we have managed to deliver the entire £25 million of the first tranche. We are now working closely with Hospice UK on the £75 million and I am confident that that money will be out of the door and into hospices in very quick time this year, based on the outstanding performance on the first £25 million tranche. I therefore hope the hon. Lady will be reassured on that point.

In closing, I hope that we at least have a consensus on the vital importance of hospices. The Government are committed to working at pace to ensure that we secure a sustainability and solidity for the sector going forward. I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield once again for securing this important debate. I also thank and wish everybody in this Chamber all the very best for the recess, and I look forward to seeing them all on the other side.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 April 2025

[DAWN BUTLER *in the Chair*]

Persecution of Christians

9.30 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this important motion for debate. I declare an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. Around the world many obscene, difficult and heartbreaking things are happening to people because of their beliefs. Our APPG aims to speak for those of all faiths and none, and to act as a constructive voice in this place to address religious persecution globally, both now and in future.

This subject is close to my heart. In 2023, I was pleased to represent the APPG at the International Religious Freedom summit in Taiwan, where we heard harrowing reports of persecution, torture and killings on account of people's religious beliefs. I pay tribute to the unwavering strength of those killed, removed from their homes, refused jobs, and imprisoned without recourse, solely for their faith.

Amid the increasing instances of persecution, hate crimes and stereotyping, numerous organisations work tirelessly to expose and combat those injustices. I am grateful for their collective efforts, and particularly the hours of research that go into producing reports so that we in this House can be made aware of the suffering caused by anti-religious movements, religious extremism, political oppression and Government overreach. By gathering data, providing legal support and amplifying the voices of the persecuted, those organisations expose violations of the universal declaration of human rights and offer hope to those who have been silenced. Their work is instrumental in ensuring that freedom of religion or belief becomes a better recognised and protected human right. Without their vigilance, many cases of abuse would remain hidden and individuals who have been aided by their efforts would continue to suffer without recourse.

Despite the very real threat of persecution, hundreds of millions of Christians—effectively entire populations—remain steadfast in their faith, at great personal cost. They willingly risk their livelihoods, their families and even their lives to uphold their beliefs. Their resilience in the face of oppression is testament to their unwavering conviction, and their strength should not go unnoticed. It is imperative that we advocate on their behalf, ensuring that they receive the fundamental freedoms that so many of us in democratic societies take for granted. To ignore their plight is to turn our backs on the very principles of justice and human dignity that underpin free nations.

Despite being the world's largest religion, Christianity is the most persecuted minority faith in many regions. That persecution stems from a range of sources, including Islamist extremism, Marxist regimes and dictatorial

Governments. In some countries, public celebrations of Christmas are not only discouraged but life-threatening. Open Doors, an organisation that monitors Christian persecution worldwide, reported alarming global figures for 2024.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Was it not one of the most heartbreaking things that all of us in the House have seen when Christmas was cancelled in Jesus's birthplace last year? We have seen the persecution in Palestine, and in Gaza what has happened to some of the most sacred sites in Christianity, with the third-oldest church reduced to rubble. At times it is heartbreaking. My hon. Friend listed things such as Marxism and Islamism; does she agree that the situation in Palestine should draw our attention to Christians persecuted there, too?

Ruth Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People cannot worship in rubble. It is important that we acknowledge all the areas affected. I will say more on that shortly.

Open Doors' alarming global figures for 2024 were presented to us in Parliament in January. The world watchlist and accompanying report paint a deeply concerning picture. Last year, almost 5,000 believers worldwide were killed for their faith. Most were from Nigeria. However, there have been rising numbers of Christian deaths in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Burkina Faso, where 201 believers lost their lives—that is a more than fivefold increase on 2023. The last year has seen almost 210,000 Christians forced from their homes into hiding or exile because of their faith. Almost half of them are from Nigeria, despite around half of all Nigerians being Christians.

Since the first world watchlist in 1983, North Korea has been at the top 23 times, which is almost 70% of the time. The persecution of North Korean Christians has worsened in the last year following a rise in reported incidents of violence, which coincides with stricter regulations announced by the North Korean authorities early in 2024.

More and more Christians are having to worship undercover. In Afghanistan, it is effectively impossible for a Christian to publicly express their faith. In Algeria, all Protestant churches have been forced to close, and the number of Christians awaiting trial and sentencing is at an all-time high. In China, the era of relative tolerance is over. Unregistered churches are now illegal. Church teaching is informed by ideological pressure and official indoctrination. Religious education for children is banned. Many congregations are taking their fellowships underground into isolated home groups. Meanwhile, the small Christian community in Libya is extremely careful to avoid a repeat of the March 2023 crackdown, which swept up numerous Christians for arrest. Believers have to be increasingly creative and courageous in how they gather, if at all.

Open Doors states that the persecuted church is increasingly a displaced church, with believers exiled to refugee camps or camps for internally displaced people. Sudan is facing the largest displacement crisis in the world: in a country of 49 million people, the number of IDPs had surpassed 7.7 million by mid-2024. In Nigeria, radicalised Islamic Fulani militants continue to drive

[Ruth Jones]

Christian communities from their lands. Conflict in the Manipur region in India has forced tens of thousands of Christians to flee for their lives, often with little more than the clothes on their backs. The loss of home and community makes already vulnerable Christians even more of an easy target.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate and on her excellent speech, in which she is outlining the outstanding work of Open Doors and other organisations. Does she agree that as well as co-ordinating a UK-wide attempt to address the ongoing problem, we need to internationalise it to try to make people from a range of nations aware and resolve it?

Ruth Jones: Absolutely. Open Doors is a great organisation for highlighting what is going on around the world. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need a concerted effort around the world to stamp out the persecution of all faiths, but we are talking about Christians in particular today.

In Pakistan, young Christian men are increasingly being targeted for forced conversion, with recent violent attacks including one against a Christian youth whose throat was slit after a blasphemy accusation. In Iran, 139 Christians were arrested in 2024, with many sentenced to lengthy prison terms under national security laws, simply for attending house churches.

In Nicaragua and Colombia, church leaders face arbitrary imprisonment and assassination for standing up to authoritarianism and criminal groups. Mexico is 31st on the 2025 world watchlist—its highest place since 2005. It is also the only country in Latin America to rise in the rankings. Organised crime is rampant in many areas, and churches and believers who seek to counter it make themselves targets. There has been an increase in the number of believers killed and abducted there.

From violent attacks to house arrests and forced marriages, Christian women and girls around the world are shamed and persecuted twice—once for their faith and the second time for their gender.

The universal declaration of human rights is the most translated document in the world. It has been signed by all 193 UN member states. Crucially, it covers provisions for the freedom to change one's religion or belief, to adopt a religion or belief of choice, or to retain one's current beliefs. Despite the numerous protections outlined in the declaration, there is a universal lack of accountability for those who do not uphold its principles, leaving religious minorities vulnerable to continued persecution.

Over the past 24 months, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has answered 200 written parliamentary questions that mention the protection and aid of persecuted Christians. The steps the UK is taking to protect this fundamental right include advocating for political transition that leads to an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative Government; reminding all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law; and ensuring that official development assistance is allocated to those who are most vulnerable and most in need, irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity. It is vital to consider what measurements will be used to assess the impact of such aid, projects and policy.

The Government must continue their work on this issue. Areas in which they can go further include ensuring that UK diplomats raise cases of Christian persecution at bilateral and multilateral levels, including by urging Governments of concern to cease the repression of religious minorities and comply with international human rights standards; advocating for the establishment or strengthening of UN mechanisms to investigate FORB violations; and expanding UK aid and development funding to support local peacebuilding efforts, trauma-recovery programmes and economic rehabilitation for survivors of religious violence in Nicaragua and Colombia.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned ever-decreasing ODA funding; does she believe that the complete intolerance of religious persecution should be a prerequisite for such funding?

Ruth Jones: Yes, I do, and I am glad the Minister is here to listen to the debate and interested in what he will say in response.

It is important to target sanctions under the UK's global human rights sanctions regime against individuals and entities complicit in Christian persecution. Will the Government ensure that they publicly name and support at-risk and imprisoned Christian leaders, and use diplomatic channels and public platforms to press for their immediate and unconditional release? FORB should be integrated into broader UK human rights and foreign policy frameworks to ensure that the new integrated human rights and sanctions regime prioritises religious freedom alongside other human rights. Gender and religion-specific vulnerabilities should be recognised in the design of strategies to tackle issues including protection, displacement, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, development and human rights generally.

In recent years the UK has shown great leadership in promoting FORB, and it is vital that it continues to do so. When freedom of religion or belief is under attack, other basic human rights are often under threat as well. FORB serves as the ultimate litmus test for the health of other freedoms in a country. We are blessed to live in a society in which the Government do not take these threats lightly. However, the growing issue of rising authoritarianism in North Korea, central Asia and Iran, and the extreme displacement in west and sub-Saharan Africa, remain deeply concerning and under-represented. I look forward to hearing from colleagues and hope the Minister will address our concerns, so that freedom of religion or belief remains a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. We estimate that Members should keep to a limit of around four or five minutes per speech.

9.42 am

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Nigeria is No. 7 on the world watchlist published by Open Doors. Some of the most egregious examples of persecution, with whole communities being laid waste, come from Plateau state. Many commentators, including the EU Parliament, have put that down to the pressures brought about by climate change. Well, climate change does not rape people. Climate change does not bomb church services. Climate change does not abduct women

and children and force them into marriage. Those things are done because of an extremist ideology entirely unrestrained by proper state power, because of the state's incompetence, indifference or even complicity.

What assistance is the United Kingdom affording to Nigeria in the implementation of the Human Rights Council's recommendation, from its universal periodic review, on the protection of freedom of religion and belief? Has the Minister shared the experience that I had as a Minister of visiting some of the countries where these things take place and having his ear bent by members of both the Opposition and the Government on what we should do about it, as if we were still a colonial power able to do such things? What leverage do the Government actually have, beyond the important role of providing a platform to share views and reassure sufferers that we are alive to their concerns—that we are praying for them, at least?

Finally, I have a word of caution for the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), who spoke about official development assistance. Properly spent, it is directed to projects that relieve suffering communities. If it is used as a political weapon—as leverage that is put on Governments and withdrawn—it only makes the sufferers suffer even more.

9.45 am

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for bringing this issue to the House. I appreciate her advocacy for those who are going through persecution because of their Christian belief.

Nobody deserves to be persecuted because of their faith. The freedom to practise religion, to experience communion with family and friends and to worship without fear of violence is fundamental to human rights conventions. Christians around the world are being denied those protections and are experiencing unimaginable heartache and suffering. It is estimated that 380 million Christians around the world are subjected to high levels of persecution and discrimination. The data is clear and is incredibly troubling. There has been a rise in violence towards Christians across the globe over many, many years.

Persecution often involves a broad scope of behaviour. It is usually the bloody and violent extremes that get media attention, which is often short-lived, but disinformation, marginalisation and intimidation come under the informal definition of persecution and they deserve our attention. We have an obligation to talk about the issue and speak up for those who are suffering and those who endure torture and killings. The numbers are rising.

I am keen to understand the steps that are being taken to better support persecuted Christians across the world and promote religious freedom and belief. Are there plans to implement the calls to action from organisations such as Open Doors? I congratulate my hon. Friend again on bringing this very important issue to the House.

9.48 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler, for what I am sure will be the first time of many. I commend the hon.

Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), who is a dear friend. Like me, she is an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief; I declare that interest.

I thank all hon. Members who have persistently championed the cause of religious freedom, particularly in relation to persecuted Christians globally. Their unwavering commitment ensures that this critical issue remains at the forefront of our parliamentary discourse. It is imperative that we recognise the alarming escalation in the persecution of Christians worldwide. I have taken the following statistics from a 2023 report by Aid to the Church in Need, which has thoughtfully considered the status of fundamental human rights for all religious traditions.

Some 1.5 million Christians called Syria home before the war started in 2011. Today, that number has plummeted to 300,000, an 80% decline in little over a decade. In Aleppo, the Christian population has dropped from 250,000 to just 30,000—from 12% of the city's population to a mere 1.4%. In Raqqa, where once there were 11,000 Christians, barely 100 remain today. Deir ez-Zor was once home to 5,000 Christians, but that number has fallen to nearly zero. That tells us all about the decline of Christian faith in Syria. Sadly, we see religious persecution once more being ignored, and Syria is not alone; Nigeria has approximately 3.3 million internally displaced people as a result of religiously motivated violence. Communities have been uprooted and entire cultures have been erased.

I am heartened to support a Government and a Minister who have made significant strides in delivering on the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's report. We have seen particular progress on recommendation 2, which calls for the UK to be

“the global leader in championing freedom of religion or belief, ensuring it is given due priority in the UK's engagement in multilateral institutions”.

The UK Government have answered nearly 80 written questions on behalf of religious minorities this year. I extend my sincere thanks to all those who have used their voices to highlight this freedom. It serves as a litmus test for human rights. The liberty to believe in a higher power, to worship and to stand in awe is intrinsic to our humanity. The values imparted by Christianity make the humanitarian efforts of Christian organisations indispensable to the world. For example, one global Christian Church operating in 193 countries and territories has clocked up 6.6 million hours of volunteer work.

Not only are Christian teachings globally relevant, but they hold profound significance here in the United Kingdom. The Bible warns that turning away from God leads to moral decay, manifesting in behaviours such as wickedness, greed and a lack of compassion. Conversely, embracing Christian teachings offers a pathway to healing and restoration within our communities.

In 1 Peter 4:8-10, the apostle Peter says:

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.”

This is a mindset that builds strong, stable and peaceful societies. Countries that have championed freedom of religion or belief lay the foundation for lasting peace. To those steadfast souls who, in the face of relentless persecution, continue their journey with unwavering faith, I echo the words of Christ in John 16:33:

[Jim Shannon]

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

I recognise the significance of 2025. Let it be a jubilee year not just in name but in action—a year in which captives and the persecuted find justice, in which those in fear find protection, and in which nations find peace through the promotion of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. That is the sort of country that I want. That is the world that I want. I am sure that everybody here has the same notion.

9.52 am

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this debate.

I declare an interest as the recently appointed UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. In the three months for which I have been in the role, it has become evident to me that the sad truth is that the scale of religious persecution is growing in the world. In 2019, the Truro report, which gave rise to the role that I am now honoured to hold, commented:

“Christianity now faces the possibility of being wiped-out in parts of the Middle East.”

Christians are suffering from external threats almost everywhere.

Here is a story of persecution that is familiar to many in this room. An effigy of a religious leader was paraded through the streets, hysterical graffiti was chalked on the walls, and books were written criticising people as fifth columnists and traitors. They were suspected, mistreated and had only recently been given the freedom to run for public office. That is not Pakistan or Nigeria; it was London in the 1850s, in a frenzy about newly emancipated Catholics. It is a crucial part of this debate to acknowledge that our country’s credibility on freedom of religion or belief is not because we are holier than thou, but because we got it wrong in the past.

Our country’s mistakes on religious toleration and the learning we take from them are the basis on which we can condemn the horror being inflicted on Christians around the world. I am proud to be the MP for North Northumberland. My constituency is home to Holy Island, which witnessed some of the earliest and most sustained attacks on British Christians in the Viking raids. Over the centuries, Northumberland has come to believe deeply in freedom, tolerance and the right for everybody to believe and confess how they wish.

Today, parts of the world such as parts of Nigeria are becoming playgrounds for jihadists, who are freewheeling through the region. I am reminded of the story of Bishop Wilfred, who I met last month. On Christmas Day last year, 47 Christians in Wilfred’s diocese were killed in militant attacks, with another 6,800 believers displaced. We have already heard accounts from around the middle east. In the middle east, the ancient home of three of the world’s global religions, Christian communities are in freefall. In 2014, there were almost 1 million Christians in Iraq; today there are only 200,000. The point is clear: despite the global growth of the Church, Christians remain vulnerable to persecution and conflict.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment as the special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. I wish it had not taken the Government six months to appoint him, but I am sure that he will approach the role with the alacrity that it demands.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the attrition of global Christianity and the oppression of Christian faiths around the world. Does he agree that in the discourse in which we engage in Parliaments in the west and in societies where religion is tolerated, we need to accept that there is no league table of religious persecution? I am concerned that sometimes Christianity is seen as being at the bottom of that league table—that there is a view that religious persecution is wrong, but that some forms of it are more wrong than others. The persecution of Christians often comes out at the wrong end of that equation. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to be crystal clear with the regimes that are persecuting Christians that we believe that it is anathema to what any Government should be doing?

David Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome. I agree that any human rights violation should be treated the same, no matter what religion or belief someone has. I will come on to the broader connection between rights.

There is no country in the world that is a perfectly free society on the one hand, but just happens to persecute Christians on the other. That makes the persecution of Christians, and of freedom of religion or belief more generally, an acid test that reveals the true colours of many regimes that would rather portray themselves as orderly and harmless. Not being allowed to gather for worship means that there is no freedom of peaceful assembly. Not being allowed to evangelise or convert means that there is no freedom of conscience, speech or expression. Being imprisoned for faith means that there is no right to liberty. Without those freedoms, there is no democracy.

When Christians are thrown in prison, they are likely to share cells with Alawites, Uyghurs, Ahmadiyya and other individuals who are not tolerated because of what they do or do not believe. As our hearts break for Christians who are imprisoned, so they break for the many others who are abandoned because of what they believe. FORB is often seen as a canary in the coalmine for freedoms, but the analogy is imperfect because it suggests that the canary does not matter. FORB is better described as the lone nightwatchman who is found bleeding and unconscious outside as the night grows darker and freedom slips away.

The suffering can overwhelm us, but my hope is that the United Kingdom is uniquely well placed to act. Our country has been on a long journey from persecution to pluralism. That gives us a legitimacy with which to challenge other nations and encourage them to do better. We believe something radical, which is that while religious freedom would certainly be good for those who are being persecuted, it would also bless those who are doing the persecuting, by unlocking new opportunities and freedoms for their nations to flourish. I am encouraged that the Foreign Office is serious about keeping human rights as a cornerstone of our foreign policy. I commit to playing my part as the special envoy, pressing the Government as we seek to navigate this new world.

In my constituency of North Northumberland, we share the common-sense values of freedom of speech, fair play and respect for our fellow man. Those values were hard-won over centuries of debate and sometimes conflict. We now have the opportunity to lead the world in avoiding the mistakes we made, and to end the persecution of Christians wherever we see it. Where we see Christian persecution, we know that those of other faiths and beliefs will be suffering too. It is my expectation that this Government will step bravely into the breach to defend them so that, in the words of Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah, we can

“proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, and set the oppressed free”.

9.58 am

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Butler, and to be in a Chamber with so many of my favourite colleagues. I look around and am genuinely so inspired, pleased and gratified to be among this group of parliamentarians of all parties. I do not know what it is that binds us together. Well, I do—we are mostly believers. I pay tribute to everybody here, particularly to the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith); I welcome him to and congratulate him on his very significant appointment. Congratulations too to the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), on her championing of this agenda over many years and on calling this debate.

I think it is necessary to acknowledge at the outset—in slight contradiction to the hon. Member for North Northumberland, although I hope that this will not be taken as too Christo-chauvinist a perspective, nor as a sort of Christian supremacist principle—the reason that we in this country defend the liberties we do on behalf of all religions and belief systems around the world, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. It is because of the Christian foundation to our politics. All our liberties, and the principle of political liberty that this country has sporadically, with some success and some failures, helped to export around the world, derive fundamentally from the Christian foundations of our political institutions and political philosophy. What we think of as the intrinsic value of every human being comes only from one place: the Bible. All our laws and what we now call human rights have that origin. Indeed, the very concept of the secular space, in which people are free to believe anything or nothing, derives ultimately from the Christian principle that everybody has value, and that it is not right to pry into the souls of other men or women.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for North Northumberland that we derive our legitimacy to speak in this space because of our past sins, as a country or as a civilisation. I recognise those sins, but I think we are speaking on this topic because we are the heirs to a tradition that fundamentally recognises the value of Christianity. His regional patriotism for Northumberland is understandable—think of St Cuthbert and the great saints of those days—but I bring him King Alfred, who defended Wessex, including what is now Wiltshire, against the Vikings, pushed back the tide of paganism, restored Christianity to England and ultimately helped to export it to the world. I think it appropriate to be proud of the Christian basis of our politics in this debate.

Jim Shannon: The issues of human rights abuse and persecution cannot be divorced. If there is persecution, there is human rights abuse; and if there is human rights abuse, there is persecution. Does the hon. Member agree that that is the central focus for us, as Christians? We stand up for everybody: those with religious faith, with no faith, and with different faiths.

Danny Kruger: I absolutely agree. It is of course not just Christians who think that, but it is right that in our country we proudly stand on that ground, and defend the right of everybody to absolute freedom of belief. As I said, I think we do that, ultimately, because the foundation of our politics is Christian.

I will refer quickly to the Holy Land, as other hon. Members have. I have become chair of the APPG on Christianity in the Holy Land, which was instigated by our former colleague David Linden, who is a sad loss to the House—at least on this topic, not on others. He encouraged me to take up the role, so I have been having a number of very powerful and moving conversations with Palestinian Christians about the state of the Church in the Holy Land. In fact, I visited many years ago, in the early 2000s during the second intifada, with Canon Andrew White, who was the Church of England’s representative to the Holy Land in those days and a very great man. We visited Bethlehem, and I saw how absolutely desperate the plight of the Church was at that time. As the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) acknowledged, the situation has got worse and the state of the Church in the Holy Land is now very dire. I acknowledge that that is the consequence of Israeli Government activity. I recognise that and, as a strong supporter of Israel, I recognise how hard it is for Christians in the west bank to worship.

On a different trip at around the same time, I visited Iraq with Andrew White, just after the invasion. At that point, we could wander around quite freely. There was a sense that there would be a new flourishing of religious freedom in Iraq. We visited St George’s church, for a service to mark its reopening after the war. It was a wonderful moment, with Iraqi Christians, as well as lots of American and British soldiers, present. It felt like the dawning of something wonderful in Iraq. Of course, within months that church was closed, and many of the Christians we had met were dead. The tragedy of the American-led invasion was that Christianity in Iraq has been severely repressed ever since, and we know about the similar phenomena in Syria and elsewhere since. The tragedy of nation-building in the middle east, often led by Christians, has not been good for the Church.

The principal enemy of Christianity globally is not misapplied western liberalism; it is alternative religions and ideologies, in particular Marxism in China, radical Hinduism in India and, of course, radical Islam all over the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) mentioned Nigeria. The situation there is absolutely appalling: 3,000 people a year killed in recent years, and getting on for a quarter of a million people displaced. That is, I think, around half the total global number of those killed and displaced. In Algeria, as the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn mentioned, I want to draw particular attention to the Kabyle people, a Berber community in the north of the country who have been resisting the Islamist ideology of the Algerian Government for many years and who have suffered severe persecution. They are

[*Danny Kruger*]

attempting self-determination and their slogan is, “In the name of all beliefs”. I want to acknowledge that—going back to my original point—when we defend Christianity, we are defending everybody, and I pay tribute to that campaign.

I want to finish by asserting this point. Christianity is established in the west and therefore we think of it as the dominant philosophy, even though in many ways in our country I do not feel it is anymore. It is the shield of minorities everywhere, and I think we need a stronger promotion of the value of Christianity in every society. We should not simply be defensive in debates like this about defending the status quo and defending Christians; we should be supporting those who promote Christianity, sympathetically of course and always peacefully. The promotion of Christianity is a moral good, because wherever Christianity is, life is better. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I could not put it better than he did: in an absolute sense, Christianity is good for people.

I pay tribute to Fiona Bruce, the hon. Member for North Northumberland’s predecessor as special envoy—a great friend to many of us and a pioneer in this space in the previous Parliament and over many years for her work promoting religious freedom and belief in this country and around the world. It is a great shame that the Bill she was championing fell before the general election. I do not know whether the hon. Member for North Northumberland would have welcomed it, or if the Government have any intention of reviving the measures proposed in it, which were to establish the position of the envoy on a statutory footing, properly resourced, rather than being something that, as it were, exists at the whim of the Government. I regret that the Bill fell, but I pay tribute to her. I pay tribute particularly to the hon. Member for North Northumberland. It is a tremendous thing that he is now in post; he has a great and important role to do.

Lastly, to end on a note of hope, there are great things happening in the world. Christianity is not oppressed, downtrodden or downcast. We are seeing very positive signs of growth and revival. In China, the house church movement has won many millions of converts. Here in the UK, I am encouraged. There was a report from the Bible Society and Theos recently called, “The Quiet Revival” which demonstrates that, quietly, we are seeing new growth in our faith in the UK. On that basis, I have confidence in the future.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I would like to get everybody in for this important debate. We are looking to get to the Minister at around 10.28 am, so you have about four minutes per speech, please.

10.8 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Butler.

As we prepare ourselves for Easter, it is right that we turn our eyes to those persecuted around the world for following Christ, so I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones).

It has been poignant and humbling to listen to the speeches by Members today, as it is sobering and challenging to read the reports of those who share the same faith as me but whose experiences are so different. Today, around

a third of the population, and growing, share the Christian faith in the far reaches of the world, but for many their experiences are so different. As we ruminate over the census of decline here in the UK, we see the persecution of Christians around the world, and the sharp intolerance and violence that their faith often draws.

The Open Doors world watchlist, Aid to the Church in Need, overseas organisations and charities, among many, expose the deep scale of persecution on the basis of faith. Most conflicts and war crimes are also associated with faith, and we know that about 380 million Christians across our planet are killed or experience high levels of persecution because of their faith. We see suppression and imprisonment of people, and the destruction of churches. If there is not such sexual or physical violence against Christians in the west, persecution can often show itself as psychological or spiritual suppression of the all too few who dare to speak the name of Jesus freely—even in a place like the UK, where there are no bounds but people still dare not speak his name.

There are three policy areas that I will touch on briefly. One is covered by the Home Office—ensuring that we have safe and legal routes for people who experience persecution to come to the UK. We talk about such routes, but the reality is so different, and because I represent a human rights city, that is a vital point.

The second area is covered by the Foreign Office. ODA has an incredible impact, ensuring more security and greater resilience, and it is so important that we return to 0.7%. Even in a world where our global economy is so disrupted, we must find space to restore ODA to 0.7%.

Thirdly, on trade, I think about China, as I always do. It is 15th on the Open Doors world watchlist, yet we have just signed a trade agreement with it. How much emphasis was put on the need for freedom of religion and belief in China alongside the ink that marked that agreement? We think, of course, of the suppression of the Church and its leaders in China, and of the public denial of the sacraments to Jimmy Lai. It is so important that we review our policy. We said when we left the EU that we would put human rights at the heart of our trade agreements, but we have work to do to achieve that.

This week, I was listening to a sermon ahead of Easter, which reminded me of persecuted Christians around the world. It talked about coming to the end of the road, where there is no hope, as the Israelites came to the Red sea and the disciples came to the cross. It marked so much as the end. In a nation and world in chaos and crisis, it is hard to find hope. For many persecuted Christians, who are imprisoned and tortured or living in fear, it is hard to find hope. There is such little hope in politics, on our streets or across the world. Yet the sermon went on to say:

“and then there was Jesus”.

That spins logic, and everything else, on its head. The Red sea opened. There was resurrection Sunday. For all of us who put our trust in Christ, we know that there is eternal hope.

It is with that hope that we see the most incredible witness of those who are persecuted. Their hope and their unfathomable joy reminds us all that no regime can suppress the cast-iron security that the Easter message

brings. Such hope could not hold Jesus in a grave. It enables persecuted Christians, and all of us, to know that no matter what we face, Jesus is always with us and always will be. As we invest in Him, we invest in ourselves, and have such certainty that the hope in this broken world, including for those who are persecuted, will never be destroyed and can only be found in Him.

10.12 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an absolute honour, Ms Butler, to serve under your guidance this morning. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for starting the debate so very well.

I think that to be a Liberal is to stand up for the rights of people that we do not like and do not agree with. It is easy to stand up for the minorities that we agree with. But on this occasion, I speak as somebody who I guess belongs to the minority on planet Earth and indeed, if we believe the last United Kingdom census, in this country: I am a Christian.

As other people have said, I will try to race through my remarks, so that others can get their fair share of the time available. I pay tribute to Open Doors for its world watchlist and for the work it has done in exposing persecution around the world. I will just focus on one or two instances, in particular the state of Libya.

Libya is very important for so many reasons. It is the fourth most persecuted place on planet Earth for Christians. Only 0.5%—35,000—of the people in Libya are Christians. If a woman in Libya is even suspected of being interested in Christianity, they will face horrific abuse, sexual violence, house arrest, forced marriage and even, so to speak, “honour killing”. Neither men nor women are spared. They are subjected to losing their jobs, their homes and their livelihoods. Such incidents are not isolated in Libya; there are widespread attacks upon Christians and suspected Christians right across the country, and the total instability there makes things even worse.

I highlight Libya because it is the country through which so many refugees who may end up in this country go through. When we talk about the channel crossings, let us put things in perspective. Whatever dangers people put themselves through to cross the channel—and they are huge dangers—they are absolutely nothing compared to the hideous dangers that people go through to cross Libya, in order to get themselves to the Mediterranean in the first place. Eritrea is a country where 44% of the population is Christian, and where young men and women find themselves forcibly conscripted indefinitely, very often to kill their own people. We need to be aware of that when we are talking about the refugee crisis.

It is not just failing states where there is a threat to Christians. We see Christian nationalism around the world, where Christianity is appropriated for political purposes—either to shore up the regime, country or state, or one’s own political party. I counsel all Christians to be deeply suspicious of those who seek to appropriate the gospel for political purposes. China has been mentioned as well—a country where, on the face of it, Christianity is tolerated. However, branches of the Church, house churches and those faithful to Christ alone who will not bow the knee to the state, find themselves increasingly under serious threat.

It is worth touching on for a moment why Christians are the most persecuted group on planet Earth, though they are not the only persecuted group—we should stand with all others as well, as I said in my opening remarks. Christians believe we have ultimate allegiance somewhere else. Famously in Matthew 22:20, Jesus is approached by someone who is trying to catch him out by asking, “Are you going to pay taxes to the temple? Are you going to pay taxes to Caesar?” Jesus picks up a coin and says, “Whose image is on this coin?” The image is of Caesar’s. Jesus famously says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” That may or may not be an instruction to pay taxes, but it is definitely about giving the image-bearer—or the image-provider—all of what the image entails. That coin had Caesar’s image on it, but God’s image is on us—so yes, give the coin to Caesar, but give all of oneself to God. One can see why that is deeply counter-cultural and offensive.

I heard Justin Welby being interviewed by Laura Kuenssberg the other weekend, as many hon. Members will have. The most irritating part of the interview, from my perspective, is when Justin Welby did not push back when Laura Kuenssberg said, “Why isn’t the Church more in tune with the culture?” That is because we are not meant to be. We are counter-cultural in every place and generation, which will wind up dictators and so-called democrats. That is why I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for appointing the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), and for recognising that freedom of religion and belief is something we must always fight for because especially for Christians, as we live our counter-cultural lives, we will always be offensive following one who caused the greatest of all offences and died on a cross for all of our sins.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): In order to fit everybody in, I will put a two-minute time limit on speeches.

10.18 am

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time today, Ms Butler. As I have two minutes, I will be very brief.

The persecution of Christians was brought to my attention by one of my constituents, a member of the Heysham Free Methodist Church. I was appalled to learn of the threat of violence from so-called social media influencers and Hindu nationalist leaders; people have been displaced, with their homes and businesses destroyed, and that is absolutely abhorrent. I wish us to speak with one voice on this matter, and to speak against the state enforcement of religion and state tolerance of religious persecution; that is absolutely unacceptable.

I want to call particular attention to the persecution of those who hold no faith, a reality that too often goes unrecognised. In 2022, the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was sentenced to 24 years in prison for a supposedly blasphemous Facebook post. As of January this year, we have blasphemy laws in 91 countries in the world, including in Northern Ireland. Blasphemy laws lead to the harassment and persecution that Mr Bala suffered, as well as that faced by people of all faiths and none. That must end. Mr Bala will be coming to the all-party parliamentary group Humanist Group on 14 May, and I invite hon. Members to join us and hear more of his story.

[Lizzi Collinge]

This debate shows us that people of faith and no faith can have a powerful connection and can find common cause. No one should be persecuted for their faith or lack thereof. Religious freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of belief must be actively protected and are worth fighting for.

10.20 am

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): That we live in a strange age is beyond doubt. The guilt-fuelled self-loathing that poisons so many tiny bourgeois minds extends beyond the disowning of where we have come from—our shared history—to being insecure about who we are. To deny the Judeo-Christian roots of western civilisation is to ignore the essence of the values, which by underpinning what we share make us capable of the judgments necessary to know what is right. Widespread insecurity about our Christian heritage neuters the response, by people who should know better, to the persecution of Christians.

The hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) spoke about parliamentary questions; I asked one when 70 Christians were found beheaded in the Congo. The response I got was full of broadly drawn liberal platitudes about universality and multilateralism, and it said that the Government were saddened—not outraged, disgusted or determined to do something, but saddened. Well, that quiet sadness is an acquiescence of people who, in G. K. Chesterton's words, exercise unquestioning tolerance. He said, "Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions."

The truth is that throughout the world Christians face discrimination, largely in the name of the Islamisation of parts of the world that used to be Christian. The middle east is a classic example, where the number of Christians has fallen sharply over my lifetime and where Christians continue to be persecuted—in the birthplace of the son of God, bear in mind. In an age that falsely divides people into victims and victors, too often people in the west see Christians as victors even where they are being persecuted.

I simply ask the Minister: will he prioritise this issue? Will he put on a statutory footing the role of the person designated to defend minority religions? Will he make sure that the Government's policy in respect of aid and foreign affairs addresses the persecution of Christians worldwide?

10.22 am

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this debate.

Freedom of religion or belief is not a western ideal. It is a universal human right, enshrined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. Yet millions of our Christian brothers and sisters, especially women and girls, are denied that right every single day. For many of us in the UK, faith is a core part of our lives and identity. However, too often Government policy has treated faith as an optional extra. This debate is not about abstract policy, it is about people—men, women and children—who suffer for nothing more than professing faith in Jesus Christ. I am thankful every day for my ability to profess my Christian faith, and to live

in a society where we have civil and religious liberties, and I am thankful for those who have fought for those liberties.

Today, I focus my comments on how persecution disproportionately affects women and girls. These women face a double vulnerability; persecuted for their faith and gender, and often suffering in silence and invisibility. I want to commend Open Doors for its fantastic work in Parliament and across the globe. If we think of gender-specific persecution, we only have to think of forced marriages, domestic and sexual violence, psychological abuse and isolation, and abduction and disappearance. Many voices go unheard, and unfortunately, because of time, we are unable to hear those voices today. In Nigeria, in 2024 alone, more than 4,100 Christians were killed for their faith; over 80% of all reported Christian deaths worldwide. Church leaders, worshippers and entire villages were kidnapped and killed for no reason other than their faith.

Given the huge changes in international relations in the last few months, can the Minister assure me that the freedom of religious belief remains a foreign policy priority for this Government?

10.24 am

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler.

The first Christian martyr was Stephen. Stephen was martyred simply because of his loyalty to the head of the Christian Church, Lord Jesus Christ. Stephen has been followed, down the eons of time, by millions of others who have been persecuted and put to death for simple adherence to the basic Christian message of redemption through the sole mediation of Christ. There is nothing offensive in that and yet it offends. The offensiveness has caused many to lose their lives, and that is a shocking indictment of the wider world. We take for granted all of the freedoms and liberties we have, but a debate such as this rightly causes us to reflect on those who exercise the freedoms that jeopardise their own lives. Think about Iran, where there has been an increase in the imprisonment of Christians from 22 in 2023 to 96 in 2024, indicating the trend. Think of Afghanistan, where the Taliban's return and their extreme sharia law means many people have been executed simply for converting to Christianity. That is a sobering reminder of the values that we have, should hold to, and never take for granted. I finish with words from the beatitudes:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

10.26 am

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Jesus of course warned his disciples that in this world they would have tribulation. Many Christians across the world have experienced that tribulation in their own personal lives. Over 340 million Christians are actively persecuted for their faith. That ranges from discrimination, to imprisonment, torture and death. I think many of us find it difficult to contemplate and comprehend that people making the choice to be a Christian know that, in some countries, that is what they will suffer.

One of the most moving experiences I have had in this House was at the Open Doors event, where I met a pastor from Nigeria, who told me that his church of

400 members was down to 22 because most of them had been killed. He was going back to be their pastor and to lead them, regardless of the consequences. I do not know how many of us in this room would have that kind of bravery. In this Parliament, we have a duty to keep highlighting these issues through the questions we ask and the debates that we have. The Government have power to do things through their trade, aid and asylum policies. One of the bishops in Syria told me that the Christian Church had been decimated in Syria, but even when refugees went to refugee camps, they were the first to be persecuted and discriminated against there. I think our asylum policy has to bear in mind those groups fleeing persecution and still being persecuted as they should have priority. There is much we can do and I hope that debates such as this one encourage the Government to do it.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I would like to give the mover of the motion two minutes at the end.

10.29 am

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this debate, which is as important as it is timely—I am pleased to be speaking today as we break for the Easter recess.

The right to practise one's faith freely, without hindrance or discrimination, is fundamental. The Liberal Democrats have a proud history of liberal universalism. We believe that all people should be able to live their life free from fear, including fear of religious intolerance; that human rights are applicable everywhere; and that the universal declaration of human rights, which enshrines the freedoms of thought, conscience, faith and religious practice, has the same resonance now as it did when it was enshrined almost 80 years ago.

It is distressing, therefore, to see Christians across the world persecuted and, worse still, to know that for many the situation is deteriorating. Today, at least 318 million Christians live lives subject to high levels of persecution and discrimination—an increase of 12% on 2021. Moreover, the number of countries that Open Doors considers to be conducting extreme or very high levels of persecution against Christians tripled in the past decade from 23 nations to 60.

It is no coincidence that those statistics rise in parallel to increasing levels of conflict and instability around the world. Four of the top five nations in which Open Doors judges that the most extreme persecution of Christians takes place—Somalia, Yemen, Libya and Sudan—have suffered particularly acute civil strife and are highly fragile. When nations collapse into violence, it is often minority groups, whether ethnic or religious, who suffer first and most. Sudan, where the world's largest humanitarian catastrophe is taking place and where more than 25 million people are in need of food support, is home to more than 2 million Christians who have been swept up in the brutal conflict. More than 150 churches have been destroyed—some deliberately targeted—and there are accounts of Christian leaders who have been murdered.

Sir John Hayes: Of course that is true, but it is not the whole story because the persecution of Christians predates much of that. For example, in the middle east, the

Ottoman empire gave licence for persecution on exactly the grounds I described: aggressive Islamism perpetuated by the Ottomans led to the persecution of Christians, particularly in Palestine, Bethlehem and similar places. Conflict matters, but it is not all that matters.

Monica Harding: In conflict, religious and ethnic minorities are persecuted.

British investment, through international development spending, peacebuilding and deconfliction, reduces the risk of religious intolerance. I am deeply concerned that, as with so many vital areas encompassed by official development assistance, British efforts to safeguard freedom of religion or belief will suffer because of the Government's decision to slash development spending to the lowest level this century. Previous aid cuts fell hard on programmes focused on those issues. When ODA was reduced from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5% in 2021, the Institute of Development Studies found that some programmes protecting freedom of religion in south Asia saw their budgets plunge by 50%.

The burdens are borne most of all by women and girls, who disproportionately face the horrors of religious intolerance whenever it appears. As evidence given by the APPG to the International Development Committee in 2021 attests, religious intolerance often goes hand in hand with the repression of women and girls. We tend to see that most clearly when it results in girls losing access to education. That deprivation is most acute when applied to women from religious minorities, for whom, as the APPG said,

“their gender acts as a further marginalising layer of identity”.

Freedom of belief and gender equality are both cherished objectives of the Government's development policy, yet cuts to aid spending will result in setbacks on both fronts.

I am also disturbed by the growing trend of authoritarian states using the digital weapons at their disposal to control and repress minority religious populations, including Christians. We see that in China, a country home to almost 70 million Christians—the single largest Christian minority population anywhere in the world—which has taken to deploying surveillance cameras inside and outside houses of worship capable of identifying believers. China also uses biometric data as a tool to monitor and therefore control faith groups. It is particularly concerning that the extent of that repression, and the potential for it to become still greater, has increased in tandem with technological development, and I urge the Government to monitor that closely.

Britain must play a role in safeguarding religious minorities and Christian communities across the world. In the past, the UK has helped to play a convening role, bringing together Governments, non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations—for instance, through the declaration of humanity, which opposes religious interpretations that are used to justify conflict-related sexual violence and other crimes.

As the UK makes the moral and strategic error of cutting development spending, it is critical that we do all we can to preserve our diplomatic capabilities. I am glad that the Prime Minister has appointed a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and I welcome the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) to his role. However, to be maximally effective, that role must have dedicated support from within the FCDO, so can the Minister share what FCDO resources

[*Monica Harding*]

are available to support the work of the envoy? In view of the darkening situation for Christians around the world, is the Minister willing to reassess the Government's decision not to legislate in this Session to put the envoy on a statutory footing?

Persecution based on faith should have no place in today's world. The worsening global outlook for tolerance is an indictment of increasing levels of violence, conflict and extremism, and it is an invitation to redouble our efforts, through diplomacy and development, to protect religious minorities—Christians and others. This is the worst time for the Government to make such deep cuts to our international aid budget, which supports projects that protect religious minorities. I urge the Government to row back on those plans; to return to the challenge of carrying the beacon for human rights, including Christian rights, in these most deadly times; and to match today's rhetoric with action.

10.36 am

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I commend the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for raising this vital issue in the House today, as we approach the most holy period in the Christian calendar, to remind us of the appalling persecution of Christians throughout the world. I will not mention every country, as so many have been mentioned today, which highlights that it is dangerous to be a Christian in parts of our planet, and we in this country must stand up against that kind of persecution and oppression.

I commend all Members who have contributed to this wonderful debate, but I draw particular attention to some of the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), which were replicated by my hon. Friend the Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger). I am looking at the crown above the door to this Chamber. There is a cross on that crown, which tells us that our constitution, our liberties, our freedoms and our British way of life are founded on Christian values. Whichever political party we represent, it is vital that we defend those traditions.

We are here today to discuss a deep moral urgency. This is not an abstract issue; it is about the very real suffering of people—men, women and children—who are targeted, attacked, imprisoned and even murdered simply for their faith. Christians have faced oppression for centuries. At home, that persecution has found new ways of expressing itself, but abroad it is still very much the same—murder, state-sanctioned discrimination and violent oppression. Today, around the world, Christians are being oppressed on a staggering scale.

First, in the light of the Government's efforts to begin removing sanctions against Syria and their stated desire to work with the interim Government of that country, it is imperative that we ask the Minister what assurances the UK Government have received that this new approach to Syria will not come at the expense of religious minorities. How will progress be monitored? What can be done to ensure that a codified constitution in Syria represents everybody equally, especially Christians? What discussions has the United Kingdom had with our

partners in Washington and Europe to ensure that any future settlement does not come at the expense of those vulnerable communities in Syria? Crucially, what steps are the Government taking to support displaced Christian families and to ensure accountability for the reported atrocities we have been hearing so much about?

In recent months, we have observed what appears to be a growing alignment between the Government of the United Kingdom and China, a country where religious oppression has become ever more brazen. The Government have announced an audit of UK-China relations. Will Christian persecution be a key part of that audit? Have individual cases—for example, the recent arrest of Bishop Shao Zhumin, who was detained for refusing to pay a fine related to a mass that the Government of China deemed illegal—been raised at the highest levels? How are the UK Government ensuring that their diplomatic efforts with the People's Republic of China include pressing for greater protections for religious minorities—especially, of course, for Christians?

Having read this year's Open Doors "World Watch List" report, which many Members rightly highlighted, I am sure that I speak for all Members across the House when I say that, while we welcome its publication, its revelations are no less troubling than those of the previous year. Sadly, there seems to be very little progress. In south Asia, Christian communities continue to endure grave challenges and are under increasing social pressures. In Pakistan, blasphemy laws continue to be disproportionately weaponised against Christians, with widespread reports of abductions, forced conversions and systematic discrimination in day-to-day life. In Bangladesh, rising hostility and subtle everyday forms of persecution, particularly in rural areas, have created an environment of fear and exclusion.

What representations have the Government made to those Commonwealth countries? How is British aid being used to safeguard religious minorities and promote genuine freedom of belief? What more can the Commonwealth of Nations, as an organisation, do to promote religious freedom, and will the Minister use the Government's influence to ensure that the Commonwealth acts where it can across Commonwealth nations in this respect?

Nigeria is another Commonwealth nation that many Members highlighted. The situation there grows more dire by the day. Christian villages are being attacked, with churches burned to the ground and priests kidnapped and executed. Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa undermine the rights of anyone who does not subscribe to their extremist ideologies. Have the Government sought assurances from the Nigerian Government on protecting Christian communities, especially in vulnerable regions of that country, and what support is being given to enhance the security and resilience of these communities against such threats?

Sir John Hayes: To be blunt, we have a lot of influence in Nigeria, so I would go as far as to say, "No trade and no aid until their Government act on this."

Andrew Rosindell: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have to get tough with countries that behave in this way, and we have to uphold the freedoms of these people. That is part of our heritage, and we should ensure that the rest of the world receives our support where minorities are threatened and persecuted.

I could go on with examples—from countries ravaged by war to those where legislative oppression cloaks persecution in legality. We could all do so, but the suffering of Christians is global and unrelenting, and our response must be equally tireless and resolute.

The last Government introduced the position of the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief: Fiona Bruce, a wonderful person whom we very much miss. I am delighted that the current Government have renewed that commitment by appointing the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), but will the Minister outline what progress has been made since the new envoy's appointment? How is the envoy working across all Departments and with international partners to protect Christians at risk, and will the Minister enshrine the appointment as a permanent part of how we do things by making it law, as Fiona Bruce attempted, so that we always have someone who fulfils that very important role? What more can we do to support and amplify the envoy's position to ensure it delivers meaningful change?

Let me be clear that this is not a partisan issue. It is about standing up for the fundamental right to freedom of religion. It is about defending those who are suffering simply for their faith. We cannot—we must not—remain silent. Britain has a proud history of standing up for the religiously persecuted. We must remember that if we do not defend religious freedom abroad, we weaken it at home. A world in which Christians are persecuted with impunity is a world in which faith is no longer safe. Our message today must be clear: we will not stand idly by. We will not allow the persecution of Christians to be ignored any longer.

I end with a passage from the Gospel of St Matthew that feels all too relevant today:

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves...you will be hated by all for my name's sake.”

Let those words remind us of our duty. The question is: what will His Majesty's Government do to defend the freedom of religion and the rights of Christians, and to prevent, condemn and stop persecution around the world?

10.46 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Butler, for your first time in the role. I am particularly grateful to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), for securing this debate and for highlighting many shocking examples of the persecution of Christians around the world.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I especially thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), our new UK special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. I welcome his appointment and commend his efforts. I look forward to engaging with him over the coming months to discuss his work so far and what the Government can do to support it.

As Proverbs 31:8-9 reminds us, we must “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves”.

That has been the tone of many of the contributions today, with Members representing the stories and the lived reality for many persecuted Christians around the world in diverse, difficult and extremely dangerous—often

life-threatening—contexts. I am glad that we have heard such passionate contributions, despite the fact that they represent some extremely horrific situations.

I declare an interest as a Christian, who has also worked with Open Doors and other related organisations in the past to highlight these cases. I am conscious of the example of my namesake, Stephen, which the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) reflected on. Indeed, the name of this place in Welsh is San Steffan, not Westminster, which is a reminder to me when I walk in through the entrance to this place. I remember asking my mum as a young child why I was called Stephen and what was the story, and reading about the horrific persecution and death that St Stephen endured.

I am also privileged to represent Cardiff South and Penarth, a constituency rich in religious diversity and tolerance. Its Christian communities encompass Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Nigerian Pentecostal—every kind of church and chapel—which represents its diversity and wonder. Those churches also sit alongside mosques, temples, gurdwaras and synagogues, and those who have no belief. That makes my community beautiful and rich, but sadly that is not the experience in many parts of the world, as we have heard.

The statistics bear repeating: 380 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination, which is one in seven believers. Nearly 4,500 were murdered for their faith last year, and over 200,000 were forced into hiding or exile, each with their own terrible story to tell. For many in parts of Africa, the middle east and south and east Asia, persecution, harassment and discrimination is part of daily life. Of course, that is the reality for many people of many different beliefs and in minority communities, but we have heard about Christians specifically today.

Through the course of my own duties and my personal life, I have met many courageous Christians who have suffered for their faith. Indeed, I reflect on the visit that I undertook just a few weeks ago to Ukraine, where I met a priest in Bucha who had worn civilian clothes during the Russian invasion after a fellow priest was killed. He showed me some absolutely brutal and shocking atrocities that had been carried out by the Russians. He had to bury members of his congregation. Indeed, he helped to dig their graves.

On a personal trip to Jerusalem a few years ago, I visited St George's cathedral, where I heard of the abuse that Christians face from extremists, even in that holy city, including being spat on and persecuted. Many other examples of suffering have been raised today, and while I will not be able to cover all of them I will attempt to address some of the key points.

First, let me say that the UK remains strongly committed to freedom of religion or belief. No one should live in fear because of what they do or do not believe in. That is why we are championing freedom, tolerance and mutual respect through our work on the international stage, our bilateral work, and our programme funding. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland has been busy with international engagements and outreach since his appointment. Alongside his efforts, we are using our extensive diplomatic network across the world, and dedicated FCDO staff,

[*Stephen Doughty*]

to champion freedom of religion or belief and to challenge the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities.

I pay tribute to the work of organisations like Open Doors; its crucial world watchlist shines a light on Christian suffering around the world. To the many brave human rights defenders drawing Government attention to these vital issues at huge personal risk, I say that we stand with you. Members have referred to many of the recommendations in the Truro report. We welcome the report and its recommendations, which we are considering carefully.

A number of Members have raised the very difficult decision taken by the Prime Minister, with conflicts overseas undermining our security and prosperity at home, to cut our ODA budget from 0.5% to 0.3%. The Prime Minister and myself have been clear on many occasions that this was not an announcement that we were happy to make. We will of course do everything we can to move towards rebuilding our capacity. Our commitment to freedom of religion or belief and to tackling the persecution of Christians and other minorities will not waiver. I have noted the various points that have been made about specific countries and programmes—the envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, will have heard those too.

I highlight the important work that we do in our programme funding, including through the John Bunyan fund, which enables us to target funding through our posts and centrally to support our objectives on freedom of religion or belief. We also build awareness of relevant issues among our staff and our platforms through seminars and training. We hosted a seminar last summer for religious engagement on foreign policy. We mark and use the important international dates and campaigns, such as Red Wednesday, to reinforce our commitment to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief.

We also continue to work at the international and multilateral level. That includes our work through the United Nations, where we regularly engage and participate in interactive dialogues with the special rapporteur. Last month our special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, was in Geneva to do that in a session on the intersection between freedom of religion or belief and torture. We have participated in different dialogues in New York, and we also co-sponsor side events at the Human Rights Council.

We regularly raise freedom of religion or belief during the universal periodic review process, which has been mentioned a number of times. In November, we specifically made statements on Bhutan, Nicaragua and Qatar. In the case of Nicaragua, we noted our increasing alarm at the deteriorating human rights situation, including the closure of Church-affiliated organisations, and the harassment and arbitrary detention of members of the Church.

I will give some other examples of the work that we have been doing, because this is very much at the heart of the efforts that the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers have been engaged in. Last December, the Foreign Secretary wrote to Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, imprisoned in Cuba, to express his solidarity and calling for his release. We were delighted when he was released in January. Freedom of religion or belief is

also crucial to our work in Pakistan. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), visited in November to promote that work during meetings with Government Ministers, business and religious leaders.

Members have raised a number of countries. Many right hon. and hon. Members raised the situation in Nigeria. I reassure colleagues that we regularly raise freedom of religion or belief with the Nigerian Government. Of course, the drivers of intercommunal violence are complex, and through our security and defence partnership we engage with our key stakeholders to address that. We regularly raise freedom of religion or belief with the Nigerian Government, including during their periodic review in January 2024. We condemn all instances of intercommunal violence. We raise concerns at the United Nations Security Council. Through our £38 million Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria programme, we are attempting to address the root causes of conflict in the middle belt of the country and beyond. That partnership builds the capacity of Nigeria's security forces to tackle violence against civilian communities, including those of different religious backgrounds and beliefs.

Many colleagues mentioned Syria. We have made it absolutely clear that the Government who are forming there must ensure the protection of all civilians, set out a clear path to transitional justice and make progress towards an inclusive society, which must include the protection of diverse religious minorities and communities in the country. Let me also be clear that we will judge them by their actions. I am the Minister with responsibility for sanctions and we are closely monitoring the situation there.

China, of course, was mentioned by many. Let me be clear that the United Kingdom Government stand firm on human rights in China, including on the repression of minorities. We raise our concerns at the highest levels. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor and the Energy Secretary have all raised human rights recently with their counterparts in China.

In Iraq, our specific freedom of religion and belief objectives are absolutely threaded through the programme work of the British embassy in Baghdad and the British consulate-general in Erbil. In Algeria, the British embassy in Algiers has raised freedom of religious belief with the Algerian authorities on a number of occasions, and did so again recently. On 10 February, our ambassador met the Minister of religious affairs and we will continue to raise concerns, including in relation to Kabyle and the operation of the Protestant Church of Algeria.

On Libya, last year we co-sponsored a human rights resolution at the Human Rights Council relating to these issues. Of course, the Holy Land itself was regularly referred to in the debate; I referred to it myself in my own opening remarks. Respect for freedom of religion and belief, and the promotion of inter-religious dialogue, play an absolutely important role in securing a sustainable peace. Our consulate-general in Jerusalem regularly meets and discusses issues with the Christian community in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including with the patriarchs and the heads of churches in Jerusalem.

We continue to press for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to collaborate with the international community and to take steps towards implementing its

human rights obligations. Obviously, the situation there is hugely concerning, not only for Christians but for so many other people. Christians are categorised there as a “hostile” class, according to the special rapporteur on the DPRK.

We continually raise human rights concerns with the Eritrean Government. Indeed, the UK special envoy for the horn of Africa and the Red sea raised human rights during her visit to Eritrea in June last year, and we continue to work on that issue closely.

Obviously, the situation in Sudan is absolutely horrific. That is why it has been so key in the Foreign Secretary’s efforts, and indeed in our commitments on ODA and in our work at the United Nations Security Council.

Of course, Iran was also mentioned, and we are absolutely committed to holding it to account for its restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, including at the UN’s third committee in October.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Government’s absolute commitment on these issues, and the importance of them to me personally as a Minister, and indeed to the Foreign Secretary. I will continue to do important work with our special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, and with organisations such as Open Doors. I very much welcome the different examples that have been raised by right hon. and hon. Members today. It is very important that these voices are heard, and that the situations are exposed. Members can be absolutely assured of our commitment to work with them in tackling persecution against Christians, and indeed in tackling persecution against anyone on the basis of their religion or their non-belief around the world. That is the right thing for this country to do and we will continue to do it.

10.58 am

Ruth Jones: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for attending this debate, and for participating in it in such an informed and knowledgeable way.

Hopefully, we have highlighted the plight of persecuted Christians around the world. I hope that we have amplified their voices, so that people here in the UK will wake up and realise just what is going on across the world today. I especially thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, for attending the debate, and I look forward to following his work as he represents the UK on the world stage.

It has also been good to hear from the Minister about what he and his team have been doing, and I look forward to seeing him continue his work to promote religious freedom, especially for Christians across the world. We need to make sure that we are turning laudable words into concrete actions to protect and support our Christian brothers and sisters across the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians.

Congenital Hyperinsulinism

11 am

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I will call Sarah Hall to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of congenital hyperinsulinism on patients and their families.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I dedicate my remarks to my constituents Joanne and Gavin and their daughter Ibbie, who is two years old. Ibbie lives with a rare and serious condition called congenital hyperinsulinism. This is a term many will not have come across, but one that has come to define every part of life for the families that it touches. CHI affects around 95 babies born in the UK each year, with just over 2,000 people currently living with the condition. It causes the body to produce too much insulin, leading to dangerously low blood sugar levels. Left undiagnosed or unmanaged, the consequences can be life altering, increasing the risk of long-term neurological complications and impaired neurodevelopment.

The clinical challenges are complex and the emotional toll on families enormous. When I recently met Ibbie at one of my constituency surgeries, I met a bright, smiling two-year-old, full of life, but behind that smile is the reality her parents face every single day of managing risk, navigating a system that too often does not understand their daughter’s condition, and fighting for basic support. While the challenges Ibbie faces in living her life are many, her parents Gavin and Joanne are doing everything they can to help navigate them.

Joanne and Gavin are both teachers—a maths teacher and an English teacher—but they cannot work. Ibbie’s needs mean they must always be close by. They must always have access to a car, and theirs cannot be a one-car household. Every family decision, no matter how small, is shaped by proximity to emergency care. Their other children have also been drawn into the experience. They have learned how to spot signs of danger and been taught how to perform heel pricks. The whole family has stepped up to help keep their baby sister safe and well. It is clear that congenital hyperinsulinism is not just a medical diagnosis; it is a whole-life diagnosis.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this forward. I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic—a condition that is not as bad, I have to say, but still has to be managed. Northern Ireland has a high prevalence of diabetes, with almost 115,000 people living with the condition, and the number is increasing annually. Does the hon. Lady agree that early intervention for those who are pre-diabetic is essential and that consideration must be given to widening the ability for Ozempic, Mounjaro and other glucagon-like peptide-1 drugs to be prescribed more widely to help in the prevention of full-blown type 2 diabetes? That

[Jim Shannon]

needs to be done not just in my constituency or the hon. Lady's but across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Sarah Hall: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

As I was saying, it is clear that congenital hyperinsulinism is not just a medical diagnosis; it is a whole-life diagnosis. It affects emotional health, finances, education, work, family life and more. Far too often, families say they feel invisible, left to navigate this journey alone. Ibbie's family have had to personally teach staff how to carry out a heel prick and spot signs that she might be unwell. What should have been a joyful milestone becomes a period of anxiety and worry.

Even basic medical information is hard to access. After Ibbie was diagnosed, her parents were not given guidance on how to manage the condition—no education, no tools, no support. Even their GP and health visitor were unfamiliar with CHI. They had to travel from Warrington to Alder Hey in Liverpool just to ask whether Ibbie could take Calpol. Disability living allowance forms have been difficult to complete. There is no easily accessible support, and little knowledge of the condition. All of this compounds what is already an extremely worrying situation for families, and results in many feeling isolated and lonely.

That kind of gap in care is not just inconvenient: it is dangerous. It speaks to a wider failure to provide families with the knowledge and resources that they need. I thank the Children's Hyperinsulinism Charity for helping to bring these issues to the fore. It is a small charity, run by dedicated parents who are doing the work that should be supported—and, in many cases, delivered—by public bodies. We know that the financial burden on the NHS is considerable. A 2018 study found that congenital hyperinsulinism costs the NHS over £3.4 million a year. That is why early diagnosis, consistent care and good support systems are not just good practice; they are essential and cost-effective. Yet, across the country, parents tell us the same story: late diagnosis, poor awareness, postcode lotteries in care, and a lack of access to vital medication and monitoring technology.

Gavin and Joanne had to fight to get a continuous glucose monitor for Ibbie, a tool that allows real-time blood sugar readings and could prevent neurological damage. They succeeded, but the funding lasts for only a year. After that, they are back to square one. While some hospitals such as Alder Hey, Royal Manchester Children's hospital and Great Ormond Street offer specialised support, families who live outside those areas are left with fewer options. Geography should not determine the quality of healthcare that a child receives. As it stands, congenital hyperinsulinism is not even listed on the NHS website. That is a small but symbolic gap, and it makes a difficult diagnosis even more isolating.

There are misconceptions about the condition; comments from health professionals to my constituent when they are told about Ibbie suffering from hyperinsulinism include, "Is that like diabetes?" Improving clinical understanding of CHI is essential. At present, no routine test for the condition is carried out in newborns. The standard heel-prick screening, familiar to most parents, does not check for hyperinsulinism. For families like Gavin and Joanne's, early diagnosis comes not through

systemic checks but chance; their daughter Ibbie was seriously unwell at birth, which prompted further testing and led to the diagnosis. Others are not so fortunate. Many children with the condition show few symptoms initially, and diagnosis only follows a serious health episode. In too many cases, it is not clinical vigilance that identifies the issue but emergency.

That unpredictability is compounded by geography. Families describe a postcode lottery in access to timely treatment and care. In Ibbie's case, even medication is not easily obtained in Warrington. Her parents must travel to Alder Hey, where she is able to receive the specific brand that she requires. For a family already managing a complex health condition, that adds further pressure and strain.

I have some specific asks, drawn directly from the lived experiences of families in my constituency and beyond. The first is to ensure that congenital hyperinsulinism is added to the NHS website as a priority, to raise awareness with healthcare professionals, caregivers and the general public; the second is to work with families, charities and health professionals to create an information campaign and resource pack for parents and other frontline health professionals; and the third is to guarantee equitable access to treatment, medication and monitoring technology, including CGMs, regardless of geography or condition type.

My fourth ask is to provide more consistent support with benefits processes, such as DLA, where families currently face a wall of bureaucracy and misunderstanding; my fifth ask is to address disparities in access to key medications, such as diazoxide, and work to prevent supply shortages; and my sixth is to fund ongoing research into treatments to reduce the need for invasive procedures such as pancreatectomies. Finally, will the Minister meet the families affected by hyperinsulinism, including Gavin and Joanne, to hear directly from them and explore how the Government can close the health and care gap?

In closing, let me return to the heart of this debate: not just the medical condition, but the families whose lives are shaped by it—people like Gavin and Joanne, and their daughter Ibbie, whose story reminds us that behind the terminology and statistics are children who deserve the chance to thrive, and parents who deserve to feel supported and not abandoned. We must not accept a healthcare system where someone's postcode determines the standard of care their child receives, nor should we tolerate a lack of basic awareness among professionals about a condition with such serious implications. When families are educating their GPs and nursery staff on how to manage their child's condition, something is wrong.

Every child deserves the same level of care, and every parent deserves the reassurance that the system is there to support them. Families like Ibbie's are not asking for the world. They are asking for recognition, understanding and a system that helps them to do what they already do so well: love and care for their children. We owe them that, and more.

11.10 am

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) for securing this important debate, which

really is a tribute to her and to her constituents, Ibbie and her family, who have clearly been through a very challenging time but have shown tremendous strength, bravery, love and compassion. I would be grateful to my hon. Friend if she could pass on our very best wishes to the family and thank them for helping us to look at this issue.

The birth of a new member of the family should be a moment of excitement, celebration and, indeed, exhaustion. Realising that their baby might have a serious illness should be the last thing on any new parent's mind. That is why getting help quickly is so important, as is ongoing support. Around 95 children are born with congenital hyperinsulinism in the UK each year. Although that means it is a rare disease, it should not be overlooked.

The Government are committed to improving the lives of people living with rare diseases. On that point, I have carefully noted the seven asks that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South listed, including her request to meet the relevant Minister. I should say that the lead Minister in this area is our colleague the Minister of State for Health, who is not present today—I am standing in for her. My officials will pass on to her all my hon. Friend's asks, including the one for a meeting. I am sure that the Minister of State for Health will be happy to follow up on those points.

Rare diseases like congenital hyperinsulinism are individually rare but collectively common. There are more than 7,000 rare conditions, meaning that one in 17 people will be affected by one over their lifetimes. Each condition will have different symptoms and experiences, and every person is unique. Despite that, across all rare diseases there are shared challenges, which have shaped the approach of the UK rare diseases framework and England's annual action plans. The national conversation on rare diseases in 2019 identified four priorities for the framework: ensuring that patients get the right diagnosis faster; increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals; the better co-ordination of care; and improving access to specialist care, treatment and drugs.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) on securing this important debate. I had not intended to intervene, but my hon. Friend raised issues similar to those in my constituency in respect of young boys diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, who are having difficulty accessing the drug Givinostat in Scotland. I am aware that the Minister might not be able to respond immediately, but will he meet me to discuss access to that drug in Scotland, and how we can help other young people affected by a rare disease?

Stephen Kinnock: I am happy to look into that. Healthcare in Scotland is devolved, but all the nations of the United Kingdom can learn a huge amount from each other—nobody has a monopoly on good ideas—and it would be excellent to find out a little more about the issues my hon. Friend referred to.

The four framework priorities form the “what” of what we do, and are supported by underpinning themes—the “how” of how we get there. The themes include keeping the patient voice at the heart of all we do. I pay tribute to advocacy groups such as the Children's Hyperinsulinism Charity and Genetic Alliance UK for

their excellent work supporting families and continuing to raise important issues that help to make things better for people with congenital hyperinsulinism.

In England, we published the fourth rare diseases action plan on 28 February, which is otherwise known as Rare Disease Day. The plan provides updates on the progress made since the beginning of the framework in 2021. I am pleased to say that it also includes three new actions for the future, which aim to improve the co-ordination of care, make things easier for families who need to visit multiple specialists, and improve the environment for research on rare diseases in the UK.

Receiving the right diagnosis as soon as possible is vital, particularly for conditions that present in infants and young children, such as congenital hyperinsulinism. The Exeter Genomics Laboratory is the national provider of hyperinsulinism genetic testing and the research centre of excellence. That lab, the paediatric endocrinologist community, and highly specialised service units have a close relationship, so patients can be diagnosed rapidly and managed effectively via a multidisciplinary team framework.

A diagnosis means that the right treatment can be given early, ultimately helping to improve health outcomes. Advances in genomics represent a huge opportunity to find children with rare diseases as soon as possible. The generation study, which commenced last year, is run by Genomics England and is piloting the use of whole-genome sequencing in newborns to identify more than 200 rare conditions, including congenital hyperinsulinism. The study is now under way and recruiting across 18 NHS trusts. It aims to screen 100,000 babies.

Diagnosis is only the start of managing a rare disease, and I know that there is still unmet need. Too many people continue to struggle with challenges, including lack of access to reliable information or specialist treatment. Only 5% of rare conditions have an approved and effective treatment—that is a shocking statistic. To improve the situation, we have made pioneering research another underpinning theme of the UK rare diseases framework. The highly specialised technologies programme of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence evaluates technologies for very rare, and often very severe, diseases. We are working with the regulatory system to look at access schemes such as the early access to medicines scheme, the innovative licensing and access pathway, the innovative devices access pathway and the innovative medicines fund. Those schemes are all designed to support the earlier availability of innovative treatments to patients who need them, and they must also work for rare diseases.

Many people struggle to access reliable information on rare diseases. With over 7,000 different rare diseases, which often need highly specialised input, the NHS website is not always the best place for such information—although I note the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South made about the website, and we will look into that. Patient organisations and charities play an important role in creating high-quality information on rare conditions. Therefore, in this year's action plan we have set out the steps we are taking to support organisations to get the information they produce accredited under the Patient Information Forum's trusted information creator—or PIF TICK—scheme, so that families will know they can rely on trustworthy information.

[Stephen Kinlock]

Living with or caring for someone with a rare disease can be mentally tough. We know that people living with rare conditions, and their families and carers, often struggle to access mental health and psychological support. This is not right. Alongside the wider steps that we are taking to improve mental health access, the NHS genomics education programme has this year published new resources on rare diseases and mental health, aimed at healthcare professionals. It has also developed a communications tool to help healthcare professionals with sensitive conversations, to ensure that patients and families feel supported throughout the diagnosis of a rare condition.

I close by again thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South, as well as those affected by congenital hyperinsulinism and organisations that advocate on their behalf. Although the five-year UK rare diseases framework will come to a close at the start of next year, we remain committed to improving the lives of those with rare diseases. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) will work with officials and colleagues in the devolved Governments to chart a course forward and maintain the momentum we have built.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am

Sitting suspended.

Fly-tipping: West Midlands

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

2.32 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of fly-tipping on communities in the West Midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue, particularly as the debate coincides with the conclusion of the Great British spring clean, in which many colleagues, from both sides of the House, take part.

Fly-tipping is a growing concern not only in my Aldridge-Brownhills constituency but across the wider west midlands region and beyond, as I have noticed of late on my social media and in my inbox. Once people were aware of this debate, a number of them got in touch to say that they have fly-tipping issues locally. In some areas it has become a persistent and damaging problem. It is vital that we come together to explore practical solutions and collaborative efforts to tackle its impact on our communities. I consider litter and fly-tipping to be an expensive nuisance; that sums it up in a short and succinct way.

Keep Britain Tidy, which does so much to raise awareness of fly-tipping and littering, estimates that local authorities in England dealt with 1.15 million fly-tipping incidents in 2023-24—up by 6% on the year before. Sixty per cent of all fly-tipping involves household waste. It costs the economy a staggering £1 billion, and there is enough fly-tipped waste to fill Wembley stadium 30 times over. It is shocking to see that amount of fly-tipping in this day and age.

Of course, those of us who represent the west midlands are dealing with our own fly-tipping and littering situation thanks to Labour-run Birmingham city council's bin strike. I am a bit disappointed that there are no Birmingham city representatives on the Government Benches, although there is a colleague from—is it Birmingham Northfield?

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab) *indicated assent.*

Wendy Morton: There we go. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has joined the debate, because there is a large number of Labour MPs in Birmingham city.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. A deposit return scheme under which people take plastic bottles and cans back to the shop to get their money back, using a reverse vending machine, has reduced black-sack litter in many countries across Europe and the world. Will the right hon. Lady explain why her party voted against a deposit return scheme in Parliament on 21 January this year, despite having previously backed one as part of the solution to fly-tipping?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I absolutely support recycling schemes, as do Conservatives more broadly. That specific vote, which I believe was before the hon. Lady came into the House, was not UK-wide, and I think that was the issue. We need to work cross-party to find the best way forward

on recycling and bottle deposit and return schemes. Any scheme has to work with individuals, communities and producers.

The ongoing bin strike in Labour-run Birmingham is now having a detrimental effect on every one of us who shares a border with Birmingham. For example, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst), who cannot be with us today, abuts Hall Green in Birmingham. On one side, the bins are piling up, whereas over the border on the other side, in Conservative-run Solihull, the streets are clean. In the past few weeks my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) has highlighted the similar situation on the border of his constituency.

Laurence Turner: The right hon. Lady highlights an issue that affects my constituency, as well as that of the hon. Member for Bromsgrove. Given that party politics were mentioned, I want to put on the record the fact that there have been disruptive bin strikes in Conservative-run authorities over recent years—Wiltshire, Aduel and Worthing all spring to mind. Does the right hon. Lady agree that there is no particular party pattern and that Conservative-run authorities are by no means immune to the issues she raises?

Wendy Morton: I was hoping this was not going to be an entirely party political debate, because there is so much cross-party support when it comes to tackling these issues. My biggest concern is the magnitude of the Birmingham strike and making sure that it gets sorted out. Several right hon. and hon. Friends have been raising the issue. The amount of uncollected waste has risen to a staggering 21,000 tonnes, which is an eye-watering amount. It is also eye-watering that we now have rats as big as cats hurtling around the city. We all know that these squeaky blinders, as they have been named, do not respect borders.

I have heard that some city residents are burning the waste, as they simply do not know when the next bin collection will take place. I have staff members who live in Birmingham and have not had their waste collected for more than a month, and who have had no recycling collection services all year. This is not right and not fair, so it is only right and proper that we call on the Government to sort it out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) is not able to be present, but he agrees that the situation facing residents is abominable. Some residents are taking responsibility by going to recycling centres, which is sensible, but that is having a knock-on effect in constituencies such as mine, with people seeking to access our recycling centres in Aldridge. It was reported that on one occasion this brought gridlock to Aldridge. It is worth remembering that when that happens, Walsall council tax payers are left footing the Bill.

At its worst, as has been observed in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove, in the absence of councils doing their job, sorting out the bin strikes and cleaning up the mess, people are driving out of the city to dump rubbish. We now have a bin strike that is a major public health emergency, as the Minister will be aware. Andy Street said last week that it is having a major impact on the reputation of Birmingham and the wider west Midlands, which will take years to recover from. Birmingham is making headlines on a daily basis

as far away as Australia, for all the wrong reasons. The longer the stand-off goes on, the worse the situation will become, with more than 4,000 tonnes of rubbish being added weekly to the current 21,000 tonnes.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and demonstrating yet again what a powerful champion she is for her constituents and region. I am sure she is aware that last night the BBC news reported from Birmingham not only on the Prime Minister's visit but on the rubbish collection issue. Does she share my concerns that what is happening in the UK just now sends out a negative message to potential tourists and the global market?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, which I was just about to come to. The reputation of a city and of a country is so important when we are trying to attract inward investment and grow our economy. It is only three years ago that, under the leadership of then Mayor Andy Street, Birmingham and the wider west Midlands was showcased as the host of the Commonwealth games. Now, three years on, it feels like we are being showcased for all the wrong reasons: as a basket case because of a bankrupt council that cannot empty its own bins.

Under the previous Labour leadership of Birmingham—before he was unceremoniously dispatched by the national executive committee—we were promised a golden decade. It is really disappointing. If this is a golden decade, I can only despair. It is important not to forget that this is the second time in only seven years that we have had bin strikes on our doorstep in Birmingham. Residents really do feel that enough is enough. The public health emergency—that is what it is now—has to end, not just for the residents of Birmingham, but for the residents in my constituency and all those bordering Birmingham who are feeling its effects.

My local council, like other neighbouring councils, is looking at ways to assist Birmingham, but I feel that would be putting a sticking plaster on a problem that needs sorting out, and would come at extra cost. Can the Minister reassure us that if other local authorities helped, any costs incurred would be funded by the Government or by Birmingham city council? I do not feel it is the job of my local taxpayers to fund the clean-up of the Labour council's streets in Birmingham.

On fly-tipping specifically, I think we all agree that the challenges posed are significant. However, it is heartening to see that proactive leadership can make a real difference. I do not want to just speak about Birmingham: I want to highlight some good work on fly-tipping, because that is equally important. In stark contrast to the situation in Birmingham, where residents are enduring ongoing bin strikes, Walsall council has demonstrated an outstanding commitment to keeping our communities clean and safe. I pay tribute to the leadership there and to all the staff.

Under Conservative leadership, Walsall has taken decisive action to combat fly-tipping and improve waste management. The results speak for themselves. Walsall's operational teams work tirelessly to ensure that waste is collected efficiently, with one of the highest performance rates in the country. Over the past year, the council has successfully completed 7 million bin collections on time,

[Wendy Morton]

achieving an outstanding success rate of 99.96%. In a climate in which some councils are failing to maintain basic services, it is only fair that we recognise that that level of dedication and public service is a testament to the commitment of the team in Walsall. By keeping our streets clean, Walsall council is not just ensuring a healthier environment but enhancing the quality of life for residents, supporting local businesses and making the area a more attractive place to live and work.

Walsall's innovative approach to tackling fly-tipping has been nothing short of remarkable. For example, the environmental crime scene project has delivered tangible, long-lasting results. The initiative was launched in February 2023 and treats fly-tipped areas as crime scenes, to deter illegal dumping. Since its introduction, reports of bulky waste fly-tipping have plummeted from 40 to just five a day. In some wards, perpetrators have removed up to 70% of the fly-tips. The environmental crime scene project has sent out a clear message: fly-tipping will not be tolerated in Walsall.

The council has also organised a range of events that bring together councillors and volunteers to tackle fly-tipping hotspots across the borough. Thanks to an incredible network of dedicated litter pickers, over 67,000 bags of rubbish have been collected across the whole of the borough in the past five years. I hate to imagine how big a mountain of bags that is, but it quite some rubbish that has been collected by litter pickers, who have been doing this on a voluntary basis. In my Aldridge-Brownhills constituency, I know of groups such as the Pelsall Wombles, the Walsall Wood Wombles, the Pheasey Park Farm Pickers—I was out with them on Sunday—and so many individuals and community groups, including the Friends of Streetly Library, who are really making a difference.

It has been heartwarming to see our local schools, such as Pelsall village school, get involved in the Great British spring clean initiative and others. As I walked over to Westminster Hall this afternoon, I noticed that Shire Oak academy had taken part in the great big school clean—I had not come across that initiative before, but it is a really good way of encouraging the next generation to take part.

John Lamont: I recently spent time with the Keeping Duns Blooming Marvellous group, picking up litter around Duns. Dozens of groups across the Scottish Borders are doing similar work. Although my right hon. Friend is right to highlight the great work that Conservative-led councils are achieving, does she share my view that, often, it is in partnership with volunteers that they are able to achieve such success?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are some beautiful villages in the Scottish Borders, and I have been fortunate to visit many. He highlights how these community-led initiatives have not just improved local cleanliness but have helped to foster a strong culture of environmental awareness, education and civic pride. That proactive and community-focused approach sets Walsall apart from the ongoing challenges faced by neighbouring areas, where waste management issues continue to spiral. Walsall's model should be a beacon of best practice for other local authorities to follow.

Turning back to the national picture, when we were in Government we took decisive action to tackle the scourge of fly-tipping. Under the antisocial behaviour action plan, in July 2023 we increased the upper limit of on-the-spot fines for fly-tipping to £1,000. We also supported local authorities to better deliver for their communities. In 2022, we launched the fly-tipping grant scheme, which awarded £450,000 to crack down on fly-tipping in local communities. Following the success of measures including roadside CCTV, social media campaigns and targeted surveillance in hotspot areas, we almost doubled the funding available for councils in 2023 to £775,000. In Walsall, the use of CCTV has made a big difference to some fly-tipping hotspots.

Last May, we went further, announcing a third round of grants that would see 26 local authorities across England benefit from a share of almost £1 million, with individual grants of up to £50,000. There is always more that we can do; the work is not finished yet, because the litter and the fly-tipping are still out there. What plans does the Minister have to build on the successes of the grant scheme, and can he announce a fourth round? Birmingham could take advantage of that if there were another round.

In 2024, our manifesto pledged to punish polluters by making fly-tipping an offence that carries penalty points against a driving licence. That is a sensible measure that would introduce a further deterrent by directly linking fly-tipping to driving penalties. I believe we must further consider this type of action. Individuals and businesses would think twice about offending if they risked losing the ability to drive or getting points on their licence. It may even allow us to deter those who choose to absorb the costs of a fine.

The forthcoming Crime and Policing Bill is a golden opportunity to implement this type of reform. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), has tabled an amendment to the Bill to introduce the relevant legislation. The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), said she would ask her counterpart at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to consider the benefits of endorsing penalty points for fly-tippers.

I read a report prepared by Policy Exchange, called "Litterbugs 2.0"—I am sure the Minister or his officials will have seen it—which calls for higher penalties, a local authority league table and, interestingly, a national litter awareness course. Those are all worthy ideas that we need to continue exploring, because we cannot just rely on volunteer litter groups or councils. Government cannot do everything; there needs to be a cross-Government, multi-layered approach. Will the Minister enlighten us on his views on this matter? I am sure that he shares my desire for sensible reforms that strengthen the deterrents against fly-tipping. Personally, I would like that extended to litter as well because, try as I might, I have yet to find a clear definition of the difference between fly-tipping and litter, so let us tackle it all in one go.

In a recent litter pick in my constituency, I could not help but notice that litter was being thrown indiscriminately out of vehicles—hence my previous point. At the weekend, members of a local litter picking group asked very pertinent questions around the littering on slip roads to

highways. If the Minister has not noticed already—I am sure he has—I suggest that when he is travelling or driving he takes notice of the vast quantities of litter and fly-tipping that we often see on the sides of roads or slip roads going on to motorways. Could he clarify whether the responsibility is with councils or National Highways, and whether the approach is the same right across the country?

It is time that we properly recognise the incredible work of volunteers. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) has rightly highlighted the importance of providing funding to local parish councils and encouraging collaboration with local businesses, particularly to support the installation of more automatic number plate recognition cameras to deter and catch offenders. Could we find a way to offer greater recognition for some of those litter champions, maybe through the honours system, which could do so much more to inspire and reward people at the grassroots level. Those individuals and groups who go above and beyond in their communities deserve more than a thank you—a lot of them would not expect it, but they do so much good work.

In Walsall borough, we are proud to have over 1,000 registered volunteers and nine community litter picking hubs, where residents can sign up and collect equipment. A huge amount of good work is happening at the grassroots level, but Government must play their part, too. We cannot expect councils and volunteers to carry the full weight of this challenge alone.

To conclude, I have a few asks for the Minister, who I am sure would be disappointed if I did not. Sitting through DEFRA questions in the main Chamber the other week, I saw so much cross-party support for tackling this problem; there must be some way that we can move this agenda forward. Can we have a national debate and a clear action plan that leads to real, measurable delivery that makes a difference to our communities?

Will the Minister consider the appointment of a litter and fly-tipping champion in Government—as we have champions and envoys in other Departments—to lead a joined up, cross-departmental approach? I assure him that I am not bidding for that job, but it could be a really important role. Could we have for a strong commitment to education and a zero-tolerance strategy? It is so important that we shift public behaviour. That is what a lot of this is about—shifting public behaviour and attitudes towards fly-tipping and litter so that it is not acceptable to drop litter.

Finally, on enforcement, we need to move beyond warm words and see concrete actions to tackle this costly and persistent blight on our communities. With the promised 13,000 extra police officers, perhaps that extra resource could be used to tackle this nationwide problem.

2.56 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing the debate. We will talk about some of the specific issues she raised in relation to Birmingham, but this issue attracts attention in every region and, as she rightly said, is an issue across the west midlands region.

I pay tribute to some of the volunteer groups in my constituency, such as the Rubery Wombles, who do excellent work. Just this weekend I joined a community litter pick to clear one of the walkways off Torre Avenue in Northfield, which had accumulated a volume of fly-tipped litter. That did not come about through a particular organised group; it was simply residents getting in contact and suggesting that we come together to take matters into our own hands and clear that waste.

The right hon. Lady made some valid points about areas where there is an overlap in responsibility between national agencies, such as National Highways, and local authorities, and some of the problems that can arise, which I am sure are familiar to all Members through their constituency casework.

The right hon. Lady spoke about working together, and started by talking about who was here in the Chamber. In case it is not clear, let me point out for the record not only that I am standing here as a Birmingham city MP, but that of the three political parties that represent the city of Birmingham in Parliament, only Labour is represented in this debate today.

Wendy Morton: I did apologise at the time for forgetting the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Forgive me; I will not do that again. On the point about balance, I am a Conservative with a west midlands seat, so the Conservative party is represented in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) may be a Scottish Conservative, but I will not hold that against him—he is part of this debate too.

Laurence Turner: The right hon. Lady is exactly right to say that there is west midlands Conservative party representation; I was merely making a point about the city.

We do not have the same figures for the region, but nationally, fly-tipping incidents rose by 37% between 2010-11 and 2023-24. For the west midlands, where records start a little later, the increase has been higher—the number of recorded fly-tipping incidents rose by 80% between 2012-13 and 2023-24. Within the city of Birmingham, that increase was lower until we got to this current, very difficult period of industrial disputes. This is an issue in communities across the whole region, and I see it in my own constituency. As I said, just yesterday residents and users of Bell Holloway in Northfield, which is an arterial route in the constituency, found that the road had been closed due to fly-tipping in nearby woodland. It is not the first time that such an incident has happened on that particular road.

Through my constituency postbag, I have picked up on a large number of very serious recurring cases across the constituency. There is a set of flats in the Longbridge area where there is some confusion over land ownership and organised groups are seemingly taking advantage of this grey area to repeatedly fly-tip at that location. I know that fly-tipping is a serious problem on private land, in particular when landowners may not have the resources to respond to regular and large-volume fly-tipping.

I pay tribute to everyone who works in my office; as MPs, we individually take up casework, but of course it is the people who work for us who take on much of the heavy load. I have cleared regular fly-tipping in Weoley castle car park, and have helped to secure permanent physical adaptations at a site on the Frankley estate, which has helped to deter repeat fly-tippers.

[*Laurence Turner*]

Turning to the strike in Birmingham, just this morning there was an unfortunate incident involving the mobile waste centres that are being sent out around the city, which over the last week have sadly become the subject of misinformation about when and where they will be deployed. Overnight, a very large amount of black-bagged waste was dumped on Vardon Way in Kings Norton, which of course will reduce the capacity for residents who attend that mobile service at the advertised time. I pay tribute to Councillor Corrigan for Kings Norton North, who I have worked closely with over the last 24 hours to ensure that waste is cleared.

John Lamont: Earlier, I referenced the BBC News reports from Birmingham; the hon. Member probably watched them himself. There were scenes of refuse trucks trying to leave the council depot to go and collect rubbish, but being stopped by Unite trade unionists, who blocked them as they tried to leave the depot and then slow-walked in front of them so that collections could not be carried out. Will the hon. Member do the right thing and condemn the actions of those trade unionists, and stand up for his constituents who want their rubbish collected by those trucks, which those union workers are preventing from getting out?

Laurence Turner: For the avoidance of doubt, I am a member of Unite. I was on the BBC over the weekend to talk about exactly these issues. There has been a change in the policing of the egress from the depots, one of which is in my constituency. Also, at the start of last week, a major incident was declared in Birmingham. I support the action taken, which should lead to a 40% increase in the number of trucks that are able to leave the depots. I hope that means that there will be a change in the frequency of collections.

Wendy Morton: Does the hon. Member agree that, although a public emergency was declared, it is good news if a few more trucks are getting out because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, lorries have been slowed as they have tried to get out of the depots? The only way to crack this is to break the strike, and for the Government, Birmingham city council and, if necessary, the commissioners to get back round the table and sort this, because the only people who are losing out are the residents.

Laurence Turner: A 40% increase is more than “a few”, by any measure, but on the right hon. Lady’s substantive point, I was a trade union official, and in my experience the vast majority of disputes are ended by the two parties involved—in this case, Unite the union and Birmingham city council—coming to an agreement. Talks have resumed and that is positive. Members of this House have a responsibility through our words and rhetoric not to make a resolution less likely to be achieved. The exact details are held by the people in those discussions. I hope we will see some news from those discussions soon, because the strike needs to come to an end, and I hope that the offer on the table will be put to Unite members in a ballot.

The reality is that the bin collection service in my constituency was not good enough before the strike; that is an important point that we cannot lose sight of.

Waste collection rates in the city of Birmingham are too low. That has a consequence for the council’s finances, as well as for the environment. I have serious concerns about the number of commercial contracts that I hear anecdotally are being cancelled because of the lack of reliability of the service during the strike and the potential implications for the city’s financing.

The context that has not been touched on is local government funding. That has a particular expression in Birmingham, but it affects all our constituencies—although the situation in Scotland is a devolved matter. We all remember when the previous Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), boasted that he had redirected funding away from what he called “deprived” cities to more affluent areas. That is certainly what we have seen in Birmingham.

Research that I have commissioned from the House of Commons Library shows that over the last decade Birmingham has suffered the sharpest decrease in spending power of any unitary authority in England. Taking inflation into account, residents of the city have lost more than 40p per £1 for every single person. We have lost more than 60% of the staff at Birmingham city council because need has risen in addition to that broad fall in spending.

The challenges are not confined to Birmingham—although because of its levels of deprivation perhaps the wave hit there first. When we look locally, Solihull, Dudley, Worcestershire and Shropshire are all councils that are experiencing severe financial difficulties; indeed, the scale of the cuts proposed in Shropshire is greater as a proportion of the council’s revenue than those planned in Birmingham.

Of course, the extremely difficult financial inheritance has an effect on the ability of local authorities to monitor and enforce fly-tipping prevention. Keep Britain Tidy has said, appropriately enough, that we are facing a “tipping point”. Some of those problems are attitudinal, and as has been said, once people know that they can dump once and not face effective sanction, it is more likely to happen again.

West Midlands police has an important role to play in preventing fly-tipping, but it still has 1,200 fewer police officers and police community support officers than it did in 2010. The police and crime commissioner, Simon Foster, recently submitted a bid to the Home Office to employ an additional 150 police officers. It would be a good start if that were granted.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the hon. Member for explaining that the police and crime commissioner has bid for some additional police officers, because try as I might, using written parliamentary questions and debates, I have been unable to find out how many police officers the west midlands will be getting out of the 13,000. Despite budgets and everything else, does the hon. Member agree that if someone is resident in Birmingham, where they have had a council tax increase of 17.5% in the last couple of years, all they want is to get the strike ended, their bins emptied and the streets tidy again?

Laurence Turner: I think what people in my constituency want is a regular and reliable service. They want the current backlog to be cleared. Some streets in my constituency have not had a collection for four or five weeks. Of course,

that is completely unacceptable, particularly when other streets have had much more regular collections, even during the strike period. We need to modernise the service.

Council tax is a burden on all our constituents. The impact assessment for the 10% council tax increase in Birmingham last year made it clear that approval for that increase was given by No. 10 and the Treasury when they were under Conservative leadership. The decision has been taken this year not to go ahead with the second 10% increase that had been planned under the Conservatives. I think that is positive. We are also starting to see significant funding coming into the city, which reflects the higher level of need. Over many years, we heard from the Conservatives that they were going to introduce a fair funding review for local government. It never happened. I am glad that action is finally being taken on this matter, but it takes time to turn these situations around. I hope that we see progress on these matters soon.

To return to discussion of the Government's plans, I note that I received a reply, not from the Minister present, who I know also takes these matters extremely seriously, but from the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), who is also a west midlands MP. In answer to a written parliamentary question, she said:

“We have committed to forcing fly-tippers and vandals to clean up the mess they have created as part of a crackdown on anti-social behaviour. We will provide further details on this commitment in due course.”

That is a welcome and sensible measure, and I hope that we will hear from today's Minister, either during the debate or when we come back from recess, about what actions are planned, because people in my constituency are fed up with the actions of the organised criminal groups that are taking advantage of wider problems in society, including the severe restriction on resources for our councils and our police.

3.12 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for introducing this important debate. Fly-tipping is a crime against the environment. It is damaging to our local communities, and creates danger for children and pets, particularly when drugs and drug-taking equipment are discarded.

The consequences of fly-tipping extend beyond visible pollution. It affects soil, water, wildlife and human health when hazardous material such as asbestos and oil contaminates groundwater and soil. Fly-tipped waste, including household appliances, can clog drainage systems and streams, preventing water flow and leading to flooding and overflows upstream. It has a devastating impact on wildlife. Fly-tipping blights the roads and fields in my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, harming nature and putting a mental and financial toll on my constituents. Unfortunately, across the west midlands, we are no stranger to litter on the side of the roads, or broken and abandoned furniture and car tyres dumped in verges, fields and lay-bys.

Our struggling local authorities cannot keep up with the scale of fly-tipping, with incidents increasing nationally by 6% in the last year, up from 1.08 million to 1.15 million. Last year, fly-tipping cost local authorities an average

of more than £13 million, and as the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) noted, the burden on councils has increased to such an extent that they are forced to make impossible choices in their funding and vital local authority-funded services are suffering. That includes local authorities' ability to keep household waste centres open, which is deepening the fly-tipping crisis.

When fly-tipping occurs on private land, the situation is even worse. There is no obligation on the local authority to clear up, so landowners have to take it on themselves to clear up other people's waste. In my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, as well as in other rural areas of the west midlands, it is often our farmers who are paying the price for illegal fly-tipping. Farmers are forced to pay extortionate fees to clear other people's rubbish off their land. We want local authorities and the Environment Agency to have the resources to prosecute all instances of fly-tipping. We also want the police to have the appropriate resources, including mobile ANPR cameras and rural drone kits, to help and support any investigation. According to the National Farmers Union, the total cost of rural crime rose to a staggering £52.8 million in 2023, up nearly 22% since 2020. The Liberal Democrats are therefore calling for the Government to commit to proper community policing—and to a rural crime strategy including fly-tipping—to ensure that officers are visible, trusted and able to tackle local and rural crime.

In my constituency I have some fantastic groups that generously give up their time to help clear our streets, verges, fields and streams. These include Rubbish Friends in Stratford and Clifford Chambers and Litter Free Alcester, as well as many litter picking initiatives in villages. We saw many of these during the Great British spring clean. I pay tribute to all of our community groups that volunteer to pick up rubbish thrown carelessly by others. However, their actions alone will not keep our streets and fields clean and clear and limit pollution in our streams and brooks and in groundwater. We need effective legislation and enforcement to get rid of illegal fly-tipping. I propose education as well. We must teach our children and young people in schools the value of the natural environment and the importance of protecting it. I hope the next generations, in my constituency and beyond, will grow up understanding the value of taking care of their communities and have civic pride in the villages, towns and cities in which they live.

3.17 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing forward this really timely and important debate. As she rightly and eloquently illustrated, fly-tipping is an absolute crime. It blights our landscape, risks pollution and disease, and costs thousands of pounds to clear up. It is shocking that many people actively choose to dump their waste, causing huge cost. That is not only to the taxpayer for clearance but also the detrimental impact on the many local communities where not only fly-tipping but littering takes place.

What a timely day to bring forward this debate, as many of our litter pickers have been getting out there as part of the Great British spring clean. I would therefore like to comment on the points made by my hon. Friend

[Robbie Moore]

the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on his work with Keeping Duns Blooming Marvellous. He has been not only advocating on their behalf but getting out with many other litter pickers across his constituency. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills commented on Walsall Wood Wombles and many others who she has been out helping in her constituency. I am pleased to hear that the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) was also out litter picking this weekend. I am surprised he managed to get back to Westminster given the huge amount of rubbish that is on the streets of Birmingham this week, but it is noted that he was out litter picking on Sunday.

I should like to pick up on the points made on litter picking before moving on to the bigger challenges that are faced across the west Midlands. It is right to make the point that our parish councils, which are at the grassroots of facing these challenges, do need extra support to try to deal with some of the litter waste that exists within their communities. I want put on the record my thanks to the Ilkley litter pickers, who meet every month. I have been lucky enough to go out litter picking with them across Ilkley and up at The Cow and Calf regularly, helping them. They have vast numbers—about 60 people now—regularly turning up on a Sunday, when they meet, and it is incredible to see.

The situation in the west midlands is absolutely shocking, and it is no wonder that fly-tipping is getting considerably worse as a result, but the diagnosis of Labour mismanagement is no shock at all to me, because Labour-run Bradford council outrageously closed not only Golden Butts household waste recycling centre in Ilkley but Sugden End household waste recycling centre up in the Worth valley in my constituency early last year, despite massive protests by local people and a petition, which I organised, receiving more than 9,000 signatures. And guess what? In Craven, Ilkley, Worth Valley and Keighley West wards, the wards closest to the shut tips, we have seen fly-tipping increase as a result in the following year. By contrast, for those wards that are nearest the tip that remains open in the centre of Keighley—despite Labour-run Bradford council's wanting to close it in 2023—fly-tipping reports are fewer.

Quite simply, Labour local authorities cannot see the wood for the trees. They cut waste services supposedly to save money, but they do not take account of the vast increases in fly-tipping that there will be as a result, and who has to pick up the cost for that? The taxpayer. Waste is far more expensive to remove once it is fly-tipped. It would be more properly disposed of at a proper waste facility. Just because Labour has removed waste services does not mean that waste will stop piling up. That is exactly what we are seeing in Birmingham, because Birmingham city council is failing to get to grips with the huge challenges over the last month, and who is being impacted by that? The residents, the council tax payers, on the back of their council taxes dramatically increasing in recent years.

John Lamont: I will make the same point to my hon. Friend the shadow Minister as I made to the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), about the tactics that the Unite trade unionists are using:

the blockade of the depots to prevent the refuse trucks from leaving, and the slow walking in front of the lorries to prevent the bin workers from getting out to collect the rubbish. The hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield was a bit reluctant to call that out. Will the shadow Minister join me in saying that that type of action is completely unacceptable and should not be allowed in this day and age?

Robbie Moore: It absolutely is action that needs to be condemned. Why? Because those who are being impacted are the hard-working residents of Birmingham. They are dutifully paying their council tax—despite its having increased as a result of Labour's mismanagement of the council—yet they are expected to be taking their waste to an allocated disposal site, either a site that has been allocated by the council to dispose of their waste or a waste wagon; but wagons needing to get out of the depot are being held up by those who are striking, yet the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield will not actively and openly come out and condemn their behaviour, which is having a negative impact not only on his constituents but the residents across Birmingham more widely. Does he want to intervene? I will let him use this opportunity to condemn their actions right now if he chooses.

Laurence Turner: I have made my comments. The hon. Member is acting irresponsibly, because we are in discussions—I mean “we” in the sense that the council, which I am not a member of, and the union are in discussions. The most important thing is making sure that the strike ends, and that there is no new equal pay liability. Let us not forget that the first equal pay liability in Birmingham arose under Conservative leadership of the council, with huge costs to my residents. The most important thing is that we get a resolution. The hon. Member can grandstand all he likes; it does not bring the dispute one inch closer to being finalised. I am conscious that this is a long intervention. I commented on the issue over the weekend; those comments stand on the record.

Robbie Moore: I note again that the hon. Member has not condemned the actions, yet who is being penalised but the residents of Birmingham as waste piles up outside their houses? The BBC was reporting on that very action last night. It reported not only on the action being taken by Unite trade unionists, but on the residents who are being impacted. It reported on residents who could not even get down their street, blockaded in their own homes, because of piles of rubbish outside that are causing a huge nuisance: a huge impact with the smell and a huge impact on their livelihood and way of life. That is completely unacceptable.

Wendy Morton: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way. It was obvious last week in the Chamber that the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), just washed his hands and passed it back to Birmingham. I come back to the same point: does my hon. Friend agree that the people who are suffering are the residents of Birmingham and those in the surrounding areas? What is wrong with standing up and saying, “Come on, folks, let's get together and sort this out”? It is the 21st century and we have rubbish on the streets of our second-biggest city.

Robbie Moore: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If you are a resident in Birmingham paying your council tax, you want action. You do not want talks after talks, discussions after discussions. Residents have been impacted for too long—a month in certain circumstances. I was in Birmingham two weekends ago, and the level of rubbish on the streets was completely unacceptable in Britain's second-largest city, yet what is the Minister doing about it? What is the Minister doing to hold Labour-run Birmingham to account? What action are the Government going to take, other than just passing the buck down the line to Labour-run Birmingham city council to sort it out?

Other local authorities are impacted, too. I note that Lichfield district council has offered its waste services to help Birmingham tackle the mountain of waste. That is highly commendable, but what is the impact on Lichfield ratepayers? Is that what they want from their council tax payments? What is the Minister doing to ensure that the other local authorities that neighbour Birmingham will be compensated for providing assistance? The net increase in undealt-with waste, as a result of Labour-run Birmingham city council, is currently running at an estimated 1,000 tonnes per week. That is enough to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool with rubbish every two weeks. How will Birmingham residents not be tempted to fly-tip in Birmingham, and further afield in places on the periphery that are likely to be impacted such as Walsall, when they have literally run out of pavement space to put their rubbish on? It is hardly their fault. They pay their council tax, yet the Labour council cannot be bothered to get around the table properly and sort the issue out.

There is also the impact on local investment. Under Andy Street, Birmingham and the wider west Midlands area saw a huge amount of inward private investment to the benefit of many residents, yet the level of nuisance the situation is causing—not only in Birmingham, but in the wider area—makes matters significantly worse.

Laurence Turner: I must say, listening to this, that I feel there is a real rewriting of history going on. Under the leadership of the Conservatives, the sharpest central Government cuts on any local authority in England were inflicted on Birmingham. Will the hon. Gentleman apologise for his party's role in that?

Robbie Moore: Dare I say it, but the mismanagement under the Labour administration in Birmingham is the absolute result of what residents are now being faced with—an increase in council tax across Birmingham and a significantly negative impact on the current level of service, with their rubbish not being collected.

I fear that the worst is yet to come for the people of Birmingham. We have already had reports of rat superhighways under streets—tens of millions of rats scurrying between rubbish piles and commuting through sewers. But what happens when the rubbish is finally removed, when there are no rubbish bags on the streets and the food in the rubbish has been removed? We will see starved rats running around the sewers looking elsewhere to find food. I fear for the residents whose homes may be impacted, and the additional cost that will be put on Birmingham city council to deal with vermin on the streets, not just clearing the waste.

The terrible lesson from this saga is obvious: Labour's mismanagement of Birmingham has left residents in the lurch, with literally a mountain of rubbish on their doorsteps, just one year after the budget-busting council tax rises—nearly 20% since 2023. From council tax to local services, the facts show that Conservative councils deliver more for less. In Labour-run Birmingham, they do not appear to be delivering anything. I want to come on to the points that have been raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills to do with the initiatives that Conservative-led Walsall council are bringing out, such as the environmental crime scene project, which seems a great idea—treating every fly-tipping scene as a crime scene and taking a robust approach. We have seen reports drop from 40 reports a day to five. That is 70% of fly-tipping removed. A Conservative council taking a robust approach gets the problem solved—delivering a better result for the taxpayer. That is the result of best practice.

Under the previous Conservative Government, we delivered £2.2 million to councils struggling to tackle fly-tipping, helping them get ahead of the problem. We have seen an increase in spot fines, a fly-tipping grant scheme and a better, more collaborative approach. I fear for rural councils and our farmers, who are most impacted and on the periphery of those urban environments—as has been picked up in this debate. So why on earth did the Government remove the over £100 million rural service delivery grant, which was a grant specifically aimed at helping those rural councils deliver services? Undoubtedly, those services are much costlier and harder to deliver in a rural environment.

So far, this Labour Administration have only committed to revising statutory guidelines in the Crime and Policing Bill. It shows a startling lack of awareness that when waste in Birmingham is piling up at a rate of one bin bag every 4.5 seconds, the best that this Government can offer are some revised guidelines and advocating further talking shops in Birmingham. I ask the Minister, what on earth is he doing? What on earth is this Labour Government doing to get to grips with the problems in Birmingham? While there is nothing wrong with sharing and enforcing best practice, it is not the fly-tipping revolution we need. It is simple: as we have seen in Labour-run Bradford council and now in Labour-run Birmingham, “Vote Labour and you get trash.”

3.32 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. Anyone would think it was election season, would they not?

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing today's debate and making a thoughtful and considered introduction with a number of questions for me, which I will attempt to address. She asked for a champion of these issues and I can think of no better champion than the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), who would normally be here and who I am sure would welcome the cross-party support that the right hon. Lady offered.

I thought that the right hon. Lady made a number of sensible suggestions, for instance around points on licences, which I know is under consideration. She talked about

[Daniel Zeichner]

having a national debate and a national action plan—all of these things are under consideration and are good ideas. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for not only making an excellent speech on the issues around waste and fly-tipping, but for putting some context into the political argument that is happening about the history of Birmingham. These issues have to be understood in that wider context.

To go back to fly-tipping, it is not just a load of rubbish: it is a serious crime that blights local communities and the environment. We appreciate the difficulty it poses to councils, landowners and residents. Local councils reported more than a million fly-tipping incidents in 2023-24, representing a significant cost burden to the UK economy. Over the last five years, those reported fly-tipping incidents have increased by 20%. That is unacceptable and this Government will take back control of our streets and our countryside. We are committed to forcing fly-tippers and vandals to clean up the mess they have created, as part of a crackdown on antisocial behaviour and we look forward to providing further details on this commitment in due course.

We recognise the crucial role of councils in tackling fly-tipping. Fly-tipping happens for a variety of reasons, from people misunderstanding how to deal with their waste to hardened criminals seeking to make money from the co-ordinated dumping of large amounts of waste, so the response will vary depending on the circumstances. We want to see an effective enforcement strategy at the heart of local authority efforts to combat fly-tipping. I strongly encourage them to make good use of their powers, which include prosecution. That can lead to a significant fine, a community sentence or even imprisonment and compensation for a landowner's clearance costs.

Much has been said about Walsall council's splendid record—the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills talked about it at length—but I note that it failed to bring a single prosecution in 2023-24. While sentencing is a matter for the courts, I understand that the National Fly-tipping Prevention Group, which is chaired by DEFRA officials, has previously produced guidance to support councils in presenting robust cases to court. Right and hon. Members across the House may wish to bring that to the attention of their local councils.

Instead of prosecuting, local authorities can issue fixed penalty notices of up to £1,000 to those who fly-tip or £600 to those who pass their household waste to someone without the proper licence. They also have powers to stop, search and seize vehicles of suspected fly-tippers. To help councils to make full and proper use of their enforcement powers, we are seeking powers in the Crime and Policing Bill to provide statutory enforcement guidance, to which councils will need to have regard.

Wendy Morton: Perhaps the Minister's records are not as up to date as mine. I want to gently point out that Walsall council successfully prosecuted an individual for fly-tipping a fridge while serving a suspended sentence order in February 2024.

Daniel Zeichner: I am very pleased to hear it. It sounds like there was one prosecution, which is better than none.

We are under no illusion about the scale of the pressures that local authorities are facing. We all know how much pressure they are under, and it impacts the services that they can provide to local people. The 2025-26 local government finance settlement will provide over £5 billion of new funding for local services over and above local council tax. The majority of funding in the local government finance settlement is un-ringfenced, recognising that local leaders are best placed to identify local priorities. It will be a choice for local authorities, and they will make their choices.

The situation in Birmingham has been raised. I recognise the misery and disruption it is causing to residents and hear what Opposition Members have said. It is in the interests of all parties and, most importantly, of the residents of Birmingham and the surrounding areas, that this industrial action is brought to a close as soon as possible. We encourage all parties to redouble their efforts to find a resolution. We believe that it is right that the response continues to be locally led, as is usual in the case of council-run services such as rubbish collections.

Birmingham city council declared a major incident on Monday 31 March, which means that it can increase its street-cleaning operation and fly-tipping removal by bringing in extra vehicles and crews. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government updated the House on Monday 7 April on how the situation is being managed following that declaration. She, the Minister for Local Government and MHCLG officials are monitoring the situation closely. Birmingham city council continues to lead the response, as is appropriate, but cross-Government mechanisms have been activated to ensure a co-ordinated response, with MHCLG in the lead and DEFRA supporting.

The backlog of waste must be dealt with swiftly to address public health concerns. The council began its work to collect the hazardous accumulation of waste over the weekend, and the Government stand ready to play their part in supporting the council in that work.

Robbie Moore: How bad does it need to get for the residents of Birmingham before the Government step in and take stronger action?

Daniel Zeichner: We absolutely recognise the gravity of the situation, but we believe that the best thing to do is to work with people locally to try to get a solution. It is a complicated situation, as has been outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield, and I think we had better concentrate on trying to get a solution than scoring political points.

John Lamont *rose*—

Wendy Morton *rose*—

Daniel Zeichner: I will carry on for a minute.

In the time-honoured spirit of scoring political points, I return to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), who queried why the Opposition voted against the deposit return scheme. That vote was just a few months ago, in January, when 67 Conservatives voted against the very policy that they had promoted in government. If we are going to have this knockabout and tit-for-tat across the Chamber, let us recognise that there are issues on both sides.

John Lamont: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Daniel Zeichner: Absolutely—I will happily have a further tit-for-tat with the hon. Gentleman.

John Lamont: I view this as an important part of our democratic process, not as a tit-for-tat. It is important to recognise the concerns around that deposit return scheme. I was a Minister in the Scotland Office when the Scottish Government put forward proposals, and the previous Government were concerned about how those would impact on the operation of the internal market in the UK. Are the current Government saying that having different deposit return schemes in different parts of the UK is no longer a concern?

Daniel Zeichner: The point we are making is that it is quite extraordinary that the Conservative party in government promoted a piece of legislation that the party in opposition now appears not to support.

I am going to move back to fly-tipping, because that is the subject of the debate. We recognise the role of the public in tackling fly-tipping. Approximately 60% of fly-tips involve household waste, and householders have a legal duty to take all reasonable measures to ensure that they give their waste only to an authorised person. They should check the register of waste carriers to avoid giving waste to criminals who promise quick, cheap waste collection but only go on to dump it in our communities. I have asked officials to look at how we can strengthen the regulatory regime for waste carriers, brokers and dealers to crack down on the waste criminals.

We also need to help householders to get rid of their rubbish before they turn to rogue waste collectors. Simpler recycling will provide all householders with a comprehensive and consistent set of waste and recycling services, end confusion and enable householders to recycle as much waste as possible. DEFRA recently published guidance to ensure that local authorities consider certain factors when they review services, such as residual waste collections, to ensure that reasonable standards are maintained. Those include ensuring that there are no disamenity impacts, such as an increase in the fly-tipping of residual waste. We expect local authorities to monitor any changes to collection frequencies to ensure that there are no adverse consequences.

We also recognise the importance of household waste recycling centres, which was mentioned by Opposition Members. It is for local authorities to make the relevant decisions. They hold the responsibility for the operation and management of such centres in their areas.

I recognise the difficulty that fly-tipping poses to rural areas, and recognise that more than 80% of farmers say that they have been affected by fly-tipping on their land. We will continue to work with the National Farmers Union and others through the national fly-tipping prevention group to promote and disseminate good practice on how to prevent fly-tipping on private land. Whether it is councils, individuals or businesses, when we all work together we can tackle fly-tipping and littering more effectively. Our work with the national fly-tipping prevention group, which includes councils, the Environment Agency and police representatives, is identifying issues, highlighting innovative ways of tackling fly-tipping and sharing best practice.

Members on both sides spoke warmly about their experiences of volunteering. I commend all those who have been out picking up litter themselves, as I have done in the past, as well as all the volunteers in voluntary groups around the country. The Government have been proud to support Keep Britain Tidy's excellent Great British spring clean campaign, and my colleague, the Minister for nature, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East, was pleased to speak at the launch event earlier this year. DEFRA colleagues recently cleaned a section of the Regent's canal with the help of the Canal and River Trust. I urge everyone to try to get involved in helping to create an environment we can be proud of.

Reducing waste in the first place should mean that there is less of it to be dumped unlawfully. In our manifesto, we committed to moving to a circular economy, in which resources are kept in use for longer and waste is minimised. The Secretary of State has convened a circular economy taskforce of experts from industry, academia, civil society and beyond to help the Government to develop a circular economy strategy for England.

The strategy will be supported by a series of road maps, detailing the interventions that the Government and others will make. Among other things, the outputs will aim to support economic growth and tackle threats to our environment and circularity, such as fly-tipping. What gets tipped is often landfilled, rather than recycled, remanufactured or repurposed.

In conclusion, this Government believe that whether someone lives in the countryside, a town or a city, they should be able to walk through their community feeling proud of a clean environment that is free of rubbish and litter. That is why we are committed to stamping out antisocial behaviour such as fly-tipping from our streets and countryside. It is time to dump the excuses. Working with councils, regulators and others, we will force offenders to clean up their mess, put a stop to waste criminals and together keep our communities clean.

3.45 pm

Wendy Morton: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), the hon. Members for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) and for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), and the shadow Ministers for contributing to the debate.

It seems to me there is a lot of cross-party support when it comes to fly-tipping and litter. I think we all agree that we need to do more and go further. I for one will certainly follow the Crime and Policing Bill closely in the coming weeks.

It was clear, though, that we disagree on the situation in Birmingham. It is disappointing that, time and again, Government Members would not condemn the strikes, and that the Government continue to wash their hands of the shocking ongoing situation in Birmingham and on the doorsteps in so many local authorities, including my own. I say gently to the Minister that if he is serious about taking back control of the streets when it comes to rubbish and waste, will he please start in Birmingham?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of fly-tipping on communities in the West Midlands.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Radio Teleswitch Service Switch-off: Scotland

4 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government preparations for the radio teleswitch service switch-off in Scotland.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I welcome the Minister to her place.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that when things go wrong, Governments get the blame—whether it is their fault or not. That is just one of the unfairnesses of politics with which we all have to live. In opening my remarks, therefore, I will say something very unusual—I struggle to think of another occasion when I have said this in almost 24 years as a Member of Parliament—if the radio teleswitch service switch-off goes badly, it will not be the Minister's fault.

In the relatively short period that the Minister has been in the job, she has demonstrated a willingness to take hold of the issue and to make things happen in a way that I wish we had seen two or three years ago, because we all knew that the switch-off would be a problem. It is only now, when we are just over two months away from the final switch-off, that people who should have been alive to it long ago are finally waking up to the reality. I genuinely welcome the Minister's engagement, and I hope that her energy will drive a less bad outcome than we might have had otherwise. It might still be possible to rescue the situation, even at this late stage—who knows?

The basic facts of the challenge with the radio teleswitch service are well rehearsed—this is not the first time that the Minister has been in one of these debates. RTS is a technology that allowed for automatic tariff switching for customers and enabled tariffs such as “total heating with total control”, which have been valuable to households in rural communities, particularly those that are off the gas grid. That includes most of the highlands and islands, and certainly the entirety of Orkney and Shetland.

RTS is planned to be switched off on 30 June this year, less than three months from now. A number of extensions have been made to the deadline previously, but the switch-off cannot be delayed indefinitely due to the system being obsolete and increasingly unreliable—quite apart from the fact that it relies on the BBC to commission it. It would be helpful if the Minister in her response could offer some explanation for the exact reasons for the hard deadline that we now face.

Despite being aware of the need to move away from RTS meters for years, Ofgem and the energy companies have not done enough to prepare—candidly, they have been asleep at the wheel. At some future date, we might want to revisit that to look at what should have been done earlier and why it was not but, frankly, for today's purposes, that is an unhelpful distraction. I just put the energy companies, Energy UK and Ofgem on notice that they may yet have to account for something that visits a serious impact on my constituents and constituents who rely on RTS throughout the whole United Kingdom.

The first challenge is to get as many RTS meters as possible replaced with smart meters before 30 June. Across the United Kingdom, hundreds of thousands of RTS meters remain; perhaps the Minister can give us an

update on the exact figure. I know from my frequent engagement with her that the numbers are going in the right direction, but not as fast as she would want. A disproportionate number are in rural communities in Scotland, such as my own in the isles.

I would appreciate clarity from the Minister on how the Government propose to drive faster meter replacement in places such as Orkney and Shetland. I have heard that some energy suppliers intend to make a concerted push to replace meters first in Orkney and then in Shetland in the coming weeks. I would be grateful if she could clarify whether the spring sprint, as we are hearing it called, is being driven from the centre and whether all companies are going to be part of that surge effort.

In Orkney and Shetland, customers were historically served by the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board, or the hydro board as it was called. That then became Scottish and Southern Energy, which then hived off its retail business to OVO Energy. I would therefore guess that OVO is still the dominant supplier in the local market, but in this age of switching, there are several other companies as well. Will everybody be expected to put their shoulder to the wheel in the spring sprint?

If there is a co-ordinated surge plan for our communities, the more information we can receive on that plan and how it will work on the ground, the better. I do not believe that many people are still unaware of the RTS switch-off, at least not in Orkney and Shetland, but we can still build momentum and maximise the number of people who replace their meters if people are fully aware of when and how they can get a replacement. Simply put, if we make this surge work in Orkney and Shetland, we have the opportunity to build momentum for work in other island rural communities, and indeed for those on the mainland. Getting it right for us is an opportunity for everyone.

The second critical issue is customers' right to be no worse off under their replacement meter tariff. The Minister held a roundtable with me, other MPs and Ofgem on the state of play at the start of February. That meeting clearly had some effect as, a week later, Ofgem announced its consultation on new rules to protect customers. I note in passing that the consultation has since closed, and we are awaiting the results. Although that is not the only lever that can be pulled to drive progress, I hope we might soon have word on the results of that consultation, as we are not exactly flush with time. That would be a welcome practical signal from Ofgem—not just what its representatives say when they are sitting in the Minister's office—that it has genuinely woken up to the need to approach this issue with greater urgency.

Central to Ofgem's proposals under consultation was a commitment that energy suppliers must give consumers tariffs that leave them no worse off than their existing tariff arrangement when their meter is replaced. That promise is critical and it has to be delivered, both as a matter of fairness and for the practical success of the project. We need to give families the confidence that they can replace their meter in the knowledge that they will not be left worse off.

I have some concerns about how that proposal is being interpreted by energy suppliers in practice. I have been contacted by constituents who, having been offered a meter replacement by EDF, for example, have been told that they are not allowed to have an Economy 10 tariff but must take a more expensive and inferior

Economy 7 tariff instead. That would leave them worse off than they were on the RTS tariff, which seems to be a prima facie breach of Ofgem's rule and undertaking. It also suggests that EDF, perhaps because it is not the biggest player in some of those markets, has not fully appreciated the scale of what will be required of it.

When I publicised in the local media that this debate was going to take place, I was contacted by another constituent, who said:

"On Saturday 5th April, my old RTS meter was replaced. I am with OVO and was with SSE before"—

a fairly classic Orkney and Shetland customer—

"I previously paid around £5 per day on average...In just over two days since the new meter was installed I have spent almost exactly £30 on electricity. Quite an increase, I'm sure you will agree."

I certainly do agree and if such stories continue to appear, they will make a mockery of the rule that people will be no worse off. As the energy companies are among those who have to push hard and play catch-up here, it would assist everybody—including them—if they demonstrated a better understanding of the no detriment rule that Ofgem is seeking to enforce.

As the regulator, Ofgem is responsible for judging whether such a breach has occurred and what sort of penalty or remedy must be applied if it has, but I would be interested to hear whether the Minister agrees with that assessment, and to hear the Government's view on what seems to be a basic matter of fairness. That matters because I have heard other such cases from constituents. In such communities, it does not take much for a narrative to set in that Ofgem's rule—or guidance or whatever it will be called—does not hold water.

There are also concerns about the consequences for people who, for whatever reason, are not upgraded by the end of June. Ofgem has stated that there will be no interruption of the electricity supply to homes as a result of the switch-off. That is essential, because, apart from anything else, our communities are entirely off the gas grid. It would also be helpful for my constituents if they received clarification from the Minister about the exact process of the switch-off in June and what it will mean for individual customers.

One of the defining features of RTS is the use of "total heating with total control", which turns heating on and off automatically according to the radio signal. If heating is stuck on at the point of signal shutdown, that will be a significant problem for households, which will incur significant costs. It could even be dangerous for older and more vulnerable people. We should remember that we are talking about what might be euphemistically called some of the most windswept and interesting parts of Scotland; RTS being switched off in June is no guarantee that people will not still have their heating going. If the Minister has any answers about what is being done to avoid such issues, that information would again be welcome for my constituents.

Beyond these specific technical questions, my worry is that safety nets for the remaining customers will be weakened once the numbers start to come down. Bluntly, Ofgem and the electricity companies have shown little interest in or concern about our communities thus far. They may be coming to the table now, when there is political and public pressure on them, but once the numbers are down to the hard core of hard-to-shift cases, I worry that their interest may wane again. There

is a natural risk that isolated homes, and isolated and vulnerable people, will make up a disproportionate number of the remaining cases. Even if they are small in number, each one of them matters and no one should be left behind.

There are also specific challenges around connectivity for rural and island communities in Scotland. Smart meters may be the solution for most people who are replacing their RTS meter, but many areas in the isles do not have the signal required for smart meters—indeed, they likely never will. I understand through correspondence with energy suppliers that technical solutions are being sought for those cases. Again, however, I remind the House that there are just weeks to go. If the Minister can give further updates about what the energy companies intend for those hard-to-reach cases, that would again be a source of useful information and reassurance for my constituents.

I suggest that such challenges further reinforce why Ofgem's commitment that tariffs must be no worse than they were under RTS must be delivered, so that there is no backsliding to inferior meters and tariffs. Hitherto, the overall communication and consistency from Ofgem and energy suppliers have been pitiful. Constituents continue to be given poor or conflicting advice about their appointments, their eligibility for smart meters and much more besides.

Even now, some constituents find themselves unable to book any appointment, regardless of date. Just last week, I was contacted by a constituent who was offered an appointment in April, only for that appointment to be cancelled and replaced with one in August. Taken individually, those may be minor issues, but each one risks adding to the sense of confusion or suspicion about the way that suppliers are going about their business, precisely when we really need confidence.

This is a matter that we have been fighting on for years. I am afraid it illustrates on the part of the big corporates and regulators such as Ofgem a shameful indifference to the fact that they need to provide a different service to people in the highlands and islands, and in island and rural communities such as mine. It has left our communities in a place where, frankly, they should not be. We are grateful to the Minister for that understanding and for doing what she can to push them on, but sometime in the future I think we will have to return to this matter and see why we have been left swinging in the wind in the way that we have been.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for raising this important debate on the radio teleswitch service. I also thank him for meeting me on Thursday to discuss the concerns of his constituents, and for all the work that he and other Members are putting in to ensure that the switchover is as smooth as we can get it for constituents across the country.

We all know that the deadline for the switch-off is fast approaching. The reason for that hard deadline is that the technology behind the RTS system is at the end of its life and will soon be obsolete. When the service ends, meters still reliant on the signal will no longer be able to switch between rates. In some cases, consumers

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

may lose control of their heating or hot water. That is incredibly concerning for constituents who might be impacted. Let me reassure the House that while the RTS switch-off has been and is industry-led and industry-run, the Government are doing everything we can to ensure the transition is delivered properly in the interests of consumers.

The progress made so far on RTS replacements has simply not been fast enough or good enough. As of 7 March there were 521,892 meters in Great Britain, with 139,000 in Scotland and 47,277 in the highlands and islands. That is not acceptable so close to the deadline. The Government are meeting regularly with Energy UK and Ofgem, as well as the suppliers, to address that, with particular focus on Scotland and remote rural areas. In those meetings, I continue to emphasise the need for urgency to ensure that RTS households across Great Britain receive a suitable replacement as soon as possible.

Turning to the focus of this debate, although there are RTS meters across Great Britain that require urgent replacement, and we are working on that, the Government are very aware of the significant number in Scotland, many of which are in remote rural and island areas. Some of those areas have had challenges with sufficient installer capacity and resource to do the job at hand. To address that, the RTS taskforce—convened by Ofgem, led by Energy UK and attended by Government—agreed that resources should be targeted towards regional hotspots with a high number of RTS meters. As part of that, a number of suppliers are planning a series of spring sprints over April and May, as part of a targeted effort to replace RTS meters in the highlands and islands.

OVO, as the key supplier, is taking a lead, but other suppliers will also be playing their part. These sprints aim to provide dedicated resources to hard-to-reach areas, ensuring that engineers are in the right areas at the right times to provide the RTS replacements to communities when they need them. To support this, Ofgem is working with suppliers to ensure that consumers are sufficiently engaged and ready to let suppliers into their properties for their meter replacements during these periods.

We will be working with Members, local government, charities and local partners to spread the word and ensure there is sufficient demand when we provide surge capacity and installers to do the job. This is part of the work that Ofgem and Smart Energy GB are doing on the RTS national consumer engagement campaign; since it began in January, it has been encouraging consumers

with an RTS meter to contact their supplier to book an appointment. We are seeing an uptick in engagement—the campaign is having an impact.

On the important question of replacement meters working, technological solutions do exist and are available to replace RTS meters in every single household. The Department, alongside Ofgem, expects suppliers to replace RTS meters with smart meters where appropriate, so that consumers can access smart meter benefits in good time, including across a range of tariffs.

However, I acknowledge that some rural areas with relatively large numbers of RTS consumers, such as the highlands and islands, may have lower levels of network connectivity—we saw that in the casework that the right hon. Gentleman pointed out. In these circumstances, we believe that pre-configured smart meters can be installed in households with RTS meters. A pre-configured smart meter operates in a similar way to an analogue meter, recording energy usage accurately. These meters can provide a similar service to that provided by RTS, including electricity tariffs Economy 7 and Economy 10.

I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman on the legitimate concerns about consumers being no worse off. We cannot have a situation in which consumers do the switch over and are worse off. That is why Ofgem has been consulting on proposals, including one that would put a condition on suppliers to take all reasonable steps to provide a tariff that leaves their customers no worse off than they were under the RTS meter. When Ofgem publishes the final proposal, which will be very soon, I hope that it will go a long way towards addressing some of the concerns that I know people have about that. I would expect all suppliers to comply with these rules, which will be baked into licensing conditions. We will be doing our part to make sure that they comply.

Let me conclude by saying that this Government understand the urgency of the situation. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we should not have been in this position. We now are, and we have to collectively work to get a grip of it and to make sure that there is no detriment to constituents across the country. I again thank him for bringing this debate to the House. I thank all Members who have been working with us, including at the roundtables, to make sure that we do this well in the final stages. I will be reconvening the roundtable after recess. I look forward to many Members attending and to collectively working to ensure that we deliver the transition in an incredibly short space of time and, critically, that no consumer is put in detriment.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Court Waiting Times: Kent

4.28 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered court waiting times in Kent.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank everyone present for attending. I appreciate that it is the end of the term, so it will be a pleasure to witness the popular and lively debate that we are going to have over the forthcoming hour, I hope, but we will see.

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to open today's important debate about court waiting times in Kent and, more broadly, across the entire country. This issue has become more pressing in recent years and is symptomatic of deeper structural challenges across the entire justice system of England and Wales. The issue is not just about numbers or administrative delays, but about real people whose lives are being upended because the justice system is struggling to deliver in a timely manner.

I hope that today's debate will allow us to scrutinise these issues and, more importantly, to come together to find practical and meaningful solutions to the crisis that we are facing, because at its core the phrase "Justice delayed is justice denied" remains as relevant today as when it was coined. That truism has never been more evident than in the context of the growing delays in trials and hearings. For victims, defendants, witnesses and everyone involved, long waits for justice can be an agonising experience. The delays are not just frustrating; they have far-reaching consequences for people's lives, for their mental health and for the reputation of the justice system itself. When delays are allowed to go unchecked, the system loses its legitimacy and people begin to lose confidence in its ability to deliver justice at all.

This is a national issue affecting courts across the entire country, but Kent has been particularly impacted by the delays, especially certain parts of the county. Some courts are experiencing far more severe backlogs than others. For example, according to open-source information, Maidstone Crown court currently has 2,367 outstanding cases, compared with Canterbury, which has 894 outstanding cases. Those figures are interesting, and I will go on to talk more about them. Additionally, the latest figures from the Kent police and crime commissioner, covering the period from July to September last year, show a 269% increase in court backlogs compared with 2019. This leaves a total of 3,261 Crown court cases waiting to be heard in Kent as of September of last year.

The stark disparity in waiting times between courts is deeply concerning, as it undermines the principle of equal access to justice for all. It is a problem that demands urgent attention, as it reflects a growing imbalance in how the justice system is applied. I know it is popular in this place to talk about "two-tier justice", to coin a phrase, but it appears that under the Governments from 2019 to 2024, many victims and alleged perpetrators, and their families, have had no-tier justice—they have been left in an ever-extended limbo.

The constant pressure to move the system forward means a record-high Crown court backlog across England and Wales, now exceeding 73,000 outstanding cases. That represents a 10% rise between September 2023 and September 2024 and a near-doubling of the backlog

versus 2019. It is essential to note that these figures are not just abstract numbers. They represent real people—victims and defendants who have been waiting months and, in some cases, years for their cases to be heard. The cases vary in nature. Some are extremely distressing; they include rape and other sexual offences. For those people, the growing backlog is not just a statistic but a source of extreme anxiety, frustration and uncertainty. For the police, it means an ever-increasing cost to them and the risk of losing cases because of the time that it has taken for them to get to court.

The backlog has a profound impact not just on individuals but on the entire criminal justice system and confidence in it. Courts that are overloaded struggle to maintain their pace. They are increasingly relying on stretched resources and often working in difficult conditions. For those working in the system, deeply honourable individuals—judges, barristers, solicitors and clerks—who have given over their life, in some cases, to supporting the criminal justice system, there is a constant pressure to clear cases more quickly, which has created an ongoing mental health crisis among staff and concerns about the fairness of the justice process in meeting those timelines.

The problem is not only the sheer volume of cases but their complexity. I know that the Government are doing some work around sentencing to look at how we can streamline these processes, but the complexity of cases involving serious violence and domestic abuse requires significant time and attention.

How do we resolve these issues? I have met a number of professionals, including police officers who have been working at the frontline and professionals in the Crown court system itself, whom I have met independently of the process. I have also met people from advocacy organisations and groups, who have suggested a number of recommendations. Some are structural and will involve cost, but there are others that I have been working on with them. One of those is the question of how we can move cases around the system as it stands. As I understand it, the current system does not allow transfers easily between court jurisdictions within geographies, so my first question for the Minister is, can we look at a more centralised approach to case distribution, to move some of the cases from areas of high backlogs to areas of relatively low backlogs? For example, in Kent, we could move cases from Maidstone to Canterbury or other areas around the region, to reduce those times.

My second question for the Minister is about expanding digital and video recording equipment—capital investment—in some of these courts. We know that, with such investment in pieces of equipment, courts can streamline cases. Does the Department have an investment programme to investigate the cost-benefit of speeding up court cases as part of a revenue versus capital exercise? Has that been positioned to the Treasury?

Thirdly, there must be a review of sentencing. I welcome the Government's current move to look at sentencing, in a process being led by David Gauke, among others. One issue that judges have raised to me is that a significant number of people are electing to go to Crown courts, creating additional pressures on those courts. What could we do in the sentencing process, and what steer has been given, to try to reduce the throughput into Crown courts? I fully accept the principle of justice in this country that individuals have the choice to go before a jury, but is there some way of reducing the throughput into Crown courts?

[Tristan Osborne]

Fourthly, we know that there is a capital investment issue in some Crown courts, but I understand that family courts are operating out of some Crown court locations across the country. Other family courts are operating out of council buildings and other locations that do not need cell capacity. Has there been a conversation about the family courts moving out of Crown court locations, since they do not need the cell capacity, and freeing up that court space for Crown court and criminal cases? That is another capacity question.

Fifthly, on recruitment of judges, I understand there are significant pressures around locums and trying to get KCs to come into Crown courts to cover the backlog of cases. Is there a streamlined process that could be managed centrally, to advertise or promote that as a career aspiration, rather than an ad hoc process where people can be requested to come in on a regional basis? More central management and support is required from an HR perspective, including supporting criminal justice officers and clerks and the processing of cases in our Crown courts. In many cases, a lot of back office processing is required for the court's management of individuals. I suggest that, if we invested more in that back office space, we could process cases more quickly.

Some of those solutions require some capital investment—I suspect the Minister will not be entirely happy with that, because it requires engaging with HM Treasury—but some do not. Instead, they require a change in the system's approach to the judiciary. I absolutely understand that there will be pushback on some of these suggestions, since this has been a nominally independent system for many decades and almost centuries. However, when I have suggested many of these ideas to judges and other court professionals in the system, they have said that in some cases they are already operating with these models. There is already shared casework among some of the London Crown courts, for example, because they have ad hoc agreements. We could support existing conversations between senior professionals in the court system to ensure that we are reducing backlog.

Ultimately, all these ideas are part of a wider pattern to try to reduce backlogs in the Crown courts, which would ultimately serve all our communities: it would help the police with resource allocation around ongoing cases that have reached charging and are waiting to be presented at Crown court; it would help the victim, because the individual would get their day in the sun, and justice, much more quickly; and it would help the defendant, because an innocent person will be able to get their case heard in front of a court without having to wait, in some cases, for years, with all the tolls on mental health toll and on families that such a wait entails. It would also help to restore confidence in our criminal justice system, which is in crisis at the moment due not solely to cuts to Crown courts, but to a lack of policing, and lack of confidence in the back office, in probation and in other criminal justice approaches that we have taken.

I am not suggesting that my solutions will resolve all the problems with our criminal justice system, but this backlog is causing significant concern among residents in my part of north Kent. I look forward to hearing the Minister's answers.

4.40 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) on securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss an issue of great concern to many of my constituents in Ashford, Hawkinge and the villages. He made an excellent speech and offered many suggestions. Many of the issues that he spoke about not only impact his part of the county, but are unfortunately only too evident in east Kent.

The record and rising court backlogs that this Government inherited from the Conservatives are a threat to the integrity of our justice system. As a result of the decisions taken under the last Government, justice is simply not happening quickly enough in Kent, as in so many other parts of the country. Criminal cases are taking too long to come to trial, family court proceedings are being repeatedly adjourned and civil disputes are dragging on.

The delays have a real-world impact on our constituents. To cite one example, a victim of domestic abuse contacted me because the enforcement of a child arrangement order was taking weeks to come before the family court instead of being heard urgently, as we would normally expect in such a case. I perfectly understand my constituent's deep frustration that the delay in the family courts meant that they were not able to properly protect children who are victims of domestic abuse.

Another constituent contacted me to explain the delays in a civil case that he and his wife were pursuing against a builder, which had been dragging on for a number of years. As a result of the delay, and what my constituent felt was the mishandling of his case, he and his wife believe they have been completely forgotten by the justice system.

Timely and effective justice is key to increasing confidence in the system, but the delays that this Government inherited are preventing that. The scale of the delays means that this situation was not going to be addressed overnight. Indeed, the latest data from the Ministry of Justice shows that, in December, there were just over 2,900 open cases in magistrates courts in east Kent. The system is overburdened and, in some places, close to breaking. This is a result of decisions taken by the Conservatives to cut the number of courts, including the courts in Ashford, and their failure to invest in the rest of the justice system.

When I previously raised the issue of court delays in Justice questions, the then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander), told me that the Government were providing extra funding to ensure that more cases were heard, and as a result Crown courts in Kent were on track to sit for nearly 3,000 days during the financial year that has just ended. I would be grateful if the current Minister could provide an update on that, and also on what is being done to reduce delays in magistrates courts in Kent.

The Government have spoken about consistently investing in the recruitment of judges and tribunal members across all jurisdictions. That is, of course, to be welcomed. What is being done to ensure that these new recruits receive the necessary training, especially in dealing with cases involving sexual violence or domestic abuse, where delays do untold harm? What is being

done to put victims at the heart of the judicial process, including giving them greater support while they navigate the system and ensuring they are getting regular updates on what is happening with their cases? Finally, in civil cases, what steps are being taken to ensure that cases that need to go to trial are dealt with more quickly, including the increased use of digitised court processes and remote hearings?

Court delays have real human costs. They have a detrimental impact on the mental health of victims seeking closure and families in crisis. They also undermine confidence in the justice system for communities that depend on law and order. Justice delayed is truly justice denied. I look forward to hearing the Minister set out what steps the Government are taking to ensure that justice will be delivered in a timely manner in Kent.

4.44 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) on securing this debate.

As I have said in the Commons Chamber before, the fact that tens of thousands of victims and survivors have been waiting years for their day in court is one of the darkest inheritances this Government have taken on from those that came before. The backlogs in Kent are unacceptable, and so are those in Sussex, where both I and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) hail from.

We have heard about the problems in Kent, so I will not go over those again, but I will share Sussex's woes, which are not dissimilar. For example, our Crown court faced a 117% increase in backlogs at the end of last year compared with 2019. That is 1,166 open cases in limbo, of which 195 are sexual offences cases waiting to be heard and 316 are violence against the person. New court listings are running into 2027 and beyond.

As the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford said, these are not just statistics—they are people. In Eastbourne and beyond, they are individuals awaiting justice, victims in prolonged distress, families seeking closure and communities yearning for safety. The agonising delays also mean that victims and witnesses may withdraw from proceedings, as we have seen time and again, or that those who do stay in the mix find their recollections weakening over time and the quality of evidence declining, which compromises the dispensing of justice altogether. We have heard this twice already, but I am going to say it again because it is so true: justice delayed really is justice denied.

While the Government's announcement of additional court sitting days is welcome, we all know that it is a drop in the ocean, as the Justice Secretary has said in the Chamber. For that reason, the Liberal Democrats welcome the Leveson review, and I have met with Sir Brian to input my proposals, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, for tackling this scandal. In particular, we have been calling for a presumption against sentences of less than 12 months, in light of the 58% reoffending rate among those offenders, which demonstrates that these sentences are not effective at tackling crime—they do not provide time for sufficient tough in-custody rehabilitation to take place.

Ultimately, the Government must turbocharge their efforts to prevent the very crimes that end up clogging our courts in the first place, as part of a public health approach to tackling crime. That includes, for example, investing in the diversionary youth provision so neglected by the last Government. Before I arrived in this place, I dedicated my career to running an organisation as one of those providers. Youth provision is about much more than pizza, ping-pong and PlayStation. It is about creating safe spaces for young people to develop pro-social values—sensitive communication, conflict management, team working and the rest—all skills that support people to function at the core of society, rather than being pushed to the antisocial or criminal margins.

For as long as these delays continue, and victims and survivors are left in limbo, the Government must support the victims' charities that provide essential help and guidance to those facing that lengthy anguish. That is why it is heartbreaking that the Government have proceeded with cuts to PCC core funding and the national insurance contributions increase, which organisations such as Victim Support have said are tantamount to a 7% real-terms cut in their funding. I have heard the Government respond that tackling violence against women and girls is protected, but Victim Support has said that, notwithstanding that protection, there are still significant problems. I sincerely hope that the Government will reconsider those moves. Victims in Eastbourne and across the country deserve that, as well as the robust action needed to tackle the gross injustice of these lengthy court delays.

4.50 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) for securing the debate and for his opening remarks. He laid out the impact of court waiting times in Kent on behalf of constituents, as is his job.

I will begin by laying out the background to how we arrived at the challenges that we face, given the apparent profound amnesia of all other Members who have spoken. As a result of the pandemic, all jury trials in England and Wales were suspended on 23 March 2020. There was a limited reopening in June, beginning with just 26 courts—less than half the total. Gradually, more courts were added, but trial times and the number of individual courts available were both significantly impacted by the need to have covid protection measures in place.

The previous Government, recognising the central importance of jury trials to our judicial system, decided to keep them during the pandemic, as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford recognised. That decision was supported at the time by the then shadow Justice Secretary, who is now the Foreign Secretary. The Opposition will not apologise for keeping jury trials, and I welcome the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), recently reiterated his party's agreement with that decision.

The decision required the Government to take extraordinary steps to tackle the impact of social distancing measures on our ability to hold jury trials. We opened, and extended the use of, 20 Nightingale courts, and increased the number of judges by 1,000 and raised their retirement age. That brings me to sitting days, which are of course necessary to fund the use of the

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

court capacity available. Each financial year, the Lord Chancellor decides to fund a certain number of sitting days in the Crown courts to ensure their efficient and effective operation. In April 2021, coming out of covid, the then Lord Chancellor removed the cap on sitting days for '21-22 and subsequently removed the cap for the following two years. As a result, the number of sitting days in each year rose from 81,899 in '19-20 to 98,604 in '21-22, and to 100,950 in '22-23.

Let us look at what Labour said it would do when it was in opposition. Its general election manifesto argued:

“Victims wait months, sometimes years, for their case to come to trial, unable to move on with their lives.”

Labour said that it would “address the courts backlog”. It would therefore have been reasonable of voters to assume that Labour had a plan to bring the backlog down, but what has been the reality since it took office? What do we see today, after Labour has spent nine months in charge? Instead of working through the backlogs, waits are getting worse under this Government. There are now over 74,000 unresolved prosecutions in our courts and the backlog is growing. Some suspects are being told that they may not face trial until 2028.

Those delays, caused by court closures, the pandemic and strike action, have serious consequences. A record 17,000 people are now held on remand, taking up one in five prison places. Yesterday, on 7 April, according to the Idle Courts data feed, 68 out of 516 Crown courtrooms across England and Wales sat empty. That is 13% of our Crown capacity not in use. Yesterday, in Kent, the picture was equally stark. Only three courts were sitting in Canterbury and just one in Maidstone. This is not a system working at full strength. In a stark admission, the Lord Chancellor herself actually admitted defeat and said that the courts backlog will keep on rising. So much for what Labour said in its manifesto.

What could Labour have done differently? Since taking office in July 2024, the Lord Chancellor has acted too slowly. She has wasted valuable time by failing to fund the additional sitting days offered to her by the Lady Chief Justice, sitting on her hands when many more court sessions could have been running. On taking office, the Lady Chief Justice was clear that at least 6,500 sitting days were available to address the courts backlog. Did the Labour Government take up that full offer? No. Instead, there was an increase of just 500 Crown court sitting days in September. Realising their mistake, in December, they funded an additional 2,000 Crown court days. That brought the total to 108,500 by the end of 2024.

More recently, the Lord Chancellor came to the House on 5 March and announced that the total number of sitting days would rise to 110,000. That is the story of Labour's time in government and its efforts to tackle the problem so far—dither and delay. Even now, we are still short of the 113,000 days a year that the Lady Chief Justice says are available, and are losing valuable time to hear cases in order to tackle the backlog. Nearly half of victims have had their Crown court trial date rescheduled, with most facing repeated delays before their trial takes place. The frequent adjournments and extended waiting times cause victims immense stress, severely impacting their wellbeing.

I know that the challenge is particularly severe locally, for which I understand a number of causes have been identified. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford identified variation even within the waiting times that he has experienced locally. For example, there are more cases entering the system, likely related to the fact that police numbers in Kent are at an historic high and charges are up 50%. There are also acute staffing challenges, which have not only resulted in the closure of the Maidstone Nightingale court but, as I highlighted earlier, left courts empty even when the physical space is available. One of the reasons that has been discussed locally is that Kent struggles to recruit and retain legal professionals, as many move to London for better pay. I understand that there has been discussion of a south-east allowance to tackle that.

For victims, it is vital that the Government take action to reduce the backlog. As Members have said, justice delayed is justice denied. In yet another display of the absence of their own ideas, Ministers have asked Sir Brian Leveson to consider the future of criminal courts, and specifically the merits of hearing more trials outside the Crown court. The review will consider the merits of longer-term reform, as well as court efficiency. I understand that Sir Brian will consider court reform options that would reduce demand on the Crown court. We look forward to seeing his recommendations in full and giving our perspective on them.

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), asked questions about shorter sentencing. He fell into a common trap of trying to make comparisons between short sentences and non-short sentences in relation to reoffending rates. He fails to understand that when judges make decisions on sentencing, they do different things with different cohorts. If we case-match for the difference between the types of people who get short sentences and non-custodial sentences, the differences in reoffending trickle down to single figures. I ask him to consider that when discussing this issue in future.

When might we expect to see the review published, and does the Minister, or the Government, intend to implement any of its recommendations in legislation this year or in future years? Can she update us on how many Nightingale courts remain in use, and what assessment the Department has made of their value for money in bearing down on the backlog? The Government should also think about how to ensure that court procedures are efficient. To that end, will she be looking to extend the pilots for the court case co-ordinators that have been implemented recently? I would be grateful for her comments on those points.

Quite simply, we need more courts open for longer, hearing more cases. The Labour party decided to tell the general public that it would fix everything once in office, and that it would solve the many difficult challenges across our public services flowing from the pandemic and global challenges. However, whether it be small boat crossings, inflation, economic growth or today's topic of the court backlogs, things are actually getting worse, not better.

The Government talk frequently about their inheritance. Even if we take at face value the contested £22 billion in financial pressures apparently binding their hands, which I do not, I gently remind them that the equivalent figure in 2010 when we took office was around £100 billion.

I do not remember them giving us much leeway for the difficult decisions we had to make then, including in relation to funding the judicial system. The buck stops with them now, and I took forward to the Minister fulfilling their commitments.

4.57 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) for securing this important debate. Our ability to provide justice to the public and restore confidence in our criminal justice system, so bruised after the last 14 years, is of the utmost importance. I am grateful to be able to debate these issues today.

I will start by touching on the profound challenges that the Government face in the Crown court. When we came into power, we inherited a record and rising backlog. As others have pointed out, today it stands at 74,000 cases, which is around double what it was five years ago. I heard the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) outline his somewhat fairytale account of how we got here. His Government neglected their responsibilities both in the context of prisons, which were at breaking point when we entered government, and the dire inheritance in our Crown courts. He seeks to blame it purely on external factors, such as the covid pandemic. Who does he think was responsible for the industrial strike and the failure to broker with the professions? Under whose watch was that Crown court backlog allowed to rise? The failure to invest and reform are failures that this Government are intent on reversing.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford pointed out, the backlog involves real people. Real people lie behind these statistics. As we heard, countless lives of both victims and accused people have been put on hold as they wait for cases to come to trial. It simply represents an affront to the concept of swift justice, and I am afraid it represents the failure of the previous Government to take decisive and significant action—action that we will not shirk taking. The issue is more complex than simply rising numbers. Receipts are increasingly high and rising. The nature of the case load is different than before the pandemic; it is now made up of a greater proportion of more serious and complex offences, which take up more court time and tend to have a lower guilty plea rate. We acknowledge that has real-life consequences for victims and witnesses and that we are letting people down, both those who serve in the system and those served by it.

Addressing the Crown court backlog is a priority for this Department and this Government. We are not dithering and delaying—far from it. We have actually gripped the crisis. Last year, the Lord Chancellor funded an additional 2,500 court sitting days on top of the allocation agreed by the previous Government, contrary again to what the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle said. His Government agreed one settlement; we looked to fund over and above that, with 2,500 additional court sitting days and additional sentencing powers given to magistrates to free up vital capacity within the Crown court.

We did not stop there. To deliver swifter justice for victims, we announced funding that will enable 110,000 crime court sitting days in this financial year. That is an

additional 4,000 more days than the previous Government funded and the highest allocation in recorded history. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle says, “Well, that’s not as many as the Lady Chief Justice could offer up.” The fact is there is a difference between sitting days and the capacity of the system. It is not simply a matter of judicial sitting days; it is about the capacity of our prosecutors, defence lawyers, legal aid and the entirety of the system to operate. We have allocated a record number of sitting days within that context.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford is specifically concerned with the situation in Kent, and I am thankful for his efforts and those of fellow Members of Parliament within the Kent area for raising this issue. I am sincerely sorry to hear about the experiences he describes and how they are impacting his constituents. With this record Crown court sitting day allocation, Kent can sit all its courts for the full year at capacity. That will include an additional courtroom at Canterbury, which we have equipped for Crown court use. To his question about flexibility, of course listing is a matter for the independent judiciary, but that additional capacity at Canterbury will enable some of the cases at Maidstone to be transferred there. There is also flexibility in the system to deal with additional capacity and pressures. In addition to the sixth courtroom at Canterbury, we are working closely with circuit-presiding judges to enable additional Kent cases to be heard in London. Some of that has already begun, with cases emanating from north-west Kent being dealt with at Woolwich Crown court. I hope that will alleviate some of the pressures faced by his constituents.

Just yesterday, I spoke to Lisa Killham, the delivery director for court services in the south-east region, to ask what additional steps she and her team can offer to provide additional capacity and flexibility within the system. I know they are working hard to alleviate some of the particular pressures felt at Maidstone. Some of that is a system design problem. The role of case co-ordinators, which the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle raised, is really important, as is the use of case progression meetings to strive to improve the effective trial rate. All those measures will be vital in bearing down on the Crown court backlog in the Kent area.

We know the backlog is serious and rising. Doing nothing is not an option. That is why we asked Sir Brian Leveson, one of our most distinguished judges, to conduct a wholesale review of our criminal courts and propose radical, once-in-a-generation reform to deliver swifter justice for victims. That is not outsourcing policy thinking; it is bringing the very best expertise and experience within our system to assist the Government in what needs to be a once-in-a-generation level of reform—and nothing is off the table. As Members will know, Sir Brian is looking at things such as re-classification of offences and what sorts of cases are appropriate for a jury trial.

Jury trial will always be a cornerstone of British justice, appropriate for the most serious cases, but the right to jury trial is not absolutely sacrosanct; what we need to ensure is the right to a fair trial. At the moment, victims of rape or serious sexual violence are having to wait one, two or even three years for their date in court, and that is not fairness at all. That is not a fair trial for any of the participants. That is why Sir Brian is looking at every single option. We inherited a justice system on its knees, and we steadfastly refuse to let it fall over entirely.

[Sarah Sackman]

Restoring swift justice in this country will require the courage to take decisions—big decisions that could and should have been taken by the last Government.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for raising the situation for victims who are badly let down by the current system. Court backlogs have an undeniable impact on victims. The disruption to victims' lives affects their ability to function, work and maintain relationships and the Government take it very seriously indeed.

The Victims' Commissioner recently published a report highlighting the profound effect of the delays on victims, including the particularly adverse effect on victims of rape and serious sexual offences. To ensure ongoing communication with victims in the pre-trial period, the Government will ensure that every Crown Prosecution Service area now has at least one dedicated victim liaison officer in its rape and serious sexual offences unit, and that pre-trial meetings with a prosecutor are offered to all adult victims of those crimes. That singular point of contact can make a real difference.

As part of our landmark ambition to halve violence against women and girls, the Government have committed to introducing free, independent legal advice for victims and survivors of adult rape across England and Wales, to help them to understand and uphold their legal rights. We aim to begin a phased roll-out of the service later this year.

In the upcoming financial year, as the hon. Member for Eastbourne rightly pointed out, we have protected dedicated victim spending in the Department by maintaining this year's funding level for ringfenced sexual violence and domestic abuse support. The hon. Member challenged us to go further and is right to do so. We have ensured that the funding for victim support is spent in the most effective way. That is why we have victim liaison officers and why we are introducing independent legal advice for victims and survivors of rape. It is right that we target resource on the most vulnerable victims in our system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford was right to raise the issue of backlogs not just in the Crown court jurisdiction, which is our focus today, but right across all jurisdictions. The Crown court is of course a significant priority for the Government, but as courts Minister I am focusing on managing demand across all our jurisdictions, including our magistrates and our civil jurisdictions.

The truth—the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle seems to have forgotten this as part of his party's collective amnesia—is that the Conservatives left us with a mess in every single part of our justice system. On the civil justice side, whether someone was an employee, a tenant, a landlord, or an individual with a claim and a desire for redress, they were left with a mess. In our criminal justice system it was the same, whether in the magistrates or the Crown court.

More than 90% of all criminal cases are dealt with at the level of the magistrates court, where cases continue to be completed swiftly. That is a good news story. Although the open caseload rose by just under 14% in the year up until December 2024, timeliness in getting through cases has remained stable. We expect demand to continue to rise and, to keep pace, we will continue to

invest in the recruitment of more magistrates. We are aiming to recruit 2,000 new and diverse magistrates this year. The diversity of our magistracy is highly important.

Whether it is the civil jurisdiction or our tribunal system, we are at capacity, sitting at the maximum, or close to the maximum, number of sitting days across all jurisdictions. That reflects the Government's commitment to bear down on backlogs in every single part of our justice system.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle asked when Sir Brian is due to report; that will be later in the spring. When will the Government legislate? We want to get on with it, so we will legislate as soon as possible, either later this year or early in the new year. We are not hanging around; we have to get on top of this issue. Do we see a continued role for case co-ordinators? We absolutely do: effective case management is vital. Reducing delays in the criminal courts, maintaining our progress across all jurisdictions—including in the family court and in the civil justice space—and of course improving the experience of victims continue to be priorities for the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford raised the issue of digitisation. I hot-footed it here from the Justice Committee, where we were talking about digitisation in the civil justice space. The Government are ambitious about what we can do, the efficiencies and the greater access to justice we can realise by end-to-end digitisation. A small example of that is the Government's commitment, as part of our renters' rights reform, to have fully digitised processes in the possession claims space—end-to-end digitisation vindicating the rights of renters. That is just one example. We can import the same learnings into our criminal justice space, as well as make greater use of remote hearings and alleviate the particular pressures that exist in my hon. Friend's part of the world, and in the rest of Kent, which this debate is all about. We know of the particular pressures not just in the criminal jurisdiction but in the civil jurisdiction in London and the south-east. The Government are working hard to alleviate pressures in both places.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne was right to talk about prevention, not just cure. It is right that when we look at demand coming into the system, we look at the whole of the societal pressures that lead to the increasing demand. That is why the Government have a policy, in relation to youth hubs, that is introducing exactly the sorts of services to which the hon. Member once contributed so much.

Reducing delays in all areas is vital. We will deliver once-in-a-generation reform of our courts, to deliver swifter justice for all and adequately tackle the Crown court backlog not just in Kent but right across the United Kingdom. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford again for raising this important issue for debate.

5.11 pm

Tristan Osborne: I thank all for contributing this afternoon. I have nothing further to add, and wish everyone a relaxing break.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered court waiting times in Kent.

5.12 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 April 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Republic of Korea: Upgraded Free Trade Agreement

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The fourth round of negotiations on an upgraded free trade agreement (FTA) with the Republic of Korea (RoK) took place in London between 10 and 21 March 2025.

Total trade between the UK and RoK was worth £15.3 billion in the 12 months ending September 2024. An upgraded FTA is intended to support growth in this trade and strengthen our broader relationship with RoK.

Specifically, an upgraded UK-RoK FTA will help secure and future-proof current goods market access. Negotiators are also seeking to update the agreement in key areas where trade policy has progressed in recent years, including digital and services trade. Discussion is also progressing on a range of areas where increased co-operation will future-proof our UK-RoK strategic relationship, such as commitments on supply chains.

Negotiators made good progress on a number of areas, including but not limited to:

Rules of origin

Sides continue to make good progress on a new chapter, building on constructive discussions held virtually in February. Discussions covered both the chapter's main text and product specific rules (PSRs) for a range of sectors, including automobiles, textiles and apparel, and food and drink. Sides are seeking to ensure that the chapter accounts for current and future supply chains.

Digital trade

Further positive discussions were held on an ambitious digital chapter, including on commitments such as data, trade digitalisation and business safeguards. Additionally, the UK is seeking digital commitments that will help foster UK-RoK co-operation on a range of areas, such as emerging technologies.

Services and business mobility

The UK is seeking upgraded commitments to boost UK services exports to RoK. This round included discussions on commitments to provide improved certainty and access for the mobility of business persons. Further discussions were also held on professional and business services and domestic regulation.

Trade and Gender Equality (TGE)

Negotiators made significant progress before the round towards agreeing ambitious TGE commitments. Commitments being sought here will help foster UK-RoK co-operation on specific areas, including improving women's access to global markets, financial resources and business networks, so that they can further benefit from trade.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Notable progress was made towards agreeing a new SMEs chapter. The outcomes being sought here will help SMEs access important information on the UK-RoK trading arrangement online and encourage co-operation between parties to reduce trade barriers for SMEs.

Supply Chains and Customs and Trade Facilitation (CTF)

Good progress was made prior to the round to upgrade the existing CTF chapter. Good progress was made during the round towards agreeing new supply chains commitments. These will help cement ongoing UK-RoK co-operation on critical supply chains through mechanisms that facilitate Government-to-Government dialogue during supply chain disruptions.

Other Areas

Positive discussions were held across a range of further areas of the FTA, including anti-corruption and the environment.

The Government will only ever sign a trade agreement which aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors, including protections for the national health service.

The fifth round of negotiations is currently expected to take place in Seoul in the summer of 2025. The Government will continue to work towards delivering outcomes in the FTA that secure economic growth for the UK and will update Parliament on the progress of discussions with RoK as they continue to develop.

[HCWS582]

Horizon: Redress

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): I will deliver the planned statement orally today, as Minister for services, small business and exports.

[HCWS585]

TREASURY

Oil and Gas Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government's fiscal approach for oil and gas aims to balance encouraging investment with ensuring a fair return for the nation in exchange for the use of its resources. Currently, inclusive of the temporary Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy, companies engaged in the production of oil and gas in the UK and on the UK continental shelf (UKCS) are subject to a 78% headline tax rate on their profits.

At Budget 2013, the Government announced that they would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represented a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 109 decommissioning relief deeds. Offshore Energies UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked approximately £14.7 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament annually on progress with the decommissioning relief deeds. The report for financial year 2023-24 is provided below.

Number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into three decommissioning relief agreements in 2023-24.

Total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of that year: 108 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the year.

Number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: three payments were made under a decommissioning relief agreement in 2023-24, for £87 million in total. These were made in relation to the provisions recognised by HM Treasury from 2015 onwards as a result of companies defaulting on their decommissioning obligations.

Total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: 19 payments have been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, totalling around £347 million.

Estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government have not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury's 2024-25 accounts will recognise a provision currently estimated to be £123 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of companies defaulting on their decommissioning obligations^[1]. The majority of this is currently expected to be realised over the next several years.

^[1] This figure, which is an estimate at the last interim reporting period, is unaudited and takes into account payments made subsequent to the financial year covered by this written ministerial statement. The estimate is under review ahead of the year end reporting period and may be updated to reflect newer information.

[HCWS584]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Clinical Trials and Health Data Research Service

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Today I am updating the House on plans to create a new Health Data Research Service and fast track the set-up of clinical trials to accelerate the development of the medicines and therapies of the future. These changes will improve patient care and help to make Britain the best place in the world for medical research.

We will invest up to £500 million to establish a new Health Data Research Service. This will improve access to data for medical research by providing a secure single access point, meaning a researcher does not have to navigate different systems or make multiple applications for information for the same project. This will unlock the power of NHS data to transform research and lead to breakthroughs that improve care for patients.

The Wellcome Trust will be the first charitable funder supporting this groundbreaking initiative, committing an additional £100 million towards its development. The service will be hosted for at least the first five years at the Wellcome Genome Campus near Cambridge, leveraging the campus's world-class facilities and expertise.

We will involve the public as we design the service, building trust and understanding through transparent communication and discussion about how patient data is used to deliver health benefits to patients across the UK.

We will work closely with Wellcome and other stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of a service that will drive faster research that benefits patients sooner.

This Government's work to make the UK a world-leading destination for commercial interventional clinical trials also supports our clear focus on driving economic growth, alongside improving health outcomes for patients and the public.

We will also accelerate clinical trials and deliver radical improvement in regulatory, set-up and recruitment processes over the next year. This will help to bring down the time it takes to move from the trial being submitted for regulatory approval from over 250 days to 150 days.

We will do this by streamlining approval processes for clinical trials by moving to standardised contracts, with contracting undertaken by a single lead research site. We will reduce the unnecessary duplication of checks that can be best conducted centrally. We will publish NHS trust level set-up performance data for the first time, and continue to work with industry and the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry to improve data on our metrics to compare our performance with international competitors.

We will also implement the new clinical trials regulatory framework announced in December 2024 by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, to speed up trial approvals and encourage innovation in trial design without compromising patient safety.

I will continue to keep Parliament updated on the progress of this work.

[HCWS587]

General Practitioner Recruitment

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): General practice sits at the heart of our NHS and is its front door, but it has been neglected for far too long.

We are committed to getting primary care back on its feet and have already taken decisive action to get more GPs onto the frontline. This Government inherited a ludicrous situation where patients could not get a GP appointment, while GPs leaving training could not get a job.

Within weeks of coming into office, we committed to recruiting over 1,000 recently qualified GPs through an £82 million boost to the additional roles reimbursement scheme over 2024-25, as part of an initiative to address GP unemployment and secure the future pipeline of GPs. I am delighted to announce the Government have exceeded this target.

By cutting red tape and investing more in our NHS, we have put an extra 1,503 GPs into general practice to deliver more appointments. See: GPs recruited through the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme (ARRS) - NHS England Digital.

<https://digital.nhs.uk/supplementary-information/2025/arrs-claims-for-gps---to-31-march-2025>

The recruitment boost, part of the Government's plan for change, will help to end the scandal of patients struggling to see a doctor—easing pressure on GPs and cutting waiting times. Alongside changes to the GP contract for

2025-26, these additional GPs will help end the 8 am scramble for appointments, which so many patients currently endure every day.

Previously, primary care networks were limited in how they could use their funding. We have changed that. Now they can hire recently qualified doctors through the additional roles reimbursement scheme—a practical solution that is boosting GP numbers across the country. For 2025-26 we have gone further, delivering more flexibilities to the scheme to allow local systems to respond better to local workforce needs. GPs will be central to our 10-year health plan and shifting healthcare from hospitals to the community.

In February we reached agreement with the British Medical Association on a new GP contract for the first time in four years. We are investing an additional £889 million in general practice to fix the front door of the NHS. That comes alongside reforms to improve access, incentivise greater continuity of care and streamline targets to focus on preventing the biggest killers. And at the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced £100 million of capital for GP estate upgrades over the next financial year, the biggest central GP capital investment since 2019-20.

Thanks to these decisions, the Government have already delivered over 2 million additional elective appointments since July, meeting their target seven months early, and brought the referral to treatment waiting list down by 193,000. But we are not complacent, and we know the job is not done. We are determined to go further and faster to deliver more appointments, faster treatment, and an NHS that the British public deserve as part of our plan for change.

[HCWS586]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Victim Information and Counselling Services: Public Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 introduces duties mandating that police and other authorised persons may request victim information such as medical records only when it is necessary and proportionate, and in pursuit of a reasonable line of enquiry. These duties also create special protections for victims' counselling records, reflecting the highly sensitive nature of these records.

I am confident that these new duties, once in force, will help protect the privacy and dignity of victims within the criminal justice system and help the Government deliver on our ambitious aim to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade.

However, before we can bring in these essential reforms it is first necessary to define counselling services and issue a code of practice to which authorised persons such as police must adhere.

That is why I am pleased to announce that the Government are today publishing a public consultation on both a draft code of practice for third-party material requests and a definition of counselling services.

The consultation will run for a 12-week period and will provide a valuable opportunity for the public to have their say.

A copy of the consultation and draft code of practice will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS583]

Written Correction

Tuesday 8 April 2025

Ministerial Correction

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK-US Trade and Tariffs

The following extract is from the statement on UK-US Trade and Tariffs on 3 April 2025.

Jonathan Reynolds: With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the United Kingdom's economic relationship with the United States.

The UK has a strong and balanced trading relationship with the US worth £315 billion, which supports 2.5 million jobs across both our countries. This is second only to the EU, where our trading relationship is worth £791 billion.

[*Official Report*, 3 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 457.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the right hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds):

Jonathan Reynolds:... The UK has a strong and balanced trading relationship with the US worth £315 billion, which supports 2.5 million jobs across both our countries. This is second only to the EU, where our trading relationship is worth **£813 billion**.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 8 April 2025

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WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 8 April 2025

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